West Coast Bajau: Syntactically Ergative or Symmetrical Voice?

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In this paper I will argue that West Coast Bajau (a western Austronesian language spoken in Sabah, Malaysia and belonging to the Sama-Bajau subgroup) has a SYMMETRICAL VOICE system (Ross 2002, Himmelman 2002). With symmetrical voice, either the actor or the undergoer of a clause is selected as pivot, and crucially, "both undergoer-voice and actor-voice clauses are transitive" (Ross 2002:24). In contrast, the voice systems of many other Sama-Bajau languages[1] have been analyzed as syntactically ergative, where undergoer-voice clauses are transitive (ergative) and actor-voice clauses are intransitive (antipassive).

As noted by Ross (2002) in his discussion of Philippine-type languages, at issue here is whether the actor-voice clause is transitive or intransitive. In West Coast (WC) Bajau, the undergoer argument in actor-voice clauses is treated as a core argument, not demoted to oblique status as is the defining feature of antipassive undergoers. As evidence for this claim, I describe a third voice construction in WC Bajau in which there is a clear demotion of one of the semantic core arguments (the actor) to oblique status. In this 'traditional passive' construction, the actor argument is marked as a PP, exhibits variable word order, and can optionally be deleted from the clause. By way of contrast, the undergoer of the actor-voice construction bears none of these characteristics. It is true that in WC Bajau the actor voice is normally used to express an indefinite, non-referential undergoer (sometimes omitted from the clause), which is typical of an antipassive. However, lexically transitive verbs in actor-voice main clauses are also capable of expressing definite and referential undergoers, unlike typical antipassives. Finally, the actor-voice construction in WC Bajau has a much higher frequency distribution in narrative texts [40%] than that established for the Chamorro antipassive by Cooreman (1987), whose frequency distribution of voice constructions has been validated cross-linguistically (see Givón 1994).

Additional support for a symmetrical voice system in WC Bajau comes from evidence for a 'VP constituent' in both actor voice and undergoer voice, where the VP consists of the verb followed immediately by the non-pivot core argument. Other Western Austronesian languages for which a VP constituent in both voices as been claimed are Pendau (Quick 2002, 2006) and Toba Batak (Schachter 1984). VP constituent behavior will be shown

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[1] See Trick (2006) for Sama Southern; Brainard & Behrens (2002) for Yakan; Gault (1999) for Sama Bangingi'; and Walton (1986) for Sama Pangutaran.

for basic transitive clauses as well as for 'double object' constructions using the benefactive applicative -*an* suffix.

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