

## Atayalic subjects and the nature of nominative

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The Atayalic languages of Taiwan exhibit a so-called “voice system” characteristic of many Austronesian languages: in each clause, one nominal (here called the “subject”) appears in a particular case (“nominative”) and verbal voice morphology cross-references the choice of subject. In this talk, I develop a new analysis for such voice alternations as involving removal of the subject’s K layer. I motivate the proposal with two sets of previously underappreciated facts: nominative case is structurally smaller than non-nominatives (§2 below) and certain non-subjects can bear nominative case (§4; based in part on original fieldwork on Sqliq Atayal).

**§1. Background on voice and subjecthood** Like many other so-called “Philippine-type” languages, Atayalic languages are predicate-initial, with second-position clitic pronouns (important in §4) and prenominal articles encoding case. Following prior work, I call the three cases nominative, oblique, and genitive.

- (1) ‘Yuraw eats the taro.’
- a. M-anìq squ’ sehuy **qu’** Y.  
AV-eat OBL<sub>2</sub> taro NOM Y.
- b. Nìq-un na’ Y. **qu’** sehuy.  
eat-PV GEN<sub>1</sub> Y. NOM taro

In each clause, there is a unique subject, bolded in (1) from Sqliq Atayal. The subject in Atayalic is associated with the following properties: (i) nominative case (*qu’* in Sqliq); (ii) clause-final position; (iii) being cross-referenced by voice morphology on the verb (see AV vs PV in (1)); (iv) definiteness and discourse topic status, and (v)  $\bar{A}$ -extraction being limited to the subject. I will present data on other voices and properties (iv,v) at the talk.

**§2. On the structure of nominals** I propose that oblique and genitive nominals include a K head, but nominatives lack K (cf Bittner and Hale 1996); what is described as the nominative article (Sqliq *qu’* in (1)) is in fact the D head of a K-less DP. This novel perspective is motivated by the form and use of prenominal articles. Oblique and genitive articles in Atayal dialects each come in two forms: see table in (2) below. First — as noted by some specialists (Ferrell 1979; Liao 2004; Ross 2006) but not in prior formal work — the OBL<sub>2</sub> and GEN<sub>2</sub> forms transparently contain the nominative. This is particularly clear in Pngawan (Huang 2006): *naka’* = *na’* + *ka’*, *cika’* = *ci’* + *ka’*, with other dialects reflecting minor contractions thereof. Second, in certain dialects, the choice between each pair of oblique or genitive forms reflects a difference in definiteness: see the Matu’uwal (3) from Huang (1995), reproduced with her translations.

- |              |     |                    |                    |   |                    |       |     |          |
|--------------|-----|--------------------|--------------------|---|--------------------|-------|-----|----------|
| (2) Dialect: | NOM | GEN <sub>1/2</sub> | OBL <sub>1/2</sub> | (3) M-anìq                                      | <b>cu’/cku’</b>    | qulìh | ku’ | ’ulaqi’. |
| Sqliq        | qu’ | na’ / nqu’         | sa / squ’          | AV-eat  | OBL <sub>1/2</sub> | fish  | NOM | child    |
| Matu’uwal    | ku’ | na’ / nku’         | cu’ / cku’         | ‘The child is eating {OBL <sub>1</sub> : fish / |                    |       |     |          |
| Pngawan      | ka’ | na’ / naka’        | ci’ / cika’        | OBL <sub>2</sub> : the fish}.’                  |                    |       |     |          |

Concretely, I posit the three types of nominals in (4), given here with Matu’uwal forms:

- (4) a. [ D NP ] ⇒ *ku’* NP    b. [ K<sub>[OBL]</sub> NP ] ⇒ *cu’* NP    c. [ K<sub>[OBL]</sub> [ D NP ] ] ⇒ *cku’* NP  
(At the talk, I also present evidence from Seediq — the other Atayalic language — for this view.)

**§3. Proposal for voice** A. Subject selection involves K-Removal All nominals are base-generated as KPs, with some inherently-valued and some valued during the derivation (see also Chen 2025). One is chosen as the “subject” and its K head is removed (cf. Hewett to appear), after its Case value is Agreed with. The Case value copied onto the verbal complex is realized as voice (i.e. the “case-agreement” view). Details: A K-probe on *v* (a phase head in these languages, as per e.g. Aldridge 2004; Rackowski and Richards 2005; Erlewine and Levin 2021) moves its goal to Spec,vP (if not already there), Agrees with it in Case, and then Removes its K head (adopting *Remove* from Müller 2017 et seq). The K-probe probes jointly with an  $\bar{A}$ -probe on *v*, using Van Urk and Richards’s (2015) *Multitasking*, ensuring attraction of an  $\bar{A}$ -nominal.

**B. Subject in clause-final topic position** Following Bittner and Hale (1996), all nominals require K except if they are in a local relationship with C. A Topic head above TP, within the split CP, can host and license one K-less nominal that is definite (with a D head). As a result, the subject moves to this topic position — unless it is a pronominal clitic (in §4 below) or a null operator in  $\bar{A}$ -constructions (which are predicative and hence exempt from licensing). This explains the definiteness and topic status of postverbal, non-clitic subjects and their nominative-marking, analyzed as a K-less nominal’s D (see 4a). As per Aldridge 2004 and Holmer 2005 on Seediq, TP-fronting above TopicP derives the clause-final position of non-clitic subjects; see also §5.

**§4. Nominative non-subjects** Further evidence for the proposal comes from the fact that, under particular circumstances, a non-subject can bear nominative case. For instance, a non-subject agent (normally genitive; see (1b)) can be nominative-marked when doubled by a genitive clitic pronoun, provided that the subject itself is a clitic pronoun (*saku* in the Squaliq Atayal (5)) or if the subject is A’-extracted (data at talk). On my (5) Wal =saku \*(=nya) kt-an qu’ T. account, these are exactly the cases where the AUX =NOM.1sg =GEN.3sg see-LV NOM T. clause-final topic position is unoccupied. ‘Tali saw me.’

**Proposal:** I propose that genitive clitics for non-subject agent pronouns involve head-movement of  $K_{[GEN]}$  to T, following Erlewine and Levin (2021). For regular pronouns, this amounts to moving the entire pronoun, as pronouns have no nominal restrictor (Postal 1966 a.o.). But if this process targets a non-pronominal KP agent, it results in a K-less nominal; such a derivation only survives if the K-less nominal then moves to be hosted by the clause-final topic position (see §3B above). The result is a K-less DP — in other words, a nominative (see 4a) — with obligatory genitive pronoun doubling, which is only possible when the subject (as determined by voice morphology) is not itself occupying the clause-final topic position, deriving the facts.

**§5. Evidence for the high position of nominatives** Following Holmer (2005), clause-peripheral particles provide evidence for the high position of postverbal nominative subjects. For example, the Squaliq Atayal interrogative particle *ga’* (Q) must immediately precede or follow a clause-final subject; see (6). This is explained by Q always being outside TP, which then fronts above the subject/topic. Projecting Topic above or below Q explains the two orders in (6).

(6)  $[_{TP}$  Cyux m-aniq { \*ga’ } yutak ] { ga’ } qu’ Y. { ga’ }? ‘Is Yuraw eating oranges?’  
 AUX AV-eat orange.OBL Q NOM Y. Q

The position of interrogative *ga’* also (7) ‘Did Tali see you?’

shows that non-subject agents are normally low (7a), inside TP, but nominative non-subject agents are high (7b), as predicted by my analysis: The K-less nominal moves to topic position.

a.  $[_{TP}$  Kt-an =simu { \*ga’ } na’ T. ] { ga’ }?  
 see-LV =NOM.2pl GEN T. Q

b.  $[_{TP}$  Kt-an =simu =nya ] { ga’ } qu’ T. { ga’ }?  
 see-LV =NOM.2pl =GEN.3sg Q NOM T.

**§6. Conclusion** My novel approach to voice as involving K-Removal is motivated by overt morphology: nominatives are smaller than — and sometimes contained within — non-nominatives. This contrasts with Chen’s view of “nominative-marking” in fact being “topic-marking,” which then obscures the underlying case morphology. The link between nominative and subjecthood is also less direct on my account, explaining the distribution of nominative non-subjects.

There is also evidence for nominative being structurally smaller than other cases in some Philippine languages (Reid 1978, 1979). Time permitting, I highlight such evidence, including from original fieldwork on Pangasinan (northern Philippines), at the talk.

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