Malayic active voice *meN-*: One prefix or two?

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Introduction

Malayic languages (Austronesian) have an active/passive voice alternation. Eventive bivalent verbs in Standard Indonesian and Malay (SI/SM) bear *meN-* or *di-*:

(1) **Active/passive alternation with *tulis* 'write':**

a. Fera **men**-ulis buku ini.
Fera ACT-write book DEM
'Fera wrote this book.'

b. Buku ini **di**-tulis (oleh Fera).
book DEM PASS-write by Fera
'This book was written (by Fera).'

The verb is morphologically marked in both voices, leading to the description of such systems as "symmetric voice" alternations (see e.g. Himmelmann, 2005).

► Today we discuss the nature of *meN-*, commonly described as the active voice prefix.

N in *meN-* represents a homorganic nasal, with a phonologically determined realization:

(2) **Some verb stems and their active/passive forms:** (based on Sneddon, 1996: 9–12)

		active	passive	
tulis	'write'	***me-n**ulis*	***di**-tulis*	"coalescing" *N*: replaces the verb's stem-initial consonant
pukul	'beat'	***me-m**ukul*	***di**-pukul*	
kirim	'send'	***me-ng**irim*	***di**-kirim*	
sewa	'rent'	***me-ny**ewa*	***di**-sewa*	
beli	'buy'	***mem**-beli*	***di**-beli*	non-coalescing *N*
dengar	'hear'	***men**-dengar*	***di**-dengar*	
ajar	'teach'	***meng**-ajar*	***di**-ajar*	
lihat	'see'	***me**-lihat*	***di**-lihat*	no *N*

In contrast, the realization of *di-* and other voice prefixes are invariant.

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***meN-* reflects two prefixes:**

- the syllabic part *me-* ↔ active voice;
- the homorganic nasal *N-* (which may or may not coalesce with the stem-initial consonant, and can be null) ↔ introduction of volitional agent;

  ...as suggested in passing in Gil 2002 and Benjamin 2009.

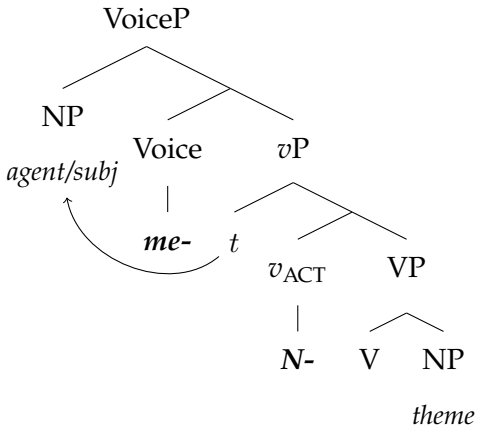
However, in most (not all!) cases, *me-* and *N-* cooccur, obscuring this decomposition.

Formally, we analyze *me-* and *N-* as realizations of two functional heads:[3]

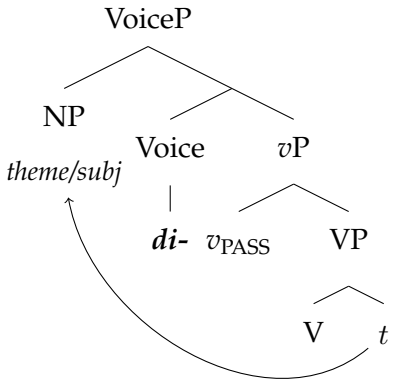
- *v* (↔ *N-*) introduces the agent (Kratzer, 1996)[4];
- Voice hosts the grammatical subject; *me-* is its active form, where the subject is the agent.

The verb stem is pronounced at *v* and Voice lowers onto *v*+V under linear adjacency with *v*.

(3) a. Active:



b. *Di*-passive:[5]



► We present four classes of evidence that nonetheless motivate their decomposition:

§1 *peN-* nominalizations

§2 verbal reduplication

§3 co-occurring *N-* and *di-*

§4 the position of agents

1 and 3 can be seen in the standard languages (SI/SM). We also highlight behaviors in various non-standard, regional Malay(ic) varieties that challenge the unanalyzed *meN-*.

[3] This contrasts with all prior formal syntactic analyses of Malayic voice (e.g. Aldridge, 2008; Sato, 2012), which invoke a single functional head that combines these syntactic functions, associated with the realization of unanalyzed *meN-*.

[4] The prefix *ber-* can also introduce verbs with volitional agents; these are generally transitive, but some forms of transitive uses are possible. *Ber-* verbs have been described as middles and are limited to expressing lower transitivity (in the Hopper and Thompson 1980 sense); see Kemmer 1993 and Wee 1995.

[5] Following Arka and Manning 1998, Cole et al. 2008, Legate 2014, among others, we take the agent to not be introduced as an agent in *di-*passives.

1 Evidence from *peN-* nominalizations

Nominalizations in SI/SM may involve *peN-* or *pe-*, largely corresponding to verbal predicates with *meN-* vs *ber-*, respectively. (See e.g. Denistia 2020 and citations there.)

(4) a. *mengajar* 'teach' ~ *pengajar* 'teacher' (Nomoto, 2017)
b. *belajar* 'learn' ~ *pelajar* 'student'

The surface realization of the nasal *N* in *peN-* and *meN-* are the same (Sneddon, 1996: 9–14). More generally, *peN-* nominalizations are agent-oriented:

(5) From stem *kasih* 'love': (Hassan 1974, in Benjamin 2009: 304)
a. *pengasih* 'one who is loving'
b. *pekasih* 'one who is loved'

► Such correspondences support parsing *N-* as a shared agent-related morpheme in both *meN-* and *peN-*. (See Benjamin 2009: 303–304 for a suggestion along these lines.)

2 Evidence from verbal reduplication

Verbal reduplication of active verbs targets *N*-V, but excludes the syllabic part *me-*.

We first demonstrate this in Riau Indonesian, where the effect is especially clear (Gil, 2002: 258–259). In Riau, the "active prefix" may be *me-* alone or *N-* alone, conditioned by the stem-initial segment. *N-* is included in reduplication but *me-* is not:

(6) a. *pinjam* 'borrow' > active *minjam* (Riau)
> *minjam-minjam* 'borrow repeatedly' (cf **minjam-pinjam*)
b. *lempar* 'throw' > active *melempar*
> *melempar-lempar* 'throw repeatedly' (cf **melempar-melempar*)

Returning to the standard languages SI/SM, verbal reduplication of active verbs includes the nasal *N-* when it undergoes coalescence with the stem-initial consonant, but does not include *me-* (Lapoliwa, 1981; Sneddon, 1996).

(7) *tulis* 'write' > active *menulis* (SI/SM)
> *menulis-nulis* 'write repeatedly' (cf **menulis-tulis*, **menulis-menulis*)

- As Benjamin (2009: 298) notes (crediting Hendon (1966: 46–47) for the idea), the analysis of such reduplication is simplified if such forms are actually an active prefix *me-* on a reduplicated stem *nulis-nulis*, "prenasalized" in the context of active voice.[6]

  We formalize this by proposing that reduplication targets the material in v, not Voice.

The analysis above is complicated by the fact that, for stems where coalescence does not occur, both *N* and the stem-initial consonant remain, with reduplication applying only to the stem:

(8) *baca* 'read' > active *membaca* (SI/SM)
> *membaca-baca* 'read repeatedly' (cf **membaca-mbaca*)

- We can account for this by tweaking our contextual allomorphy rules, so that the nasal is realized as part of Voice when coalescence does not occur; see Appendix.

Support for this approach comes from colloquial Johor Malay (Onn, 1976: 178). Where coalescence does not occur, the *N* part is optionally included in the reduplication:

(9) *gali* 'dig' > active *menggali* (Johor)
> *menggali-(ng)gali* 'dig continuously'

This reflects the SI/SM analysis above, but with optionality in *N-* as part of Voice or v where coalescence does not occur.

3 Evidence from co-occurring *di-* and *N-*

Association of *me-* and *N-* with distinct functions is evident in various regional and colloquial varieties of Malay/Indonesian and other Malayic languages, as discussed in Gil 2002, Benjamin 2009, and others. This even leads to the possibility in some varieties of *di-N-*V forms:

(10) a. *potong* 'cut' > *di-motong-nya* (Riau Indonesian; Gil 2002: 265)
b. *pinjam* 'borrow' > *di-minjam*

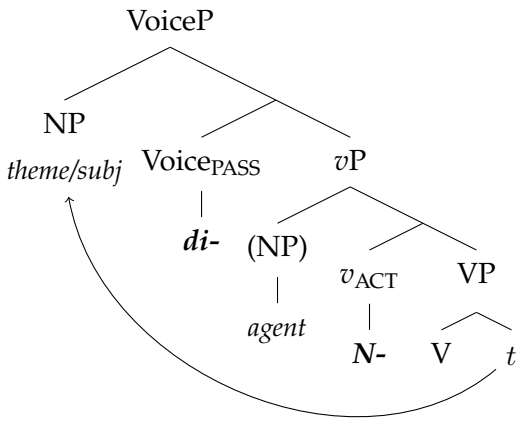
(11) a. *bunuh* 'kill' > *di-munuh* (Salako Kendayan (Malayic; W. Borneo))
b. *rumput* 'weed' > *di-nga-rumput* (Adelaar, 2005: 218–219)

- Such forms directly motivate the segmentation of *meN-* into *me-* and *N-*, with *me-* occupying the same position as *di-*.

[6] In the phonological literature on reduplication, such examples (among others) have been presented in McCarthy and Prince 1995 to motivate the idea of Base-Reduplicant identity.

- Whereas active/passive Voice and active/passive v are one-to-one in the standard languages, these languages allow passive Voice and active v to appear together:

(12) **The structure of *di-N*-V clauses:**



The opposite mismatch — active Voice with passive v — is not logically possible, as passive v does not project an agent which could then move to Spec,VoiceP.

4 Evidence from the position of agents

Additional evidence comes from the position of agents in these non-standard Malayic languages. The structure in (12) predicts that active v should be able to introduce an agent.

- Recall that Voice lowers onto v+V under linear adjacency. The presence of an overt agent would disrupt this relation between Voice and v+V.

The behaviors of two Malayic languages show different responses to this situation, which support this overall proposal:

- Salako Kendayan (Malayic, West Borneo; Adelaar 2005) allow for "*di* agent *N*-V" patterns:

(13) **Salako Kendayan "*di* agent *N*-V-RED":** (Adelaar, 2005: 218)

Aŋkoà-lah tuàkŋ kaleŋ di=*kau* matàh-matàh aŋkoà.
DIST-EMPH bone catfish DI=2sg N-break-RED DIST
'That's the catfish-bone you've broken into many pieces.'

This reflects a grammar where *di-* can be a proclitic, not necessarily a verbal prefix.[7]

[7] The same pattern is observed in Matéq (Connell, 2013) and various other Land Dayak/Bidayuh languages, also of Borneo.

- Suak Mansi Desa (Malayic, West Kalimantan; Sommerlot 2020) active verbs may appear with *meN-* or *N-* in free variation; i.e. Voice has a null allomorph. However:

  (14) **Only *N-* is possible in object extraction constructions:**

  Buku to yang *opa'-ku* {moli / *memoli} ___.
  book DEM C father-1sg N-buy meN-buy
  'This book is the one that my father bought.' (object pseudocleft)

  (15) **Agents are immediately preverbal in object extractions:**

  Opai yang {**inya*} **nda'** {*inya*} milau ___?
  what C NEG 3sg N-look.for
  'What is s/he not looking for?' (object *wh*-question)

  We propose that the agent in these clauses is in Spec,*v*P. Because of the presence of the agent, Voice must be null, as it would otherwise fail to lower onto the verb.

Summary

- Most prior work has described *meN-* as a single prefix, as it appears to be in paradigmatic opposition to other (arguably not decomposable) voice prefixes such as passive *di-*.
- A range of evidence both in the standard languages (SI/SM) and in colloquial/regional Malayic varieties lead us to the conclusion that *meN-* reflects two prefixes: *me-* + *N-* (as per Gil, 2002; Benjamin, 2009). Syntactically, we can better account for a wider range of facts by assuming two functional heads that correspond to the two.
- Our case study highlights the importance of looking at affixes in interaction with other grammatical processes, both language-internally and in closely related languages.

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Appendix

Contextual allomorphy and the structural position of reflexes of *N-*:

- the verb stem is pronounced in v (via head movement)
- Voice lowers/prefixes to v+V via Local Dislocation (Embick and Noyer, 2001)
- $v \leftrightarrow$ *N-* if coalescence possible with stem-initial consonant (or if no *N*); then Voice $\leftrightarrow$ *me-*
- otherwise: $v \leftrightarrow \emptyset$ and Voice $\leftrightarrow$ *meN-*

  (And optionally in colloquial Johor Malay: $v \leftrightarrow$ *N-* and Voice $\leftrightarrow$ *me-*, even though there is no coalescence. See (9).)

Reduplication targets v+V, not including Voice.