

## Between aspect and argument-structure: comparing *meN-* in Malay and (spoken) Indonesian

**Summary.** This paper seeks to establish whether the claims made by Soh & Nomoto (2009, 2011, 2015, S&N henceforth) regarding the aspectual effects of verbal prefix *meN-* in Standard Malay also hold for spoken Indonesian, based on elicitations with speakers from Java. Novel data shows that Indonesian *meN-* differs from Malay in 1/ being able to appear with all verbs having a direct internal argument, including stative predicates, and 2/ showing aspectual effects on all telic/atelic-ambiguous verbs (degree-achievements and accomplishments). Based on these data and the distribution of *meN-*, we conclude that Indonesian *meN-* is related to both aspect (cf. S&N) and argument-structure (as claimed by literature analysing *meN-* as an active voice marker, cf. Voskuil 2000, Sneddon 2010, a.o.).

**1/ Distribution of *meN-*.** S&N (2009) shows that Malay *meN-* cannot appear on stative verbs, unless they are suffixed by the (supposedly non-stative) *-i*, cf. (1). This data is replicated for Indonesian, except that the non-suffixed verb requires its argument to be introduced by a preposition, cf. (2), thus creating a confound as to why *meN-* should not appear on stative unsuffixed verbs in the first place.

- (1) a. Ali **(\*meng-)hormat** cikgu-nya.  
 Ali meN-respect teacher-3SG  
 'Ali **respects** his/her teacher.' (Malay, S&N 2009: (13))
- b. Ali **meng-hormat-i** cigku-nya.  
 Ali meN-respect-i teacher-3SG  
 'Ali **respects** his/her teacher.' (Malay, S&N 2009: (39))
- (2) a. Ali **(\*meng-)hormat** {kepada/\* $\emptyset$ } ayah-nya.  
 Ali meN-respect to/\* $\emptyset$  father-3SG  
 'Ali **respects** his/her father.'
- b. Ali **(meng-)hormat-i** {\*kepada/ $\emptyset$ } ayah-nya.  
 Ali meN-respect-i \*to/ $\emptyset$  father-3SG  
 'Ali **respects** his/her teacher.'

S&N (2009) provide 4 tests showing that *i*-suffixed stative verbs behave like non-statives in Malay: compatibility with (i) imperatives, (ii) adverb *perlahan-lahan* 'slowly', (iii) embedding under *memaksa* 'to force' and (iv) pseudo-clefts like *Apa yang Ali lakukan* 'what Ali did is'. Tests (i), (iii) and (iv) are non-conclusive as they contain a confound: they reject not only stative readings, but also non-agentive situations, cf. (3), which is problematic as *meN-* has been claimed to mark active voice (Voskuil 2000, a.o.). Further, test (ii) shows that Indonesian *i*-suffixed stative verbs keep their stative readings, cf. (4).

- (3)
- | Test   | Eventive-agentive   | Stative                 | Non-agentive         |
|--|---------------------|-------------------------|----------------------|
| i. Imperative                                  | <i>Drink water!</i> | # <i>Know the song!</i> | # <i>Get kissed!</i> |
| ii. 'He [ ] slowly'                            | <i>drank water</i>  | # <i>knew the song</i>  | <i>got kissed</i>    |
| iii. 'She forced me to [ ]' <i>drink water</i> |                     | # <i>know the song</i>  | # <i>get kissed</i>  |
| iv. 'What Ali did was [ ]' <i>drink water</i>  |                     | # <i>know the song</i>  | # <i>get kissed</i>  |
- (4) #Ali {sayang pada / meny-ayang-i} ayah-nya perlahan-lahan.  
 Ali love at meN-love-i father-3SG slowly  
*Intended: 'Ali loved his father slowly.'*

Given these observations, the observation that Indonesian *meN-* can only attach to stative verbs when they are *i*-suffixed can only be explained by the fact that the former do not take a direct object, while the latter do. We thus hypothesise that *meN-* can only attach to roots that take a direct internal argument. This hypothesis is confirmed by the distribution of *meN-* in intransitive verbs: only unaccusative roots (where subject is generated as an internal argument) can be prefixed by *meN-*, cf. sample list in (5). All roots compatible with *meN-* could get a causative reading when suffixed by *-kan*, a hallmark of unaccusative verbs (Vamarasi 1999). Note that our list includes semelfactives, cf. (5b), and regular achievements, cf. (5c-d), which S&N (2015) claim to be barred from *meN-*-prefixation in Malay. (S&N 2011's unergativity test [VS order in *if*-clauses] was rejected with all verbs by our speakers: thus, we cannot establish whether our *meN-* gives an unergative reading to unaccusative roots or not.)

- (5) **Purely unaccusative verbs** CAUS -kan? **Purely unergative verbs** CAUS -kan?
- |                                 |   |                                  |   |
|---------------------------------|---|----------------------------------|---|
| a. <i>men-jadi</i> 'to become'  | ✓ | f. <i>*mem-[p]ergi</i> 'to go'   | ✗ |
| b. <i>me-lompat</i> 'to jump'   | ✓ | g. <i>*mem-bicara</i> 'to speak' | ✗ |
| c. <i>me-ledak</i> 'to explode' | ✓ | h. <i>*men-jalan</i> 'to walk'   | ✗ |

|                                  |   |                                    |   |
|----------------------------------|---|------------------------------------|---|
| d. <i>men-[t]inggal</i> 'to die' | ✓ | i. * <i>me-napas</i> 'to breathe'  | ✗ |
| e. <i>me-luncur</i> 'to slide'   | ✓ | j. * <i>mem-[p]ikir</i> 'to think' | ✗ |

The only seemingly-unergative roots compatible with *meN-*, as e.g. *men-[t]ari* 'to dance', are actually ambitransitive (allowing for implicit objects), as proved by their ability to get passivised, cf.(6).

- (6) Tarian ini selalunya **di-tari** oleh enam orang...  
 Dance this always PASS-dance by six people  
 'This dance **is** always **danced** by six people...'

(adapted from: <https://kebudayaanetniksuluk.blogspot.com/2008/11/tarian-tradisi-tarian-pangalay-salah.html>)

**2/ Effects of *meN-*.** S&N (2015) note that when Malay *meN-* appears on degree-achievement predicates, it is only compatible with atelic modifiers, meaning that such verbs can only refer to non-minimal events when *meN-*-prefixed, cf. (7). We replicated this data for Indonesian via a questionnaire involving verbs of different aspectual classes and valency patterns, distributed to 3 speakers from Java. Crucially, speakers also found the effect with further accomplishment predicates when they were *meN-*-prefixed, as illustrated in (8) with *baca buku itu* 'to read the book'. This shows that the atelicity effect can extend further to (non-suffixed) accomplishment predicates in Indonesian.

- (7) a. Harga minyak **turun {selama / dalam}** tiga hari.  
 Price oil fall for / in three days  
 'The oil price **fell {for/in}** three days.' (Replicated from S&N 2015, (8a))
- b. Harga minyak **men-[t]urun {selama / #dalam}** tiga hari.  
 Price oil meN-fall for / #in three days  
 'The oil price **fell {for/#in}** three days.' (Replicated from S&N 2015, (8b))
- (8) a. Ali **baca Siti Nurbaya {selama / dalam}** tiga jam.  
 Ali read Siti Nurbaya for / in three hours  
 'Ali **read Siti Nurbaya {for/in}** three hours.'
- b. Ali **mem-baca Siti Nurbaya {selama / #dalam}** tiga jam.  
 Ali meN-read Siti Nurbaya for / # in three hours  
 'Ali **read Siti Nurbaya {for/#in}** three hours.'

S&N (2015) take the incompatibility of Malay *meN-* with stative verbs and with telic readings of (only) degree-achievement predicates to show that *meN-* can only merge with a verbal projection describing eventualities with stages (cf. Landmann 1992). This analysis cannot apply to Indonesian, as *meN-* is compatible with (internal-argument-taking) verbs of all aspectual classes (including statives, achievements and semelfactives which are without stages). Instead, Indonesian *meN-* only makes event stages prominent when they are available (and does not have any aspectual effect otherwise).

**Towards a decomposition of *meN-*.** We draw from recent findings from Erlewine & Sommerlot (2023, 2024) that *meN-* is actually composed of two affixes, *me-* and *-N-*, and suggest that while the nasal affix *-N-* checks for the internal argument slot (while also introducing the agent) as an instance of *vP/VoiceP*, the prefix *me-* is responsible for the aspectual effect. Arguments for *-N-* as checking for the internal argument slot and introducing the (not necessarily volitional) agent come from the agentivity of nominalisations formed with *pe-N-* (e.g. *pe-m-baca* 'a reader'). Since the aspectual effect (making event stages prominent) cannot be observed with such nominal constructions, we attribute it to *me-*, which is hosted in *EventP*, thus higher than *Voice* in the verbal structure. An advantage of our proposal is that it allows us to reconcile Erlewine & Sommerlot's morphological analysis with previous syntactic analyses of the (standard) Indonesian verbal structure positing one *Voice* head (*vP*, Sato 2012, a.o.).

**Conclusion.** Our data shows that *meN-* exhibits cross-linguistic variability, as its Indonesian version differs from its Standard Malay counterpart in two ways: (i) it requires a direct internal argument slot, and (ii) it makes eventuality stages prominent, thus giving an atelic-oriented reading of degree-achievements and accomplishments. But *meN-* also has similarities in the two languages: in both cases, it is a marker that operates on event structure, and possibly also on argument structure.

**Selected references.** \*Erlewine & Sommerlot (2023). Malayic active voice *meN-*: One prefix or two? Handout. \*Erlewine & Sommerlot (2024). Voice and extraction in Malayic. Manuscript. \*Landman (1992). The progressive. *Natural Language Semantics* 1. \*Sato (2012). Successive cyclicity at the syntax-morphology interface: Evidence from Standard Indonesian and Kendal Javanese. *Studia Linguistica* 66. \*Sneddon (2010). *Indonesian: A comprehensive grammar*. \*Soh & Nomoto (2009). Progressive aspect, the verbal prefix *meN-*, and stative sentences in Malay. *Oceanic Linguistics* 48. \*Soh & Nomoto (2011). The Malay verbal prefix *meN-* and the unergative/unaccusative distinction. *Journal of East Asian Linguistics* 20. \*Soh & Nomoto (2015). Degree achievements, telicity and the verbal prefix *meN-* in Malay. *Journal of Linguistics* 51. \*Vamarasi (1999). Grammatical relations in Bahasa Indonesia. \*Voskuil (2000). Indonesian voice and A-bar movement. *Formal issues in Austronesian linguistics*.