

Who is your name?

David Gil

Why does Indonesian ask *Nama siapa?* (name who), rather than *What is your name?* as in English? English speakers are often puzzled by the Indonesian construction, believing that since names are inanimate, WHAT should be used. Conversely, Indonesian speakers are often surprised to learn that English uses WHAT, arguing that since names refer to people, it should be WHO. This paper poses the question whether the different choice of WH words in Indonesian and English reflects some more fundamental property distinguishing between the two languages, or whether it is a superficial feature without deeper typological ramifications. The answer that is provided is: a combination of both.

The first part of this paper presents the results of an ongoing world-wide cross-linguistic survey examining the choice of WH word in "What is your name?" questions. An interim summary of the results, covering around 700 languages, is presented in Fig. 1 below. The results show that the Indonesian WHO construction represents a cross-linguistically widespread option, spanning a wide range of seemingly typologically diverse languages, including, among others, Zulu, Amharic, Tsez, Mongolian, Dani, Tahitian and Squamish. Moreover the presence of areal patterning evident in the map shows that the choice of WH word is a feature that is readily borrowed across languages of different genealogical and typological groups. Thus, in large part, Indonesian uses WHO because it is a typical Insular Southeast Asian language, while English uses "What is your name?" because it is a run-of-the-mill Western European language.

However, the second part of this paper shows that in spite of such areal patterning, the choice of WH word does indeed also reflect deeper aspects of morphosyntactic organization. Fig. 2 below plots the choice of WH word on a graph showing the results of an in-progress cross-linguistic experiment on over 60 languages world-wide measuring the extent to which the assignment of thematic roles are grammaticalized. While the vertical axis represents the degree of grammaticalization of the agent/patient distinction, the horizontal axis represents the degree of grammaticalization of the distinction between core and peripheral roles. Accordingly, up and to the right represents languages with a greater degree of grammaticalization of thematic role assignment. For example, one of the experimental stimuli shows a picture of a man clutching an armful of money and grinning broadly; speakers are asked whether such a picture can be described by a sentence such as English *The money is happy* or its Indonesian counterpart *duit gembira* (money happy). In English, speakers systematically answer "no", further explaining that "it's not the money that's happy, it's the man": this is because in English, *is happy* assigns the thematic role of theme to *the money* — English is thus one of the languages in the upper right-hand corner of the graph. In contrast, in Indonesian, many speakers answer "yes": for such speakers, the construction does not involve thematic role assignment, but rather is interpreted associationally, in a way that can be loosely paraphrased as "As for money, there is happiness".

In spite of a substantial overlap between WHO and WHAT languages in Fig. 2, a correlation emerges: WHAT languages tend to exhibit more grammaticalization of thematic role assignment than WHO languages. In particular, the top right-hand corner of the graph is populated exclusively by WHAT languages representing a variety of families and regions, including English, Hebrew, Twi, Kapampangan, Japanese, and Papiamentu. On the other hand, the various dialects of Malay and Indonesian are all further down and to the left, with lower grammaticalization of thematic roles. Thus while in English, *what* and *your name* are related via thematic role assignment, in Indonesian, *nama* and *siapa* are connected through a looser relationship of association. Specifically, just as *duit gembira* can be interpreted as "As for money, there is happiness", so *nama siapa* may be understood as something along the lines of "As for your name, who are you?".

The choice of WH word in "What are your name?" questions is thus partly arbitrary, reflecting the outcome of diachronic processes of language contact and borrowing, and

partly principled, reflecting the degree of grammaticalization of thematic role assignment in the grammar. Indonesian chooses WHO both because it is part of an Insular Southeast Asian sprachbund, and also because of its low degree of grammaticalization of thematic role assignment. More generally, this case study underscores the way in a single linguistic phenomenon may simultaneously reflect an ontologically heterogeneous potpourri of factors, some diachronic, others synchronic — there can be no one single story explaining everything.

Fig.1

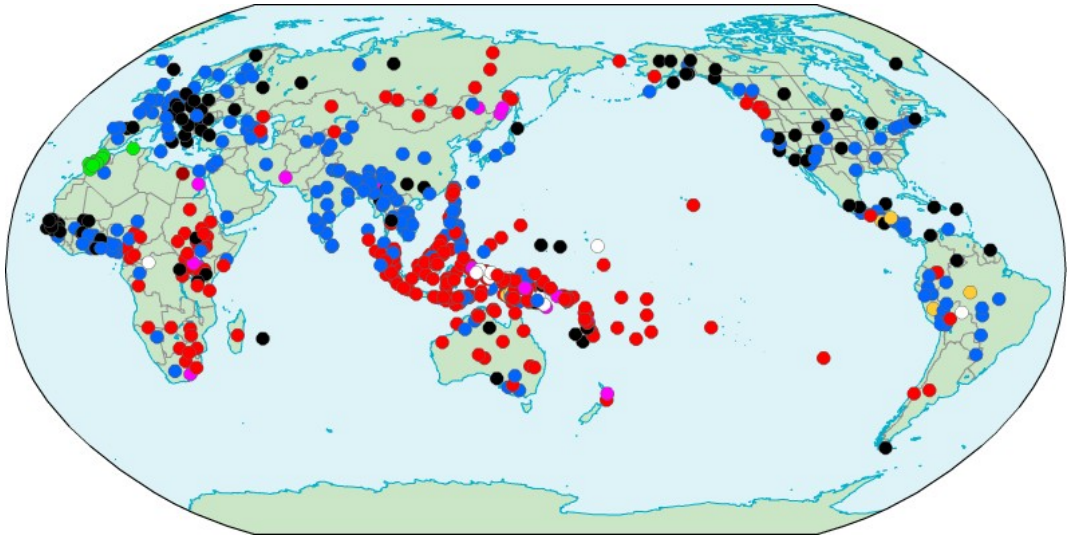
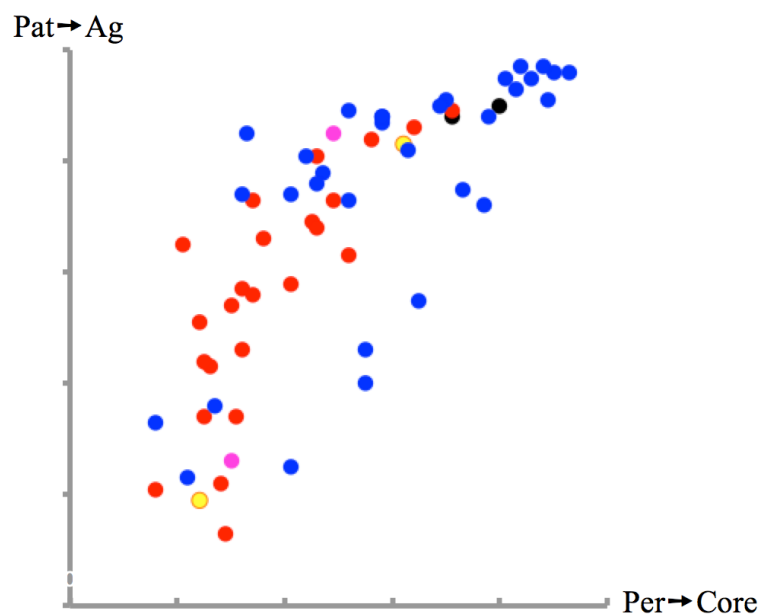


Fig. 2



- Key:
- WHAT
 - WHO
 - either WHAT or WHO
 - single WH word meaning both WHAT and WHO
 - some other WH word (typically HOW or WHERE)
 - suppletive combination of WH word and NAME
 - no WH word (e.g. "Your name is?", "Say your name!")
 - no NAME or CALL word (instead "Who are you?")