

Voice in western Austronesian: an update

NIKOLAUS P. HIMMELMANN

The analysis of voice marking and grammatical relations in western Austronesian languages¹ continues to be an exciting and controversial issue for linguists of all persuasions. So far, the debate has mainly focused on a few languages, in particular Tagalog.² The primary purpose of the present book is to broaden the empirical basis of the debate by presenting relevant data from other western Austronesian languages. As may be expected, broadening the empirical basis for debating a given issue almost inevitably raises a number of analytical issues which are usually pushed aside all too easily. The present introductory remarks outline some of these issues.

1 How many types of voice marking are found in western Austronesian languages?

To date, very little is known about the extent to which voice marking and grammatical relations vary among western Austronesian languages. In particular, it is not clear if there are indeed different types of voice and grammatical relation marking among these languages. Alternatively, we could be dealing with a single basic type and a vast array of micro-level variation.

- ¹ For the purposes of this paper, the term *western Austronesian* is defined as a cover term for all Austronesian languages spoken in Taiwan, the Philippines, mainland Southeast Asia, western Indonesia (Sulawesi and all islands to the west of it), Borneo and Madagascar, and also including Palauan and Chamorro. That is, *western Austronesian* is used in a strictly geographic sense (roughly: all Austronesian languages to the west of 130° east longitude, excluding in Indonesia the languages east of Sulawesi, but including Palauan and Chamorro). It is not to be confused with the genetically defined term *Western Malayo-Polynesian* (for which see Blust 1978).
- ² See Kroeger (1993), Schachter (1995) and Ross (this volume) for summary reviews of the debate surrounding Tagalog. A somewhat less intensive debate has been concerned with the analysis of Indonesian (see Wouk 1996 for references and discussion). Very recently, Balinese is also becoming the object of some controversy (see Clynes 1995; Artawa & Blake 1997 and Wechsler & Arka 1998, among others).

Fay Wouk and Malcolm Ross, eds, *The history and typology of western Austronesian voice systems*, 7-15.
Canberra: Pacific Linguistics, 2002.

© Nikolaus P. Himmelmann

The major task here is to uncover interesting correlations between different morphosyntactic features. For example, is it possible to claim that the occurrence of an applicative suffix *-i* correlates with the absence of noun phrase markers? Does extensive person marking on the verb correlate with placing the subject in immediate preverbal position? And so on. Before it will be possible to search for such correlations, however, it will be necessary to identify a set of features which promise interesting correlations and to obtain the relevant facts for a broad range of languages. Most contributions in this book address this preliminary task of reviewing correlation candidates and filling in the data for lesser-known languages.

Note that it is common in the literature to assume a fairly rough and hardly ever explicitly discussed division of western Austronesian languages into the following two types: Philippine-type languages and the rest (occasionally also called *Indonesian-type* languages). Wolff (1996) and Zobel (this volume) are laudable attempts to make this distinction a bit more precise. They propose a number of morphological features (for example, preposed person markers, affix combinations involving the applicative suffix *-i*) which are claimed to occur only in non-Philippine-type languages. This two-way distinction provides a useful start for investigating the (internal) typology of Austronesian languages. However, it should be clearly understood that it is a hypothesis which needs a lot of further empirical scrutiny (see Himmelmann, this volume, for more discussion).

2 What does the term *focus system* actually refer to?

The correlations of primary interest to this volume are, of course, those which may be linked to what has been called 'the focus system', a term which in the Austronesianist literature is all too often assumed to have unambiguous reference. I believe this to be a misconception. In fact, I think that further progress in the typology of western Austronesian languages depends on spelling out the range of phenomena one has in mind when using this term.

There are at least two levels/domains to which the term 'focus system' has been applied: morphology and syntax.³ And on each level different sets of phenomena may be held to be within the scope of this term, as will be briefly illustrated in the following paragraphs.

When applied to morphology, the term 'focus system' seems to be used primarily to refer to Philippine-type voice related morphology, most of which has been reconstructed for PAn. What is not always clear, however, is which affixes precisely are deemed to be part of this system. Major candidates are displayed in Table 1.

³ A third level to which this term has also been applied is the discourse level. Since this plays only a marginal role in the literature, it is not further discussed here.

Table 1: Possibly voice-related morphology in Philippine-type languages

Prefix	Infixes	Suffixes
<i>si-/i-</i>	<i>-um-/M-</i> ⁴	<i>-ən/-in</i>
	<i>-in-</i>	<i>-an</i>
		<i>-i</i>
		<i>-a</i>

There are three interrelated issues concerning the affixes displayed in Table 1. First, it is not clear whether they all are actually voice marking affixes. It is widely agreed that the prefix *si-/i-* and the suffixes *-ən/-in* and *-an*, all of which occur in a wide range of languages, are always clearly voice-related (marking voices in which the undergoer is the syntactic pivot). The same appears to be true for *-um-/M-*, at least on a synchronic level.⁵ The infix *-in-*, on the other hand, appears to be primarily a mood (or tense) marker, as it occurs in many languages in both actor and undergoer voices (see Reid 1992 for examples and discussion). The suffix *-i* is widely attested as an applicative marker (for example in Indonesian, *Tukang Besi*, *Tomini-Tolitoli* languages, etc.), but it also alternates with *-an* in, for example, *Bisayan* languages (see Zorc 1977 for examples).

Second, it is not obvious in what sense these forms actually form a system. One of the most conspicuous features of voice-related morphology in many western Austronesian languages is its formal heterogeneity, usually involving prefixation, infixation, and suffixation as well as stem-alternations of various kinds. Furthermore, there is substantial variation across the western Austronesian languages as to the number and shape of affixes which can be claimed to have some bearing on voice-marking in a given language. This raises questions such as the following: Which elements could be missing from the ones listed in Table 1 above while still allowing the remaining inventory of forms to be called a ‘focus system’? When other morphological formatives are in paradigmatic contrast with the formatives listed in Table 1 (e.g. Indonesian *di-* and *-kan*), are they part of the ‘focus system’? To my knowledge, there are, at present, no straightforward and widely agreed on answers to questions of this kind.

Thirdly, it is unclear whether the idea of a ‘focus system’ on a morphological level includes morphological formatives beyond the formatives which appear to be directly involved in voice alternations. For example, many western Austronesian languages have elaborate morphology for marking involuntary actions and/or the mere ability to perform an action. Are these formatives part of the ‘focus system’? What about the ubiquitous stative

⁴ The symbol *M-* is used here to refer to all kinds of stem-initial nasal alternations which signal ‘actor-focus’, often in combination with mood/tense such as Tagalog *pakiníg* ‘hearing’, *makiníg* ‘listen’, *nakiníg* ‘listened’. Compare Balinese *daar - naar* ‘eat’, *baan - maan* ‘obtain’, etc.

⁵ There is some evidence for the view that *-um-* differs from the three undergoer voice affixes on a number of counts and should not automatically be assumed to be a voice-marking affix. For example, it is possible to give reasonably precise accounts of the semantics of the three undergoer voice affixes. The meaning and function of *-um-*, on the other hand, is much more elusive (the common characterisation of *-um-* as an actor voice marker is problematic in that *-um-* regularly also occurs in verbal predicates not involving actors such as predicates denoting meteorological events, e.g. Tagalog *umuulán* ‘it’s raining’, and change-of-state predicates, e.g. Tagalog *gumandá* ‘become beautiful’).

morphology? Again, authors differ widely as to whether such morphology is considered part of the ‘focus system’, hardly ever providing explicit arguments for their analytical choices.

On the syntactic level, the term ‘focus system’ is also used in reference to ill-defined and differing sets of phenomena. In conservative usage it refers to some of the constructions in which the affixes displayed in Table 1 typically occur, i.e. simple declarative main clauses in Philippine languages. However, one of the more striking features of Philippine languages is the use of these forms in question word and cleft constructions and also in conjunction with existential quantifiers. The following Tagalog example shows a ‘focus’-marked word in construction with an existential quantifier:

- (1) *may ipàpakíta ako sa iyó*
 may i-RED-pa-kita akó sa iyó
 EXIST UG.T-RED-CAUS-visible 1SG LOC 2SG.DAT
 ‘(Come here,) I have something to show you.’

Is this construction part of the ‘focus system’ on the syntactic level? That is, is it a defining feature of ‘focus systems’ that ‘focus’-marked words can occur in direct construction with existential quantifiers?

There are several other widespread syntactic features in western Austronesian languages which so far have not been directly linked with the ‘focus system’ in its syntactic sense but which may well regularly co-occur with ‘focus’-morphology and in that sense actually be of central importance to clarifying what the notion of ‘focus system’ precisely means. For example, a semantically transitive ‘focus’-marked predicate usually forms a constituent with the immediately following NP, regardless of the specific ‘focus’ affix involved. This is shown by the fact that generally no other constituents (except clitics and possibly some adverbial expressions) may intervene between this NP and the predicate. Furthermore, their order is fixed while the order for other NPs is often somewhat more flexible. Here is a Totoli example:

- (2) *gaukan nogutu ponguman itu*
 gaukan N-po-gutu poN-uman itu
 king ACT.REAL-SF-make GER-story that
 ‘The king made the following announcement: ...’

- (3)a. **nogutu gaukan ponguman itu*
 b. **ponguman itu nogutu gaukan*

In this example, the post-verbal NP *ponguman itu* ‘that announcement’ expresses the undergoer of the verbal predicate *nogutu* ‘made’. It forms a constituent with the predicate since it has to follow immediately after the predicate (as shown by (3a)) and cannot be fronted (as shown by (3b)).

Again the typological question arises of whether this feature is to be considered essential to the syntax of the ‘focus system’ and if so, how this constituent compares to the well-known and widespread VP-constituents in other languages.

Another, somewhat more expansive use of ‘focus’ on the syntactic level makes reference to constructions which appear to be similar in some way or another to the Philippine voice constructions without actually involving ‘focus’-marked predicates. This is the case, for example, when the voice system of Indonesian is characterised as a ‘focus system’ (in Indonesian it is only the ‘actor-focus’ forms with *meN-* which can be considered clearly to

reflect 'focus' formatives). In this usage, the term *focus* is no longer linked primarily to a set of verbal affixations but instead refers to one or more syntactic characteristics of the voice system in a given language. Though rarely made explicit, the core feature that is of relevance here is the idea that the voice alternations in these languages are valency-neutral alternations, i.e. sets of constructions with equal transitivity values but different role-function alignments (see below end of §3).

This short review should make it clear that the reference of the term 'focus' in western Austronesian studies is far from clear. Given the various levels and differing sets of phenomena to which this term has been applied, it should not come as a surprise that considerable confusion exists in the literature as to what exactly is being claimed by a given author and how these claims are related to claims by other authors (for example, claims such as 'language X has a "focus system"' obviously depend on how a 'focus system' is defined). This confusion is aggravated by the fact that the term *focus* itself is prone to lead to misunderstandings, a topic to which I turn in the next section.

3 Why western Austronesian 'focus' is not focus

As is well known, there is a long tradition of claims, in particular for Philippine languages but also for other western Austronesian languages, that the voice system (or systems) found in these languages does not match any other system found in the world's languages. In this tradition, the term *focus* in its special Philippinist sense has been coined. This terminological choice is somewhat less than fortunate for two reasons. First, it obscures the fact that Philippine-type 'focus', though differing from the English active/passive alternation on a number of counts, is essentially a voice phenomenon. Second, it does not tally well with the concept of pragmatic focus which is widely used in general linguistics. Let me briefly elaborate on both of these problems.

The claim that Philippine-type 'focus' is essentially a voice phenomenon should not be confused with the claim that Philippine-type 'focus' alternations are essentially the same thing as the active/passive alternation in English. There is broad agreement today that the active/passive alternation should be distinguished from the Philippine-type alternations, as is obvious from the fact that almost all authors who use the term 'voice' in reference to the Philippine-type 'focus' alternations avoid the terms 'active' and 'passive'.⁶

Still, acknowledging that the Philippine-type 'focus' alternations are not the same thing as the active/passive alternation in English does not necessarily imply that these two kinds of alternation do not share any similarities. The essential point of similarity between the Philippine-type 'focus' and the English active/passive alternations is that in both kinds of alternations a different argument is put into pivot (or subject) function and that this change in the alignment between semantic role and syntactic function is marked morphologically on the verb. Compare the following two examples from Tagalog:

⁶ Even authors such as Wolff et al. (1991) who use the terms 'active' and 'passive' for pedagogical reasons make it clear that there are essential differences between the two types of alternations.

- (4) *humanap na ng bahay ang bata'*
 um-hanap na ng bahay ang bata'
 ACT-search now GEN house SPEC child
 'The child looked for houses/a house.'
- (5) *hinanap na ng bata' ang bahay*
 in-hanap na ng bata' ang bahay
 REAL(UG)-search now GEN child SPEC house
 'The child looked for the house(s).'

In (4) the verbal predicate *hanap* 'search' is marked by the infix *-um-* and the actor of the search, i.e. *bata'* 'child', is marked by the phrase marker *ang*, while the undergoer of the search, i.e. *bahay* 'house', is marked by the phrase marker *ng* (which though conventionally written as <ng> is actually /nang/). In (5), the distribution of actor and undergoer have been exchanged: it is now the undergoer which appears in the *ang*-phrase, while the actor appears in the *ng*-phrase. At the same time, the verbal morphology has changed, the verbal predicate now being marked by the infix *-in-*.⁷

In order for this alternation to count as a voice alternation, it is important to show that the *ang*-phrase is the syntactic pivot (or subject) of the two constructions illustrated in (4) and (5). And while there has been considerable controversy about the nature of subjecthood in Tagalog,⁸ it is widely agreed that the *ang*-phrases in the two examples above have more (and more important) subject-like properties than any other kind of noun phrase in Tagalog and therefore qualify as syntactic pivots, if not as subjects. Inasmuch as one accepts the claim that there are syntactic pivots or subjects in western Austronesian languages, it is clear that the change of 'focus' morphology on the verb regularly corresponds to a change in the alignment between semantic role and syntactic function, and that in this sense 'focus' alternations are voice alternations.

Of course, there are different ways of defining voice. Dixon and Aikhenvald, for example, in their recent typology of verbal alternations define voice as 'removing an argument from the (inner) core, and placing it in the periphery (valency reducing)' (1997:72). This definition, which essentially covers the passive and antipassive alternations, is somewhat narrower than the one employed here. And on this definition, it is dubitable whether the Philippine-type 'focus' alternation is a voice alternation because it is controversial whether 'focus' alternations involve a reduction in valency. Still, it seems important to me to make it clear that there is one essential point of similarity between Philippine-type 'focus' alternations and the voice alternations as defined by Dixon and Aikhenvald: all of these alternations involve a realignment between syntactic pivots and semantic roles.

Whether one captures this similarity by extending the use of the term 'voice' to also cover Philippine-type focus alternations or whether one uses another term as a cover term for the

⁷ Note that the translations for the two preceding examples are identical, except that in (4) 'house' is indefinite but in (5) it is definite. These translations reflect the most typical and unmarked reading of the Tagalog clauses. The difference in definiteness, however, is not a categorical one. Given an appropriate context and possibly also a somewhat different word order, example (4) could mean 'the children looked for the house(s)' and (5) 'the children looked for houses/a house'.

⁸ See Kroeger (1993) and Schachter (1995) for further references and discussion.

passive, antipassive and Philippine-type 'focus' alternations,⁹ is a secondary terminological matter. In line with most of the recent literature, all contributions to this volume have opted for the former option and use *voice* in reference to Philippine-type 'focus' alternations.

Turning now to the second point, it is also widely agreed today that Philippine-type 'focus' does not have anything to do with what is commonly understood as pragmatic focus. That is, Philippine-type 'focus' does not pertain to the marking of new information (so-called information focus) nor does it mark contrastive emphasis on one of the arguments (so-called contrastive focus). Thus, the NP which is said to be 'in focus', for example *ang bata* 'the child' in (4) above, is not new information, nor is it contrasted with another entity in a presupposed set of possible agents for the search of a house (i.e. (4) does not mean 'it was the child (and not its father) who looked for a house'). It is also not the case that the 'focus' morphology which appears on the predicate (such as the infixes *-um-* and *-in-* in the two examples above) marks any kind of pragmatic focus. Rather, it is clear, and widely agreed, that the so-called 'focus' affixes mark a combination of semantic roles and tense, mood and/or aspect (opinions differ quite widely whether it is tense or mood or aspect or a combination of two of these categories). Thus, for example, the infix *-um-* in (4) makes it clear that the referent of the *ang*-phrase is the actor of the search and not its undergoer. It does not highlight or emphasise the referent of the *ang*-phrase in any particular way.

The idea of highlighting or emphasising a particular constituent should be clearly distinguished from the idea that there is a special relation between the *ang*-phrase and the predicate. Undeniably, such a special relationship exists simply because it is only the *ang*-phrase which gets its semantic role directly marked on the predicate (by the 'focus' affix). The semantic role of any further argument of a verbal predicate is not directly marked anywhere in the clause. Instead, it has to be inferred from its noun phrase marker and the fact that it cannot be the semantic role which has been explicitly assigned to the *ang*-phrase. Thus in (4), the fact that *-um-* assigns the agent role to the *ang*-phrase makes it clear that the argument in the *ng*-phrase (*ng bahay*) cannot have this role. It must be an undergoer of some sort. Contrast this with (5) where the 'focus' morphology makes it clear that the argument in the *ang*-phrase bears an undergoer role. Hence, it is most likely that the argument in the *ng*-phrase is an actor.¹⁰

As already mentioned above, the special relationship existing between the predicate and the *ang*-phrase is most adequately characterised as the relationship between a predicate and its syntactic pivot. That is, what is involved here is a syntactic relationship and not some kind of pragmatic highlighting or emphasis. The syntactic nature of the relationship is clearly shown by the fact that the *ang*-phrase has a substantial number of subject properties, such as being the only argument that can launch floating quantifiers, control secondary predicates, be

⁹ One possibility that comes to mind is to use *diathesis*, a term which is used by many (in particular European scholars) as a synonym of *voice*, in a broader sense to cover both valency-changing and valency-neutral alternations concerning syntactic pivots.

¹⁰ The details of determining the semantic roles of non-pivot arguments warrant a much more elaborate discussion than is possible here. Essentially there are four different factors involved: the semantic frame (or lexical-conceptual structure) associated with the predicate, the semantic role explicitly assigned to the pivot, the marker used for the non-pivot argument(s) (in Tagalog either *ng* or *sa*), and last but not least the semantics of the non-pivot argument (a *ng*-phrase referring to a hammer or a knife is, all other things being equal, more likely to be interpreted as an instrument than one which makes reference to an animate being, which will be most naturally interpreted as an agent).

relativised and be omitted in conjunction reduction. None of these properties has anything to do with pragmatic focus.

In conclusion of this section, it may be noted that, in principle, it does no harm to call Philippine voice morphology ‘focus’ as long as it is clearly understood that ‘focus’ is used here in a very special sense which is not in any way directly related to the notion of pragmatic focus. However, as so often, while terminology *per se* is ‘harmless’ when handled with care and consideration, the discussion of Philippine-type ‘focus’ in the last fifty years has shown that this terminology adds unnecessary confusion and complexity to an issue which is already complex and confusing. This even holds true for some of the specialist literature (some of which is documented in Matsuda French 1988), not to mention the confusions in the typological literature which often appear to be misguided by the ‘focus’ terminology (a recent example is Dixon and Aikhenvald’s discussion (1997:89-91) of Philippine languages in their typology of verbal alternations).

Using ‘voice’ instead of ‘focus’ may not only be useful in that it avoids misunderstandings related to the pragmatic meanings of the term *focus*; it may also be of help when delimiting the set of phenomena which are deemed to make up the ‘focus system’. However, changing terminology alone does not solve any of the analytical problems associated with these phenomena. Whatever the thing is called in the end, the most important task is, of course, to provide an explicit analysis of voice phenomena in western Austronesian languages which allows a productive comparison with related phenomena in other language areas and families.

To my mind, there are currently two major approaches to the analysis of voice phenomena in western Austronesian languages. On the one hand, there are various proposals for an ergative analysis of Philippine languages as well as a substantial number of other western Austronesian languages (Indonesian, South Sulawesi, Uma, Balinese, etc.). In these approaches, one of the voices is analysed as the basic unmarked construction for transitive clauses while another voice (usually the so-called actor-‘focus’) is analysed as an antipassive. On the other hand, there is a fairly broad and heterogeneous set of approaches which analyse voice-related phenomena in western Austronesian languages as *valency-neutral alternations* (another term is *symmetrical voice systems*). The basic tenet of these approaches is that the different voices found in these languages do not change the overall transitivity of the constructions in which they occur. Instead, a change of voice signals a change in the alignment of semantic roles and syntactic positions (i.e. in actor voice the actor is the syntactic pivot, in undergoer voice the undergoer is the syntactic pivot, but both constructions share the same transitivity value). Among these approaches are the traditional multiple passive analyses¹¹ as well as the ‘focus’ analysis, although neither of these has been very explicit about the precise nature of the presumed realignment processes.

As mentioned at the beginning of these introductory remarks, it is far from clear that western Austronesian languages all belong to a single basic type with regard to their voice and grammatical relation marking. It is thus possible that an ergative analysis is appropriate for some of these languages while an analysis in terms of valency-neutral alternations may

¹¹ One should not let oneself be misled by the terminology. Most authors who use *passive* in reference to the undergoer voices — including the much scolded Bloomfield — are well aware of the fact that these voices do not affect the transitivity of the overall construction (see for example, Bloomfield 1917:153ff., 1933:173).

be more appropriate for others. In appraising the respective merits of these two analyses it would certainly be useful to stick to specific claims for particular languages rather than making sweeping generalisations for the whole language area — claims which are generally unfounded simply because very little is known about the details of grammatical relation marking in the majority of the languages included in such claims.

In line with this view, the contributions to this volume are concerned with voice-related phenomena in a single language or a small number of closely related languages. Furthermore, they do not focus narrowly on the two or three main clause constructions which may be deemed to constitute the core of the voice marking system of a given language. Instead, they generally include a number of related constructions and morphological items, thus contributing to the slowly growing database of potentially correlating features on which a future typology of these languages can safely be founded.

References

- Artawa, Ketut and Barry J. Blake, 1997, Patient primacy in Balinese. *Studies in Language* 21:483-508.
- Bloomfield, Leonard, 1917, *Tagalog texts with grammatical analysis*, 3 vols. Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois.
- Bloomfield, Leonard, 1933, *Language*. London: Allen & Unwin.
- Blust, Robert A., 1978, Eastern Malayo-Polynesian: a subgrouping argument. In S.A. Wurm and Lois Carrington, eds *Second International Conference on Austronesian Linguistics: proceedings*, 181-234. Canberra: Pacific Linguistics.
- Bybee, Joan, John Haiman and Sandra A. Thompson, eds, 1997, *Essays on language function and language type*. Amsterdam: Benjamins.
- Clynes, Adrian, 1995, Topics in the phonology and morphosyntax of Balinese. PhD thesis, The Australian National University.
- Dixon, R.M.W. and Alexandra Y. Aikhenvald, 1997, A typology of argument-determined constructions. In Bybee et al. eds, 1997:71-113.
- Kroeger, Paul R., 1993, *Phrase structure and grammatical relations in Tagalog*. Stanford: CSLI Publications.
- Matsuda French, Koleen, 1988, The focus system in Philippine languages: a historical overview. *Philippine Journal of Linguistics* 18/19:1-29.
- Reid, Lawrence A., 1992, On the development of the aspect system in some Philippine languages. *Oceanic Linguistics* 31:65-91.
- Schachter, Paul, 1995, *The subject in Tagalog: still none of the above*. UCLA Occasional Papers in Linguistics vol.15, Los Angeles: UCLA/Department of Linguistics.
- Wechsler, Stephen and I Wayan Arka, 1998, Syntactic ergativity in Balinese: an argument structure based theory. *Natural Language and Linguistic Theory* 16:387-442.
- Wolff, John U., 1996, The development of the passive verb with pronominal prefix in Western Austronesian languages. In Bernd Nothofer, ed. *Reconstruction, classification, description — festschrift in honor of Isidore Dyen*, 15-40. Hamburg: Abera-Verlag.
- Wolff, John U. with Maria Theresa C. Centeno and Der-Hwa V. Rau, 1991, *Pilipino through self-instruction*, 4 vols. Ithaca: Cornell Southeast Asia Program.

Wouk, Fay, 1996, Voice in Indonesian discourse and its implications for theories of the development of ergativity. *Studies in Language* 20:361-410.

Zorc, R. David, 1977, *The Bisayan dialects of the Philippines: subgrouping and reconstruction*. Canberra: Pacific Linguistics.