

Topic-to-subject grammaticalization: the case of Malayo-Polynesian pivots

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- **Synopsis:** We propose that Malayo-Polynesian (Austronesian) languages undergo a process of topic-to-subject grammaticalization, where pivots are systematically lowered down the functional spine, gradually changing from V2-topics to surface subjects. Based on 5 languages, we present four distinct stages of this incremental process, arranged in an implicational hierarchy. We show that pivot-hood is not a uniform syntactic phenomenon, but its properties per language shift in a unidirectional manner, with implications on argument structure and nominal licensing.
- **Austronesian Voice:** Malayo-Polynesian languages exhibit the Austronesian *voice*-system, where one argument per clause, core or oblique, is designated as the syntactically and pragmatically most salient *pivot*: it moves to a high position and is cross-referenced by a verbal *voice* marker that tracks the pivot’s θ -role and/or extraction site: **A**(gent)**V**(oice), **O**(bject)**V**(oice)/**T**(heme) **V**(oice), **(C**(ircumstantial) **V**(oice), **L**(ocative)**V**(oice)). An example from Standard Indonesian, contrasting AV (1) and OV (2), is given below (taken from Arka & Manning 1998).

(1) *Amir mem-baca buku itu* (2) *Buku itu saya \emptyset -baca*
 Amir [AV]-read book DEF book DEF 1SG [OV]-read
 ‘Amir read that book.’ ‘That book, I read.’ / ‘That book was read by me.’

- **Topics or subjects?** A major debate (cf. Schachter 1976) is whether Austronesian pivots are (*V2-like*) *topics* (a.o. Richards 2000; Pearson 2005; Chen 2017; Erlewine et al. 2017) or *derived subjects* (a.o. Guilfoyle et al. 1992; Kroeger 1993; Paul 2000; Legate 2014). By investigating micro-variation across Acehnese (Ace), Balinese (Bal), Malagasy (Mal), Standard Indonesian (Ind), and Tagalog (Tag), we propose that the syntactic status of pivots in fact *varies* across languages, ranging from pure topicalization to argument-structure alternation. This is reflected in the A/A’-status of pivots (whether they induce weak crossover (WCO) and must reconstruct for Condition C), their subject properties (whether they serve as PRO in obligatory control (OC) and have an impact on licensing of non-pivot agents), and information-structural effects (formal and pragmatic discourse restrictions). We show that inter-language variation is not arbitrary, but aligns pivots on a continuous cline from topic-hood to subjecthood (cf. Patrianto & Chen 2023), with intermediate stages: pivots in Tag are topic-like, pivots in Ace and Ind are pure derived subjects, while Bal and Mal pivots represent a stage in-between topics and subjects.
- **4-stage grammaticalization:** We suggest that this continuum results from an ongoing process of *topic-to-subject grammaticalization*, instantiated as pivot-lowering down the clausal spine. Focusing on OV/TV constructions with an internal-argument pivot, as in (2), we examine 4 syntactic stages of this reanalysis and show that they stand in an implicational relation, each step incrementally feeding into the next. In Table 1, the x-axis depicts the 4 stages and their signature empirical properties; the y-axis shows where each of 5 languages stands on the cline.

	WCO	pivot control	agent-verb adjacency	reconstruction for Cond. C	discourse restrictions
<i>Tag</i>	×	×	×	✓	✓
<i>Bal</i>	×	✓	✓	✓	✓
<i>Mal</i>	×	✓	✓	×	✓
<i>Ace + Ind</i>	×	✓	✓	×	×
	↔ A-mvt	↔ subjecthood	↔ pivot receives NOM	↔ loss of ACC	↔ loss of [top]
	stage 1	stage 2	stage 3	stage 4	

In **stage 1**, instantiated by Tagalog, the pivot is an obligatory clausal topic, and its movement to a high landing-site is solely driven by information-structure. Already at this stage, pivot-movement exhibits A-properties (reflected in the lack of WCO), which we ascribe to the status

of Malayo-Polynesian languages at this stage as discourse-configurational systems (Miyagawa 2010). In OV/TV, an internal-argument pivot cannot correspond to PRO in OC, has no impact on the licensing of the non-pivot agent, and obligatorily reconstructs for Condition C. Combined with its formal and semantic-discourse restrictions, it instantiates a V2-style topic rather than a derived subject. In **stage 2**, the pivot acquires surface-subject status, reflected in the fact that it must invariably correspond to PRO in OC. Its (high) landing site now becomes a Case-assigning position; we suggest that, in OV/TV, this triggers the voice domain to become a non-canonical passive (Legate 2021) (with passivization diachronically being a side-effect of topic lowering; van Gelderen 2022): the internal argument receives unmarked case and is mapped into the subject by raising across a non-demoted agent. The agent, in lack of structural case, is now forced to be licensed via strict verbal adjacency (Levin 2015). At stage 2, Voice^o can (and must) still assign low accusative, which blocks the application of late merge of the pivot at its landing site (Takahashi & Hulseley 2009); an OV/TV pivot thereby obligatorily reconstructs for Condition C. Further, the landing-site still hosts a [top] feature, and so the pivot is interpreted both as a subject *and* as a topic, though discourse restrictions are slightly relaxed. Balinese is at this stage. In **stage 3**, instantiated by Malagasy, the voice domain loses its ability to assign accusative to its internal argument, thereby allowing late merge of the pivot at the landing site to bleed Condition C. Semantic/pragmatic restrictions still obtain, but less strictly and primarily at the formal level. In **stage 4**, reflected in Acehnese and Indonesian, the topic flavor and discourse restrictions disappear; pivot promotion is now triggered by grammatical-role alternation and case-licensing alone, leaving the pivot a surface subject; since the agent is still not demoted, OV/TV remains a non-canonical passive. Assuming an implicational hierarchy of stages 1-4, our account correctly predicts the lack of unattested combinations of the properties on the x-axis: for instance, no language in this typology is expected to obligatorily control the agent but not impose any discourse restrictions on the pivot, and this seems to be so indeed.

- **Lowering of pivot landing site:** Assuming pivots move to a higher position, we propose that topic-to-subject grammaticalization proceeds via lowering of the pivot's landing site, which co-occurs with a featural change of the movement-attracting probe. In Tag, this is SpecCP endowed with [top]+[D], i.e. a form of V2 position; movement, though driven by info-structure and dissociated from Case, already has A-quality, as often in discourse-configurational systems. In Bal & Mal, the landing site lowers into a low left-peripheral position, FinP, equipped with [top]+[Case]. Fin^o is structurally adjacent to T^o (the regular source of nominative) and [Case] is bundled into Fin's feature inventory. The pivot is thereby interpreted as topic *and* absorbs unmarked Case (Erlewine, Levin, van Urk 2019). Last, in Ace & Ind, the landing site lowers into SpecTP, with no [top], attracting the pivot solely via [Case] (Patrianto & Chen 2023).

- **Potential last stages:** We discuss two potential last stages of the grammaticalization process: first, *a full canonical-passive reanalysis*, especially for those languages that already possess a co-occurring marked passive with a demoted agent, such as Acehnese, Balinese and Indonesian. Importantly, the two latter feature an additional construction that is ambiguous between transitive OV and detransitivized passive, depending on the overt expression of a *by*-agent, revealing this transitional stage (Arka & Manning 1998; Arka 2008). Second, *a (split) ergative reanalysis*, with OV/TV reanalyzed as ergative-absolutive alignment in a continuum from syntactic to purely morphological ergativity. We offer arguments both from the diachrony of Proto-Austronesian and from the synchrony of Polynesian systems (like ergative Tongan).

- **Conclusion:** Our key findings are: i) contra to what is often assumed, *pivots are not a syntactically uniform phenomenon*. This allows us to perceive existing accounts as describing different stages of pivothood (thereby being equally adequate) rather than competing takes on one and the same phenomenon. ii) *Variation is not arbitrary* but aligns languages on an

implicational cline, best understood as stemming from gradual grammatical change.