On symmetrical voice alternations: the case of Kelabit

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Western Austronesian languages are known for their typologically unusual systems of verbal morphology. Like active/passive and ergative/antipassive alternations, changes in verbal morphology indicate an alternation in the mapping of arguments to functions. However, unlike canonical voice alternations, they do not result in (syntactic) detransitivisation. This can be illustrated for Kelabit, a Western Austronesian language spoken in Northern Sarawak:

(1) a. **Actor Voice**

ne-k\<um\>an	buaq kaber	*la'ih*	*sineh*
PFV\<AV\>eat	fruit pineapple	man	DEM

'That man ate pineapple'

b. **Undergoer Voice**

k\<in\>an	la'ih	sineh	*buaq kaber*
\<UV.PFV\>eat	man	DEM	fruit pineapple

'That man ate pineapple' (elicited example from fieldwork)

The verbal morphology in (1), i.e. the infixes *-in-* and *-um-*, indicate an alternation in which semantic argument is syntactically privileged. In (1a), the undergoer is privileged, whilst in (1b) it is the actor. However, both (1a) and (1b) appear syntactically transitive with two core nominal arguments. Given that this differs from canonical voice systems, Western Austronesian verbal morphology has been subject to a variety of analyses, including symmetrical voice (Himmelmann 2005), nominalisation (Kaufman 2009), case (Rackowski and Richards 2005) and transitivity (Aldridge 2004).

In this paper, I present a series of arguments for treating the Kelabit alternations in (1) as symmetrical voice – i.e. a morphologically encoded alternation in the mapping of arguments to functions in which each construction is syntactically transitive (Himmelmann 2005). This rests upon demonstrating (a) that there is an alternation in syntactic functions and (b) that both clauses are transitive. Grammatical functions have been controversial in Western Austronesian since typical subject properties are split between the privileged argument and the actor (Schachter 1976). Nonetheless, there are several good reasons to assume that the privileged argument is mapped to subject in Kelabit. These include the patterns of optional phrase markers, control, co-ordination and word order/extraction restrictions, shown in (2):

(2) a.

Seni'er	kuh	*la'ih*	[suk	ne-nekul	nubaq	ngen seduk]
UV.PFV.see	1SG	man	REL	PFV-AV.spoon	rice	with spoon

'I saw the man who spooned up rice with a spoon'

b.

*Seni'er	kuh	nubaq	[suk	nekul	*la'ih*	sineh]
UV.PFV.see	1SG	rice	REL	AV.spoon	man	DEM

c.

Seni'er	kuh	*nubaq*	[suk	sikul	la'ih sineh	ngen seduk]
UV.PFV.see	1SG	rice	REL	UV.PFV.spoon	man DEM	with spoon

'I saw the rice that the man spooned up with a spoon'

d.

*Seni'er	kuh	la'ih	[suk	sikul	*nubaq*]
UV.PFV.see	1SG	man	REL	UV.PFV.spoon	rice

Keenan and Comrie (1979) argue that if only one argument can be relativized on, then that argument is subject. Since only the privileged argument can be relativized on in (2), this would suggest that the privileged argument is subject. Together with the other behavioural patterns of privileged arguments,

this suggests that the alternations in (1) constitute a grammatical function alternation. Alternative proposals, such as treating the actor as subject and/or the privileged argument as a topic (Schachter 1976), can be ruled out in UV constructions like (1b), since it is the actor that typically has high topic-continuity rather than the undergoer, and there is good evidence to suggest that the actor is an object rather than a subject, as discussed below.

In order to show that (1) is an example of symmetrical voice, it is also necessary to demonstrate the syntactic transitivity of each clause. In other words, it is necessary to show that the non-subject undergoer in (1a) and the non-subject actor in (1b) are both core arguments rather than obliques. Again, there are several tests that support this view, including their inability to be fronted and adjacency to the verb:

(3) a. *La'ih   sineh*   [ne-kuman   buaq   kaber]   ngimalem
         man   DEM   PFV-AV.eat   fruit   pineapple   yesterday
         'I ate pineapple yesterday'

     b. **La'ih   sineh*   ne-kuman   ngimalem   buaq   kaber
         man   DEM   PFV-AV.eat   yesterday   fruit   pineapple

     c. [Kinan   la'ih   sineh]   ngimalem   *neh   buaq   kaber*   *ih*
         UV.PFV.eat   man   DEM   yesterday   PT   fruit   pineapple   PT
         'I ate the pineapple yesterday'

     d. *Kinan   ngimalem   la'ih   sineh   *neh   buaq   kaber*
         UV.PFV.eat   yesterday   man   DEM   PT   fruit   pineapple

The patterns in (3) suggest that both the AV undergoer and UV actor form a constituent with the verb, which is typical of objects cross-linguistically and, importantly, not true of obliques. Hence, both the AV undergoer and UV actor can be seen as core arguments and both AV and UV are transitive. Moreover, AV undergoers are not necessarily indefinite, unlike in Tagalog, which is a key factor in motivating the case and transitivity analyses (Rackowski and Richards 2005, Aldridge 2004).

Consequently, this paper argues that symmetrical voice is the best analysis of the alternation in (1). This has several important implications for voice typology and theoretical accounts. Firstly, it is possible to have a grammatical function alternation without detransitivisation/demotion. Secondly, the alternations do not seem to be derived from one another, suggesting that there may be no default mapping of arguments to functions. Finally, and importantly, it is possible to find voices in which actors are mapped to internal rather than external arguments.

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