

# So Where Are All Those Prototypical Indonesian-Type Voice Systems? An Exploration of Clause Structure in Mentawai

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Austronesian languages are renowned for their highly developed voice systems, but also for a considerable amount of internal diversity with respect to these systems. Within Austronesian, one important type of voice system, sometimes referred to as "Indonesian-type" (e.g. Arka and Ross 2005:7), involves a basic opposition between two voices, active and passive, distinguished by verbal prefixes, with the additional proviso that — unlike typical active/passive oppositions elsewhere — active and passive clauses exhibit similar syntactic structure, that is to say, the passive voice does not involve the demotion of a core argument to oblique position.

Of course, many of the languages of Indonesia do not exhibit the Indonesian-type voice system. In northern Sulawesi, some languages have a voice system closer to the Philippine type; in Nusa Tenggara and elsewhere, many languages have a periphrastic passive resembling the standard European type; while in West Papua, some of the Austronesian languages are entirely lacking in an active/passive distinction. Still, the general assumption is that in the western part of the archipelago, at least, the Indonesian-type voice system, as exemplified (perhaps not by chance) with Standard Indonesian, is the norm.

However, recent work on a number of western Indonesian languages has called this assumption into question. Gil (2002) argues that Riau Indonesian and other colloquial varieties of Malay/Indonesian lack an active/passive distinction, as the term is commonly understood, while Gil (2008) shows that Minangkabau and Sundanese also diverge significantly from the usual Indonesian-type clause structure. Similar conclusions are also reached by Crouch (in preparation) for Minangkabau and by Connors (2008) for Tenggerese and other colloquial varieties of Javanese. Such work would seem to point towards the existence of yet another kind of Austronesian voice system, namely Sundic-type, characterized by isolating word structure, verbal prefixes with semantic rather than syntactic functions, and little or no justification for such grammatical distinctions as active-passive, subject-object, and core-oblique. So where, then, are all those prototypical Indonesian-type voice systems?

Mentawai, spoken on the eponymous island chain off the west coast of Sumatra, would seem to provide a likely candidate for such an Indonesian-type voice system, with a rich inventory of verbal prefixes marking aktionsart, tense/aspect, and, apparently, also voice. And indeed, the one previous description of Mentawai that I am familiar with, that of Jufrizal and Arka (2006), makes it look pretty much like Standard Indonesian, with active, passive, and even a *pasif semu* ("second passive") construction. So is Mentawai, then, that sought-after language with an Indonesian-type voice system?

Apparently not. This paper presents a preliminary exploration of clause structure in Mentawai, drawing on data from three independent sources: (a) elicitation from a native speaker; (b) a naturalistic corpus of some 3000 utterances; and (c) a psycholinguistic truth-condition experiment. The picture that emerges from these sources is of a clause structure quite different from that of most or all other Austronesian languages. As in the Sundic-type voice system, the function of the verbal prefixes would appear to be largely semantic. However, in some grammatical environments, these prefixes would seem also to have syntactic functions, though the nature of these functions — still not completely understood — is quite different from, and more complex than, that found in Indonesian-type voice systems.

Why, then, did Jufrizal and Arka characterize Mentawai as having a prototypical Indonesian-type voice system? One possible explanation is provided by the psycholinguistic experiment, which was run on two sociolinguistically distinct Mentawai-speaking populations: uneducated villagers in Mentawai, and university students on the Sumatran mainland. Whereas the results from the uneducated villagers were quite different from the results for Standard Indonesian, the results from the university students bore a much greater resemblance to the Standard Indonesian results. What this suggests, then, is that more highly educated speakers of Mentawai living on the Sumatran mainland modify and adapt their linguistic behaviour, bringing their grammatical patterns more into line with those of the more prestigious Standard Indonesian. It may be, then, that Jufrizal and Arka's description of voice in Mentawai reflects the outcome of such a process of convergence.

However, the problem is more general than just one pair of authors' description of one particular language. When the same experiment is conducted on other languages in Indonesia, similar differences emerge between uneducated villagers tested in situ, and university students tested in a big city, the latter populations' results invariably ending up closer to those from Standard Indonesian — see Gil (2005). What this suggests, then, is that because of such interference from Standard Indonesian, the prevalence of the prototypical Indonesian-type voice system across the languages of the archipelago may have been systematically overestimated. I would not wish to argue that such a voice system does not exist; just that reports of its occurrence need to be examined more critically than has often been the case.

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