West Coast Bajau: Syntactically Ergative or Symmetrical Voice?

Mark T. Miller
SIL International
The University of Texas

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

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

References


Gault, JoAnn Marie, 1999, An ergative description of Sama Bangingi’. Manila: 
Linguistic Society of the Philippines, Special Monograph Issue, No. 46.

Givón, Talmy, 1994, The pragmatics of de-transitive voice: Functional and typological 
aspects of inversion. In T. Givón, ed. Voice and inversion, 3-44. Amsterdam/-
Philadelphia: John Benjamins.

and Malcom Ross, eds. The History and Typology of Western Austronesian Voice 

Quick, Phil, 2002, A sketch of the primary transitive verbs in Pendau. In Fay Wouk and 
Malcom Ross, eds. The History and Typology of Western Austronesian Voice 

2006, Is there a VP in Pendau? Paper presented at Tenth International Conference on 
Austronesian Linguistics. 17-20 January 2006. Puerto Princesa City, Palawan, 

Ross, Malcom, 2002, The history and transitivity of western Austronesian voice and 
voice-marking. In Fay Wouk and Malcom Ross, eds. The History and Typology of 

Studies in the structure of Toba Batak. UCLA Occasional Papers in Linguistics 5, 
122-149.

presented at Tenth International Conference on Austronesian Linguistics. 17-20 
January 2006. Puerto Princesa City, Palawan, Philippines. Available from 
http://www.sil.org/asia/philippines/ical/papers.html

Manila: Linguistic Society of the Philippines.