

Austronesian Syntax: Nominalist, Verbalist, or Sententialist?

A salient grammatical feature of many Austronesian languages is the similar or identical morphosyntactic behaviour exhibited by expressions denoting things, eg. 'child', 'bird', 'helicopter' and expressions denoting activities, eg. 'ran', 'hit', 'gave'. Because of such similarities, many scholars have suggested that such languages may lack a distinction between nouns and verbs. Among the Austronesian languages for which the viability of a noun/verb distinction has been questioned are Tagalog, in Shkarban (1995) and Kaufman (2009); Riau Indonesian, in Gil (2005, 2013); and Tongan, in Tchekhoff (1984) and Broschart (1997). These languages span a variety of linguistic types, associated with the Philippines, Western Indonesia, and Polynesia, thereby suggesting that noun/verb indeterminacy is a relatively stable feature diachronically, possibly reconstructible back to Proto-Austronesian.

If a language lacks a noun/verb distinction, instead possessing a single undifferentiated category containing both thing and activity words, what is this single category? For starters, it could be *noun*. This is the view that has become popular in the analysis of Austronesian languages, as represented in Capell (1964), Starosta, Pawley and Reid (1982) Kaufman (2009) and others, often referred to as *Austronesian Nominalism*. Similar analyses have also been proposed outside of Austronesian, for example Inuktitut by Johns (1992). Conversely, the single undifferentiated category could be *verb*. Such a position, which might be dubbed *verbalism*, is put forward in the parts-of-speech typology of Hengeveld (1992), who suggests that the Iroquoian language Tuscarora might be a language with verbs but no nouns. It is also consistent with so-called *omnipredicative* analyses that have been proposed by Launey (1994) for Classical Nahuatl and by Jelinek (1995) for Straits Salish.

This paper argues that, for least some Austronesian languages, the undifferentiated syntactic category containing both thing and activity words is most appropriately characterized neither as noun nor as verb but rather as *sentence*. For example, in Malay/Indonesian, a construction such as *anak lari* 'child run' is a syntactic coordination of two complete sentences, *anak* and *lari*. Semantically, *anak lari* does not involve predication, but rather a looser relationship based on the Association Operator, which may be paraphrased roughly as 'There's a child, and there's a running, and the two are associated with each other in some way'. This paper surveys a range of syntactic and semantic evidence in support of the sentential analysis, presented in more detail elsewhere.

The sentential analysis enjoys a number of significant conceptual advantages over its nominal and verbal counterparts. First, it is architecturally simpler; in particular, given that nouns and verbs are generally considered to be in paradigmatic opposition to each other, it does not posit one member of the pair while denying the existence of the other. Second, it is consistent with ontogeny, mirroring an attested stage in the acquisition of early child language. Thirdly, it is well-motivated phylogenetically, resembling the rudimentary compositional communicative systems of some primates and other species. Finally, it highlights the connection between full-fledged language and various kinds of reduced languages such as pidgins and homesign.

Nevertheless, while the sentential analysis would appear to be most appropriate for languages such as Malay/Indonesian, it is not necessarily extendable to other languages, even other Austronesian languages in which thing and activity expressions exhibit similar or identical morphosyntactic behaviour. For example, although Tagalog has been argued to lack a noun-verb distinction, it differs from Malay/Indonesian in that the notion of predication plays a central role in its grammatical organization. This paper concludes with some speculative diachronic comments on how this distinction between Tagalog and Malay/Indonesian might have arisen.

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