

(In)transitivity, blocking and Malay/Indonesian *ber-*

Malay/Indonesian is known to exhibit ‘blocking effects’, whereby movement of a DP, but not PP/AdvP, is prohibited ‘across’ the verbal prefix *meN-* (Saddy 1991; Soh 1998; Cole & Hermon 1998, *inter alia*).

- (1) [CP Apa-kah yang [TP Ali (***mem-**)beli <apa>]]?
 what-q that Ali *meN*-buy 'What did Ali buy?'

Soh (1998, to appear) notes that these blocking effects might also arise from other verbal prefixes, such as *ber-*. In this paper, we investigate the blocking effects of *ber-* in Malay and Indonesian. We show that these effects only emerge when *ber-* behaves similarly to *meN-*: that is, when its grammatical function or semantic contribution is difficult to detect, and its presence seems optional. Assuming that *wh*-questions are formed via overt *wh*-movement to Spec-CP (e.g. Cole & Hermon 1998), extraction of a DP *wh*-phrase is prohibited across ‘optional *ber-*’. This is true whether the DP originates as the object of the verb (2), or as an argument of a CP object of the verb. Optional *ber-* does, like *meN-*, permit PP/AdvP extraction.

- (2) [CP Apa-kah yang [TP dia (***ber-**)main <apa> sampai larut malam]]?
 what-q that 3sg *ber-play* till midnight
 ‘What did he play till midnight?’

In contrast, DP extraction across *ber-* is possible when *ber-* is obligatory, as when *ber-* changes the grammatical category of the stem from N to V, adding the meaning ‘have/with’ (3).

- (3) [CP Sikap siapakah yang [TP dia ***(ber-)**pendapat <sikap siapa> sama dengan Abu]]?
 attitude who-q that 3sg *ber-*opinion attitude who same as Abu
 ‘Whose attitude does he think is the same as Abu’s?’

We also dispute the frequent assumption that Malay/Indonesian *ber-* encodes intransitivity (e.g., Nik Safiah Karim et al 1992 for Malay; Dardjowidjojo 1966; Butar-Butar 1976; Sie 1989; Sneddon et al 2010 for Indonesian). This assumption is often predicated on the observation that *ber-* forms do not passivize, and is often interpreted as evidence that the postverbal noun has incorporated into the verb. An incorporation analysis is supported by cases where the apparent object disallows a determiner or possessive clitic (Udayana & Beavers 2013). We do, however, find that the passive of certain forms with obligatory *ber-* (e.g. *belajar* ‘study’, *dibelajar* ‘to be studied’) is attested. Forms with non-obligatory *ber-* may not passivize with *ber-* (e.g. **di-ber-main* ‘pass-ber-play’), but may do so without *ber-* (e.g. *di-main* ‘pass-play’). The prohibition against the former may be due to the double marking of voice, if *ber-* as a middle voice marker (U&B 2013). We also argue that not all *ber-* forms can be analyzed as instances of object incorporation, as in some cases the postverbal nominal allows a determiner (e.g. *bermain permainan itu* ‘play that game’) or a possessive clitic. The postverbal nominal can also be reflexive + possessor (e.g. *bertemu diri saya* ‘meet myself’), an indication that it is a non-incorporated object (Chung 1976; U&B 2013). We find no systematic differences between the nominals that can appear as the complement of a *ber-* form versus other prefixed or bare verbs; along with the A’-extraction parallels between *ber-* and *meN-* addressed above, we argue that this raises the possibility that *ber-* verbs select a true ‘object’, and are not necessarily intransitive.

That *ber-* exhibits blocking effects parallel to *meN-* raises questions about current blocking analyses that are specific to *meN-* (e.g. Cole, Hermon and Yanti 2008, Sato 2012). These analyses cannot be easily extended to account for *ber-*, which exhibits the same restrictions. To better understand the blocking effects, it is important to determine what syntactic and semantic properties movement-blocking *ber-* has in common with *meN-*. The current study is a step towards that goal.