

Information structure and syntactic choices in Northern Sarawak

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This poster explores the role of information structure in motivating syntactic choices in three closely related Western Austronesian languages spoken in Northern Sarawak: Kelabit, Lun Bawang and Sa'ban. The languages have symmetrical voice alternations or multiple transitive clause types that differ in the mapping of arguments to functions:

- (1) Lun Bawang
- a. **Actor Voice** (actor = subject, undergoer = object)
- | | | | | |
|--------|--------------|---------|---------|-----------|
| ne' | nukat | kelatih | uih | nalem |
| PFV.go | AV.dig | worms | 1SG.NOM | yesterday |
- 'I went to dig up worms yesterday'
- b. **Undergoer Voice** (undergoer = subject, actor = object)
- | | | | | |
|----------------|---------|---------|-----|-----|
| Tinukat | uih | kelatih | dih | feh |
| UV.PFV.dig | 1SG.NOM | worms | DEM | PT |
- 'I already dug up the worms'

They also have relatively free word order for the subject which can appear either pre-verbally or post-verbally:

- (2) Sa'ban
- a. **Súel nah** maan bii'
- | | | | |
|------|-----|--------|------|
| girl | DEM | AV.eat | rice |
|------|-----|--------|------|
- 'That girl eats rice'
- b. Maan bii' **súel nah**
- | | | | |
|--------|------|------|-----|
| AV.eat | rice | girl | DEM |
|--------|------|------|-----|
- 'The girl eats rice'

Finally, in Kelabit and Lun Bawang pronominal arguments can be differentially-marked:

- (3) **Kelabit**
- a. Seni'er **kuh (/uih)** t=ieh
- | | | |
|--------|--------------------|------------|
| UV.see | 1SG.GEN (/1SG.NOM) | PT=3SG.NOM |
|--------|--------------------|------------|
- 'I saw him'

- b. **Lun Bawang**
 Pipag neh **ieh (/keneh)**
 UV.PFV.slap 3SG.GEN 3SG.NOM (/3SG.OBL)
 ‘He hit him’

Consequently, speakers make a number of syntactic choices when expressing a semantically transitive event – begging the question of what motivates these choices?

Cross-linguistically, word order and differential marking are known to be affected by information structure and in particular the roles of topic (what the sentence is about) and focus (the informative part of an utterance) (Lambrecht 1994, Dalrymple and Nikolaeva 2011). I argue on the basis of elicited grammaticality judgements and naturalistic corpus data that information structure also plays a role in motivating syntactic choices in Northern Sarawak. For example, word order can be used in Kelabit to place focus information initially (common in languages that follow the *principle of newsworthiness* (Mithun 1992)) as shown through negative contrast data where focus information precedes the particle *teh*:

- (4) **Context: ‘Did Andy hit John yesterday?’ No...**
- a. [Paul]_{focus} teh suk nemupu’ ieh
 Paul PT REL PFV.AV.hit 3SG.NOM
 ‘It was Paul who hit him (John)’
- b. [Paul]_{focus} teh suk pinupu’ neh
 Paul PT REL PFV.UV.hit 3SG.GEN
 ‘It was Paul that he (Andy) hit’
- c. [nemepag Paul]_{focus} teh=ieh
 AV.PFV.slap Paul PT=3SG.NOM
 ‘He (Andy) slapped Paul’

Similarly, OBL-marking in Lun Bawang may be linked to the status of the undergoer as topical (a common pattern in *differential object marking* (Iemmolo 2010)), since OBL undergoers cannot be realised clause-initially or clefted, unlike NOM undergoers:

- (5) **Lun Bawang**
- a. ***Keneh** pipag ieh
 3SG.OBL UV.PFV.slap 3SG.NOM
 For: ‘He was slapped by him’
- b. ***keneh** luk pipag *i=Yudan*
 3SG.OBL REL UV.PFV.slap NOM=Yudan
 For: ‘He was the one Yudan slapped’
- c. **Ieh** luk pipag *i=Yudan*
 3SG.NOM REL UV.PFV.slap NOM=Yudan
 ‘He was the one Yudan slapped’

Consequently, information structure plays a role in motivating syntactic choices such as word order and pronominal form in the languages of Northern Sarawak. This is of interest as it shows that symmetrical voice languages can be affected by information structural considerations in similar ways to ergative and accusative languages.

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