

Standard Indonesian Diatheses – Forms and Functions

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Standard Indonesian (Bahasa Indonesia) has available a range of linguistic devices to modify the valency of a predication. The functionally and morphologically discrete forms of predicatives (or “verbs”), like *jual ~ menjual ~ dijual ~ kaujual ~ terjual*, however, cannot simply be described as a whole by labeling them as the classic categories active and passive or as subject focus and object focus (like in Tagalog) or as (discourse) ergativity and unaccusativity without entailing even more terminological and descriptive difficulties.

This problem has led to a host of controversial publications on whether the use of classic (European) terminology is at all appropriate and how useful it can be for the description of a non-Indo-European language like Indonesian. However, these discussions did not lead to a more satisfying analysis of the valency-related phenomena in Indonesian.

One of the major problems with these forms is the question which construction can be used with which grammatical person(s). Many authors (e.g. CHUNG 1976) and grammarians (e.g. SNEDDON 1996) argue that there are two distinct kinds of passive in Indonesian which are separated by the range of grammatical persons they can be used with. Thus, forms with the so-called bare verb like

buku saya beli ‘the book, I bought’
or
koran kamu baca ‘the newspaper, you read’

are said to be grammatical only with first and second person agents whereas the other passive, formed with the prefix {di-}, is grammatical only with third person agents or in agentless sentences such as

buku dibelinya ‘the book was bought by him’
or
koran dibaca ‘the newspaper is being read’.

This implies that utterances like

buku dia beli ‘the book, he bought’
or
dibeliku ‘bought by me’

were not grammatical. This, however, seems not to be the case, taking into account e.g. the prescriptive grammar of Indonesian (*Tata Bahasa Baku*).

Furthermore, one might ask whether Indonesian actually has two different Passives constrained to certain domains, and whether the “bare verb” construction can be counted as a passive at all, since it does not allow the reduction by one argument (viz. the actor) — a criterion frequently used (e.g. by HARWEG) to define passives cross-linguistically.

Using HIMMELMANN’s and WUNDERLICH’s general definitions of *diatheses* as a basis, I would like to show that the forms under discussion are all part of one system of diatheses, consisting of a binary (valency-neutral or valency-shifting) focus distinction (agent focus vs. patient focus) and a (valency-changing) voice distinction (active vs. passive) all of which are in principle available for all three grammatical persons, only limited by certain pragmatic and extra-linguistic factors.

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