

Analyzing Austronesian Alignment in Hiligaynon Syntax

Introduction: Hiligaynon is a language in the Philippines spoken by 10% of the population but is relatively understudied. It is a member of the Central-Philippine branch of the Austronesian language family. Like its relatives Tagalog and Cebuano, Hiligaynon employs Austronesian alignment with a four-way voicing distinction. There are competing accounts of Austronesian alignment as many have chosen to analyze this system under ergative-absolutive case assignment (Mithun, 1994; Aldridge, 2004). However, Chen (2017) has argued these languages actually follow the nominative-accusative case assignment, while the voicing system marks topic. I reanalyze these claims by collecting Hiligaynon data consisting of transitives, causatives, and sentences with binding across the four voices: Actor Voice (AV), Patient Voice (PV), Circumstantial Voice (CV), and Locative Voice (LV). After, I shared these sentences with a native-speaking participant, who judged their grammaticality. After eliciting and confirming the grammaticality of these sentences with a native-speaking participant, I conclude that Hiligaynon data is consistent with Chen’s nominative-accusative analysis.

Background: There are two main analyses of the Austronesian voice system: the ergative-absolutive and nominative-accusative approaches (Aldridge, 2012; Chen, 2017). The ergative-absolutive approach argues that the pivot (the topical noun phrase) receives absolutive case. AV sentences in which the subject is the pivot are argued to be intransitives, since the subject appears with absolutive case (being the pivot). While in PV clauses, the object receives absolutive case. In LV and CV clauses, the pivot undergoes argument reordering (e.g. object shift). Under a nominative-accusative analysis, there is no reordering of arguments. Case is assigned in a nominative-accusative pattern, and the pivot indicates the topic, which overrides the case marking on the pivot. In this paper, I focus on Hiligaynon data on three of these data points: transitives, causatives, and binding.

Transitives: Chen (2017) argues that transitives in languages that use Austronesian alignment must be true transitives, not intransitive antipassives as the ergative-absolutive approach proposes. In addition to being optional, when present, the antipassive analysis of AV clauses predicts that objects are indirect and non-specific. Chen goes against these claims by providing evidence that actor voice clauses under Austronesian alignment are true transitives since objects (i) are required for the sentence to be grammatical, and (ii) objects can be direct and specific. Transitive evidence from Hiligaynon suggests Chen’s analysis may be correct, as seen in (1), which uses AV with a specific object (*sini nga manog* ‘that snake’) that cannot be dropped:

1. Nag-lampos ako sa kahoy *(sini nga manog)
AV.PST-strike 1.SG.PIVOT with wood *(that link snake)

“I struck *(that snake) with the wood”

Productive Causatives: Chen (2017) further analyzes productive causatives and argues they cannot be analyzed with ergative-absolutive assignment. Assuming a productive causative bi-clausal structure, Chen argues the ergative-absolutive analysis would predict both the causer and causee could receive ergative case (under an analysis where ergative case is assigned structurally by Voice to the external argument). However, languages that use Austronesian alignment do not mark their causee in this manner. Causative evidence from Hiligaynon suggests Chen is correct in her analysis as the causee (*Victoria*) is marked as a recipient (*kay*) instead of in the supposed ergative case (*ni*), which is seen in (2):

2. I-pa-sulat ko liwat ang surat kay/*niVictoria
FUT.IV-CAU-write 1.SG again PIVOT letter PN Victoria

“I will ask Victoria to write the letter again”

Binding: Chen (2021) argues binding in languages that use Austronesian alignment proves that the topics selected do not undergo rearrangement. The ergative-absolutive analysis argues that binding should reveal pivots in LV and CV clauses undergo an argument shift. If this is the case, binding relations between arguments may differ. However, Chen shows that these clauses do not indicate any argument shifting. Her example from productive causatives with reflexives shows that in CV clauses, the binding relations still hold, and it instead functions as an internal argument. Testing with Hiligaynon data reveals *Maria* consistently binds (*iya kaugalingon* ‘herself’) seen in (3a-c):

- (3) a. Naga-pa-ligo ako kay Maria sang iya kaugalingon
PRS.AV-CAU-bathe PIVOT.1.SG PN Maria D 3.SG self
 “I am making Maria bathe herself”
- b. Gin-pa-ligo ko si Maria sang iya kaugalingon
PST.PV-CAU-bathe 1.SG PIVOT.PN Maria D 3.SG self
 “I made Maria bathe herself”
- c. Gina-pa-ligo ko ni Maria ang iya kaugalingon
PRS.IV-CAU-bathe 1.SG PN Maria PIVOT 3.SG self
 “I made Maria bathe herself”

Conclusion: Based on the data from Hiligaynon, it is possible that Chen’s (2017) argument may have more support. If the analysis of the data is correct, then there are some problems present in the ergative-absolutive approach to Austronesian alignment. These issues may be adequately addressed through a nominative-accusative approach to studying these languages instead.

References:

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