

## Symmetrical voice languages: Rigorous terminology and language universals

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### 1. Goals of the talk

- argue that only rigorous terminology can save us from stereotypes
  - propose **rigorous terminology** for symmetrical voice languages  
(Haspelmath 2021)
- recall that language comparison has two purposes:
  - (i) finding **language universals** (and eventually explaining them)
  - (ii) help language describers make their descriptions transparent and complete  
(Haspelmath 2020)

Since Foley (1998; 2008) and Himmelmann (2002: 14; 2005), Western Austronesian languages have often been discussed in terms of “**symmetrical voice**” – but what exactly does this mean?

- What exactly is “(a) voice”?
- What exactly is “symmetrical”?

Tagalog:

- (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).’

(Himmelmann 2002: 12)

- Other important terms:
- transitivity
  - core vs. oblique
  - passive, antipassive
  - basic/underlying vs. derived

What exactly do these mean?

## 2. Stereotypes: “Passive”, “antipassive”, and “core argument”

Foley (2008: §2.1): the Tagalog Undergoer Voice (UV) is not a passive

- (1) a. *b-um-ili*      *ng*      *isda*      *sa*      *tindahan*      *ang*  
VC-buy      CORE      fish      OBL      store  
*lalake*  
man  
‘The man bought fish in the store.’
- b. *bi-bilh-in*      *ng*      *lalake*      *sa*      *tindahan*  
IRR-buy-VC      CORE      man      OBL      store  
*isda*  
fish  
‘The man will buy the fish in the store.’

(i) the actor remains a **core argument** in the Undergoer Voice (marked by *ng+*)

(ii) there is no **unmarked active** form – the Actor Voice has the marker *-um-*

Foley notes that Tagalog is different from English, and he further claims:

“This is highly unusual; normally the active voice is morphologically and syntactically unmarked... compare English *buy* vs. *be bought*”

But how can we tell what is cross-linguistically usual or unusual?

We need to engage in **large-scale cross-linguistic comparison**, based on clearly defined **comparative concepts** (Haspelmath 2010).

Foley gives no definition of “(active or passive) voice”, and no definition of “core argument”.

Foley (2008: §2.2) claims that the Tagalog Actor Voice (AV) is not an antipassive:

- (2) a. *B(um)ili*      *ng*      *isda*      *sa*      *tindahan*      *ang*      *lalake*.  
{ACTVOICE}buy      ACC      fish      LOC      store      NOM      man  
‘The man bought fish in the store.’
- b. *Bibilh-in*      *ng*      *lalake*      *sa*      *tindahan*      *ang*      *isda*.  
buy.FUT-PATVOICE      ERG      man      LOC      store      NOM      fish  
‘The man will buy fish in the store.’

He does not give a definition of “antipassive” either, but merely cites a stereotypical example of an antipassive from Dyirbal (an Australian language; Dixon 1972).

- (14) a. Intransitive verb  
*bayi yara bani-nyu*  
 DET.ABS man.ABS come-TNS  
 'The man came.'
- b. antipassive *derived* intransitive verb  
*bayi yara bugun jugumbil-gu*  
 DET.ABS man.ABS DET.DAT woman-DAT  
*bural-ng-nyu*  
 see-ANTI-TNS  
 'The man saw the woman.'

The term “passive” derives from Latin (and English), the term “antipassive” from Australian languages (cf. Janic & Witzlack-Makarevich 2021) – but if we do not define them and just rely on the stereotypical examples, we cannot test claims associated with them, e.g.

- “Antipassives always carry morphological markers of derivation” (Foley 2008: 32)
- “Antipassives force undergoer NPs into oblique cases, almost always marked by some overt case marker or adposition” (Foley 2008: 39)

### “Core argument”

- Foley (2008): possibility of preposing – but this is a very Tagalog-specific criterion
- Kroeger (1993): other criteria, such as reflexive binding, or floating quantifiers
- Arka (2017: 102): “The terms ‘core’ and ‘oblique’ are often used without explicit definition.” (Arka himself proposes a scalar notion of “core vs. oblique”)

Wikipedia:

Subject and object arguments are known as *core arguments*; core arguments can be suppressed, added, or exchanged in different ways, using **voice** operations like **passivization**, **antipassivization**, **applicativization**, **incorporation**, etc. Prepositional arguments, which are also called *oblique arguments*, however, do not tend to undergo the same processes.

([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Argument\\_\(linguistics\)#Arguments\\_vs.\\_adjuncts](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Argument_(linguistics)#Arguments_vs._adjuncts))

Here “core argument” is (partly) defined in terms of “voice” – and of course, the characterization is too broad, because oblique arguments can become core arguments by applicativization.

Thus:

For well-known terms like “passive”, “transitive”, and “core argument”, linguists often rely on **stereotypes** – we feel that we know (more or less) what these terms mean, so we do not ask for precise definitions.

### 3. Definitions: Core and oblique arguments, transitive clauses, and voice

I propose the following definitions:

**core argument:** an argument that is an S, A or P, or that is coded in the same way

**oblique argument:** an argument that is flagged in a way different from the core arguments

**transitive clause:** a clause that contains an A and a P argument

For example:

(10)            *Kim*    *convinced*    *Lee*    *of his proposal.*            (English)  
                   A            V                    P            obl

(11)            *Lydi-a*            *dabat*    *Marc-o*            *denari-um.*            (Latin)  
                   Lydia-NOM        gave    Marcus-DAT        denarius-ACC  
                   A                    V        obl                    P  
                   ‘Lydia gave a denarius to Marcus.’

A and P are unflagged in English (not marked by any case or adposition), and only oblique arguments are flagged.

In Latin, A is flagged by Nominative, P is flagged by Accusative, and obliques are flagged by other cases (Dative, Ablative, Genitive) or by prepositions.

Cf. Arka (2017: 101)

“One cannot talk about the syntactic transitivity of a structure without also talking about or assuming the core status of the argument(s) of the structure.”

These definitions rely on S, A and P (Haspelmath 2011):

In the dominant construction for physical-effect verbs (like ‘break’ and ‘kill’), the agent is the A and the patient is the P. Other two-argument verbs that use the same argument coding also have A and P.

(12)    *Kim*    *broke*    *the window.*  
           A        V        P

(13)    *Kim*    *saw*    *the moon.*  
           A        V        P                    (‘see’ is an experiential verb, not physical-effect)

English Passive clauses are not transitive because they are not **dominant** but occur rarely (not more than 20% of the cases).

**voice construction:** a valency construction that is part of a valency alternation and that is coded on the verb

Swahili:

- (14) a. *Musa a-li-safisha nyumba.*  
 Musa 3SG.HUM-PST-clean house  
 'Musa cleaned the house.'
- b. *Nyumba i-li-safish-wa na Musa.*  
 house G7-PST-clean-PASS by Musa  
 'The house was cleaned by Musa.'

nonpassive valency:  $\langle [\text{SBJ}_x].[\text{OBJ}_y].\text{V}, \text{X}, \text{Y} \rangle$

- subject (X) and object (Y) indexed by prefixes on the verb
- no flags (cases/adpositions) on subject or object

Passive voice valency:  $\langle [\text{SBJ}_y].\text{V-wa}, \text{Y}, \text{X}[\text{na}] \rangle$

- subject (Y) is indexed by prefix, corresponds to nonpassive object (Y)
- X (corresponding to nonpassive subject) is flagged by preposition *na*+
- verb is marked by *-wa*

Since there is no verb-coding in the nonpassive valency construction, it is not a voice construction. (There is no “active voice”.)

Thus, **voice** is not an inflectional category (as in traditional European grammar), but a term for a type of **valency construction** in a valency alternation.

Valency alternations need not be verb-coded:

English:

- (15) a. *Lydia gave the penny to Mark.*  
 b. *Lydia gave Mark the penny.*

$\langle \text{V}, \text{X}[\text{NOM}], \text{Y}[\text{ACC}], \text{Z}[\text{to}] \rangle$   
 $\approx \langle \text{V}, \text{X}[\text{NOM}], \text{Z}[\text{ACC}], \text{Y}[\text{ACC}] \rangle$

called “**Dative alternation**” – not a voice alternation, because there is no verb-coding

#### 4. The Basic vs. Nasal verb construction in Balinese (Artawa 2013), and the definition of “passive voice”

- (16) a. *Tiang n-godot be.* (Actor-Voice construction)  
 I ACTVOICE-cut meat  
 'I cut some meat.' (SVO)
- b. *Be-ne godot tiang.* (Object-Voice construction)  
 meat-DEF cut I  
 'I cut the meat.' (OVS)

Artawa (2013: 24): “Is Balinese typologically unusual in having two transitive constructions?”

I would say that **neither of these constructions is transitive**, because there is no **dominant** agent-patient construction – both occur frequently in language use. (And yes, I do think that this is typologically unusual: The great majority of languages do have a dominant agent-patient construction.)

I do not know of a better way of defining “transitive clause” (or “transitive verb”). Most authors have not bothered to define “transitive”, and have simply assumed that we can identify transitive clauses.

e.g. Dixon (2010: 76):

“Leaving aside copula clauses..., every language has two varieties of verbal clause:

- (i) transitive, with two core arguments – transitive subject (A) and transitive object (O);
- (ii) intransitive, with one core argument.”

How does the Balinese alternation relate to “voice”?

According to the definition of “voice construction”, the Actor Voice is a voice construction, but the Object-Voice construction is **not a voice construction** because there is no verb coding.

(17) **Balinese Actor-Voice/Object-Voice alternation**

$\langle \text{ACTORVOICE-V}, X[\text{PIVOT}], Y[\text{CORETERM}] \rangle$                       ‘X acts on Y’  
 $\approx \langle V, Y[\text{PIVOT}], X[\text{CORETERM}] \rangle$

Is the Actor-Voice a passive construction? No, because passive alternation is generally defined as follows:

(18) **passive alternation**

$\langle V, A_x, P_y \rangle$                       ‘(X) acts on Y’  
 $\approx \langle V\text{-PASS}, \{\text{obl}\}_x, S_y \rangle$

- there is a transitive valency construction with A and P
- there is an alternation with a corresponding valency construction
  - with verb coding
  - where the argument corresponding to A is oblique-coded
  - where the argument corresponding to P is coded as S

In Balinese, there is no transitive construction, so there cannot be a passive construction. Moreover, the Active-Voice construction has no oblique argument. (For the same reason, it is not an antipassive construction.)

## 5. Symmetrical voice alternations in Tagalog

In Tagalog, we see valency alternations whose valency constructions are all verb-coded:

### (19) Tagalog Actor/Patient/Locative Voice

- $\langle V\text{-ACTORVOICE}, X[\text{NOM}], Y[\text{ACC}], Z[\text{LOC}]\rangle$   
 $\approx \langle V\text{-PATIENTVOICE}, X[\text{ERG}], Y[\text{NOM}], Z[\text{LOC}]\rangle$   
 $\approx \langle V\text{-LOCATIVEVOICE}, X[\text{ERG}], Y[\text{ACC}], Z[\text{NOM}]\rangle$

#### (20) a. Actor Voice:

**B(um)ili**                      *ng isda sa tindahan ang lalake.*  
 $\langle \text{ACTVOICE} \rangle$  buy    ACC   fish   LOC   store        NOM   man  
 'The man bought fish in the store.'

#### b. Patient Voice:

**Bibilh-in**                      *ng lalake sa tindahan ang isda.*  
 buy.FUT-PATVOICE    ERG   man   LOC   store        NOM   fish  
 'The man will buy fish in the store.'

#### c. Locative Voice

**Bibilh-an**                      *ng lalake ng isda ang tindahan.*  
 buy.FUT-LOCVOICE    ERG   man   ACC   fish        NOM   store  
 'The man will buy fish in the store.'  
 (Foley 2008: 23)

### symmetrical voice alternation:

a set of two or more alternating valency patterns all of which are coded on the verb

- Which of these constructions (if any) are transitive?
- Which of these constructions (if any) are passive or antipassive?

Answers:

- **none** is transitive, because there is no dominant agent-patient construction
- **none** is passive or antipassive, because the definition of passive is that it alternates with a transitive construction (including A and P)

Thus, Foley's term "symmetrical voice" describes the Tagalog situation well. Most voice alternations are **asymmetrical** because there is one valency construction that lacks verb coding. In Tagalog, all alternating valency constructions are verb-coded.

- Which of the arguments are **core arguments**?

Answer:

**none**, because the term "core argument" is defined on the basis of A and P, and these presuppose that there is a dominant agent-patient construction

## 6. The status of the definitions

Some of the definitions that I proposed may appear strange to some of the audience – but why are the unintuitive?

Our intuitions are based on **stereotypes**, and one stereotype is that basic notions such as “transitive” or “core argument” should be applicable to all languages.

But we need to move on from stereotypes:

- either to clearly defined **comparative concepts**
  - defined for all languages in the same way
- or to **innate natural-kind categories**, as in generative grammar
  - if the categories are innate, they need not be defined in the same way for all languages; languages could have the same categories, but they could be reflected in different phenomena

(for some discussion of the generative approach, see Haspelmath 2019)

Why is the earlier discussion inconclusive?

my proposal: – because generative linguists have not found the innate categories yet  
(so they cannot agree on the right way to *analyze* grammars)

– because non-generative linguists have not fully realized that they must use the same criteria in all languages (i.e. use precise definitions)

– and because many of us continue to think that the traditional terms must have “deeper significance”, though in fact they are merely traditional terms

Precisely defined **comparative concepts** are good for two purposes:

- help language describers use transparent terminology (Haspelmath 2020)  
(but each language is described in its own terms, using its own categories)
- help general linguists formulate testable language universals

Precisely defined comparative concepts also make it unnecessary to find “the correct analysis” of a language. *Analysis* and *classification* is sometimes lumped together:



Himmelman (2005: 113)

difference). For much of the exposition of this chapter, it does not matter whether or not one agrees with a symmetrical voice analysis of these alternations. What does matter is the (uncontroversial) observation that these alternations are found in only some western Austronesian languages, thus providing a criterion for dividing these languages into two sets. Symmetrical voice languages in the sense intended here include the Austronesian languages of Taiwan, the Philippines, Malaysia, Madagascar, western Indonesia (with the exception of Acehnese and the Barrier Island languages) and the northern half of Sulawesi (Saluan (but not Banggai), Kaili-Pamona, Tomini-Tolitoli, Gorontalo-Mongondow, Minahasan and Sangiric).

The observation that symmetrical voice languages are those of the Philippines, western Indonesia etc. can be “uncontroversial” only if there is a **clear definition** of “symmetrical voice” language.

The correct analysis of such systems is typically contentious (Chen & McDonnell 2019), but the definitions need not be contentious (terminological choice is just a matter of convenience, not of truth).

## 7. Testable language universals

Some earlier proposals:

- “Passives always carry morphological markers” (Haspelmath 1990)
- “Antipassives always carry morphological markers of derivation” (Foley 2008: 32)
- “Antipassives force undergoer NPs into oblique cases, almost always marked by some overt case marker or adposition” (Foley 2008: 39)

But these do not work as universal claims, because “passive” and “antipassive” **must be defined as containing morphological markers and oblique coding of patients**:

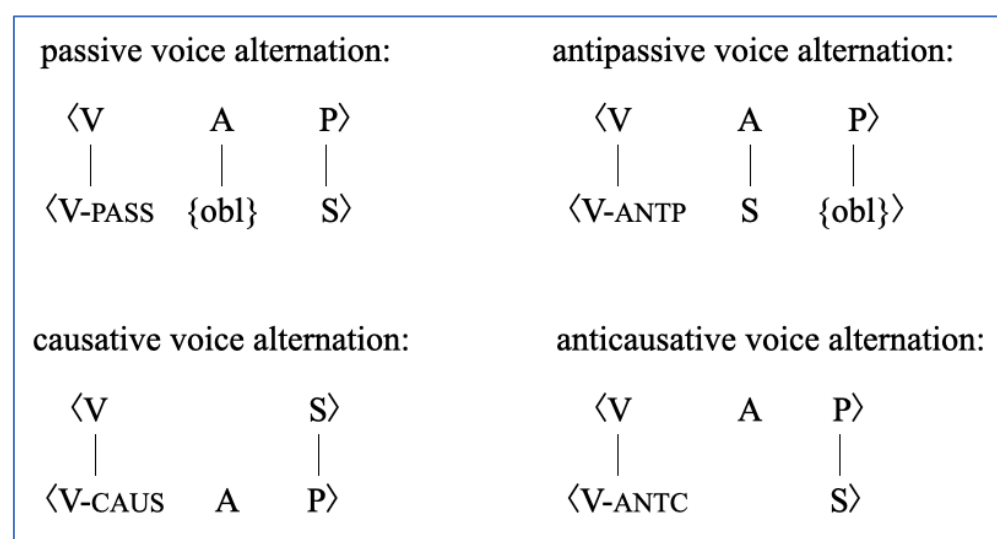


Figure 4: Vertical correspondence diagrams for four alternation types (Haspelmath 2021)

Here are some testable universal claims that can be made on the basis of the proposed definitions.

**Universal 1:**

In all languages, core arguments either lack flagging or the core flags are shorter than the oblique flags.

	NOMINATIVE	ACCUSATIVE	DATIVE
Japanese	<i>ga</i>	<i>o</i>	<i>ni</i>
Latin	<i>-us/-a</i>	<i>-um/-am</i>	<i>-ō/-ae</i>
Arabic	<i>-u</i>	<i>-a</i>	<i>li-</i>
Turkish	<i>Ø</i>	<i>-i/-u</i>	<i>-e/-a</i>
Balinese	<i>Ø</i>	<i>Ø</i>	<i>ka+</i>

**Universal 2:**

If the use of a passive construction is related to the referential prominence of the arguments, then passives tend to be used with a definite/topical/pronominal patient and/or an indefinite/focused/full-nominal agent.

English *The dog was fed by a kind neighbour.*  
*?A dog was fed by me.*

**Universal 3:**

If a language uses its transitive construction for the verb 'look at', it also uses it for the verb 'see' (see Haspelmath 2015).

French	<i>elle regarde la mer (trans)</i> <i>elle voit la mer (trans)</i>	'she looks at the sea' 'she sees the sea'
English	<i>she looks at the sea (intr)</i> <i>she sees the sea (tr)</i>	
Lezgian	<i>am hül-üz kiligzawa (intr)</i> <i>ad-az hül akwazwa (intr)</i>	'she looks at the sea' 'she sees the sea'

To test universals like these, one merely needs to examine the facts of the language (Haspelmath 2018), and they are independent of an **analysis**, because the universals are based on comparative concepts.

I suggest that this approach is a better way to move forward in general linguistics.

But does it also help us understand particular languages?

- in two ways:
- it helps us see what is general and what is accidental
  - and it helps us choose transparent terminology that is known from other languages

But in the approach proposed here, there is no set of innate building blocks of language that all languages are made up of. So each language should be described in its own terms, using language-particular descriptive categories that are distinct from comparative concepts (Haspelmath 2010).

## 8. Conclusion

Symmetrical voice languages have long been contentious in general linguistics (Chen & McDonnell 2019) because many authors tried to fit them into pre-existing categories, without saying clearly how these categories are defined.

The terms used by grammarians are often stereotypes based on a few well-known European languages (“voice”, “passive”), or languages well-known from the earlier typological tradition (“antipassive”).

If we provide rigorous definitions, we do not find “the correct analysis” – we can classify languages on the basis of the facts of the language.

Clearly defined comparative concepts also make it possible to formulate clearly testable universals, which allow us to distinguish what is special in a language from what is normal.

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