

The patient/object argument in passive constructions in Papuan Malay: its structural, semantic and pragmatic properties

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Abstract

This paper presents the semantic and syntactic status of the object argument in passive constructions in Papuan Malay (PM), a lingua franca spoken in West Papua, especially in the north coast of West Papua. This paper focuses on the animacy hierarchy of the grammatical relation of object to be accessible for the ‘privileged’ subject position in a passive construction and the semantic of transitive verbs that determine the animacy hierarchy of the object argument to be passivized in the passive constructions.

Papuan Malay (PM) is an SVO language that allows active vs. passive alternation. There are two types of passive constructions in PM, i.e. with *dapa*-construction and *ta--*-construction types.

(1) *Andi dong=dapa=pukul dari orang-orang itu dong*
Andi 3PL=PASS=hit from person-RED that 3PL
‘Andi and associates were hit by those people’

(2) *Ruma itu ta-bakar tadi malam*
House that PASS-burn recent night
‘That house was burned last night’

Dapa-construction is an analytic passive and *ta--*-construction is a morphological passive. In order for an object NP to be accessible to the subject position in passive construction, there are two main syntactic-semantic properties that are taken into account. 1) The animacy hierarchy HUMAN>ANIMAL>INANIMATE (see Dahl, 2008) determines the grammatical relation of object to be accessible for the ‘privileged’ subject position in the syntactic structure. A human object is more accessible to two types of passive constructions, rather than an animate and inanimate objects. 2) The animacy hierarchy is also determined by the semantic of the verbs. Verbs with high ‘human direct effect’ action toward an object NP, such as hit, push, eat, do not allow an object NP in the lowest rank of the hierarchy to be in the subject position in the passive construction. However, verbs with low ‘human direct effect’ action such as buy, bring, carry, and transport allow certain kinds of inanimate object nouns, but not all nouns, to be in the subject position in the passive construction.

Another strategy to place an object NP in the privileged position is through pragmatic strategy. An object must undergo a fronting strategy to the discourse function slot in the initial-sentence position when it is semantically prominent. Thus, the object NP must undergo a focus or a topic construction. Yet, it does not affect the basic word order of SVO, as a pronominal copy can be used to fill the syntactic slot of an argument being fronted.

This suggests that passive constructions in PM are not purely syntactic construction, but it is also semantically and pragmatically determined.

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