

## On the Position of Sundanese in a Typology of Isolating Languages

David Gil

Together with other languages of western Indonesia, Sundanese is known to display an array of grammatical features that include (i) isolating word structure, with little inflectional or derivational morphology; and (ii) basic SVO word order, together with the well-known correlates of such order. Nevertheless, isolating SVO languages as a class exhibit a considerable amount of internal diversity. This paper explores some of this diversity, focusing on the following two features: (i) the availability of a zero-marking option (ie. absence of a preposition) for a variety of oblique and otherwise peripheral noun phrases; and (ii) the availability of OV(S) as an alternative word order.

This paper presents the results of a cross-linguistic experiment testing the above two features in a variety of isolating SVO languages. In addition to Sundanese, the languages examined include 8 different varieties of Malay/Indonesian plus Minangkabau; (west Indonesian); Vietnamese and Cantonese (mainland Southeast Asian); Meyah (Papuan); Ju|'hoan (Khoisan); Twi, Fongbe and Yoruba (West African); Papiamentu, Sranan and Bislama (creoles); plus also Hebrew and English (non-isolating control languages). The results of the experiment suggest that there is indeed a substantial amount of diversity with respect to the two features being tested. In terms of language groups, the following ranking emerges with respect to the availability of zero-marked obliques / peripherals and OV(S) order:

(1) non isolating < creoles < mainland Southeast Asian & West African < Khoisan, Papuan & west Indonesian, including Sundanese

Thus, among the languages examined, Sundanese is characterized as having one of the highest degrees of availability of zero-marked obliques / peripherals and OV(S) order. Accordingly, Sundanese may be said to occupy a relatively extreme position within the typology of isolating languages.

This paper argues that the availability of zero-marked oblique and peripheral noun-phrases and alternative word orders are two manifestations of a single deeper property of languages, that of being *associational*. A language may be considered associational to the extent that it is lacking in distinct construction-specific rules of semantic interpretation, such as those which make reference to the presence of semantically specific prepositions, or to word order. Instead, in associational languages, most of the compositional semantics is based on a single general rule of association, formulated in terms of an association operator A, as follows. If X and Y are expressions with interpretations M and N respectively, then the meaning of the derived expression XY is A(M,N), the result of the association operator applied to M and N. In plain English, what this says is that the meaning of XY is associated in some way with the meanings of X and of Y; but nothing more than that. The meaning of XY is thus very vague, or underspecified. In some cases, additional layers of meaning may be provided by context, however, in other cases, the underspecification may persist into the pragmatic representation as well. Thus, the results of the experiment point towards the characterization of Sundanese as a highly associational language.

What accounts for the exceptional nature of Sundanese? This paper suggests that much of the cross-linguistic variation with respect to associationality can be attributed to the *articulation index*, a numerical measure of the extent to which grammatical categories such as number, definiteness, tense and aspect are overtly expressed through morphosyntactic means. In particular, the lower the articulation index of a language is, the more highly associational it is likely to be. As it turns out, Sundanese has a very low articulation index. Thus, it is argued that the low degree of grammaticalization of such categories as number, definiteness, tense and aspect is what is responsible for the highly associational character of Sundanese.