

Nominative-third and Austronesian subjects

The data. ‘Nominative-third’ (Sells 1997) or ‘Nom-3’ languages are a subset of Austronesian languages where the subject (a.k.a. ‘pivot,’ ‘topic’) follows the verb and external argument. Of course, this is unless the external argument itself is the subject, in which case it comes second.

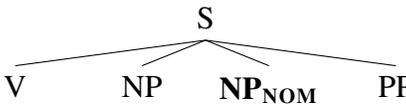
(1) V > (EA) > subject > XP (Travis 2010:41)

Nom-3 languages include Kalagan, Pangasinan, Cebuano, Dibabawon, Isnag, Balangao, and Limos Kalinga (see references in Sells 2000:124). In (1), XP represents all other phrases (the internal argument, locatives, etc.). (2) illustrates Nom-3 through Cebuano sentences in four voices, with the external argument (EA) underlined and the subject bolded: in (a), the EA is the subject, and in (b–d), the subject is positioned immediately after the EA, as pointed out by Bell (1976:7).

(2) NOM-3 IN CEBUANO, from Bell (1976:7–11)

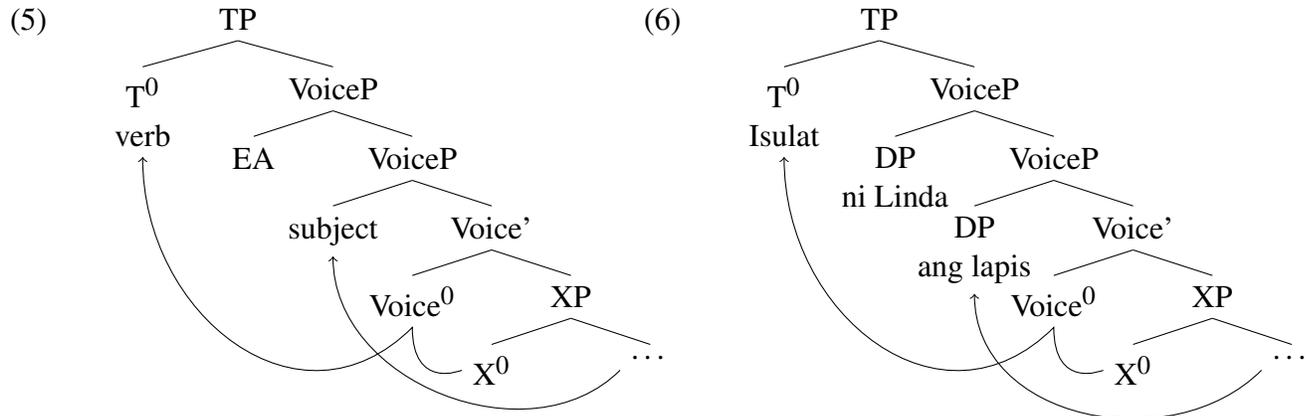
- a. Mag-luto’ **ang babaye** ug bugas sa lata.
AV-cook NOM woman OBL rice OBL can
‘The woman will cook rice in the can.’
- b. Luto’-on sa babaye **ang bugas** sa lata.
cook-PV GEN woman NOM rice OBL can
‘The rice will be cooked by the woman in the can.’
- c. Luto’-an sa babaye **ang lata** ug bugas.
cook-LV GEN woman NOM can OBL rice.
‘The woman will cook rice in the can.’
- d. I-sulat ni Linda **ang lapis** ug sulat.
IV-write GEN Linda NOM pencil OBL letter
‘Linda will write a letter with the pencil.’

Previous analyses. Two analyses have been proposed for Nom-3 word order. First, Sells (1997, 2000) takes the Nom-3 word order as evidence against binary branching at least in Austronesian. This is shown in (3), from Sells (2000:123). Second, Travis (2010:91) analyzes Nom-3 as involving the subject moving into Spec-InnerAspP, placing it lower than the EA, as shown in (4).

(3)  (4) [TP T⁰ [_vP [EA] [_v v⁰ [AspP [DP_{NOM}] [_{Asp} Asp⁰ [_vP ...]]]]]]

I agree with Travis (2010:43) that the subject is within Voice/*v*P, and possible analyses based on the subject being in Spec-TP and the agent moving higher are undesirable. However, Travis’ Spec-InnerAspP is in general meant to be the position for objects in telic sentences, so we should not use it as a canonical derived subject position.

A tucking-in analysis. I now propose an alternative. Take the verb-initial order to be derived from V-to-T movement. Further, the EA is generated (by definition) in Spec-VoiceP (Legate 2014; Harley 2017), at least in transitives. Now recall that phrases moving to the specifier of a head H, when H already has a specifier, can either extend the tree and move above the first specifier, or move as closely as possible to H and therefore “tuck in” between the first specifier and H (Richards 1997). With this in mind, I propose the Nom-3 word order arises from tucking-in of the subject to Spec-VoiceP, hence landing just below the EA. (5) schematizes this and (6) shows the Cebuano instrument-voice example (2d).



This analysis allows the subject to occur immediately after the EA, deriving the Nom-3 word order. It is also appealing because it uses Voice⁰ to derive the word order, coinciding with the assumption that Voice is the locus of voice morphemes in Austronesian languages (e.g. Legate 2014).

Intransitives. The above analysis is designed for transitives. But what about intransitives? What the tucking-in analysis predicts for intransitives depends on a number of independent assumptions; due to space constraints, let us simply jump into the data (and adhere to unergatives; unaccusatives actually pose no puzzle, since they do not allow the alternations discussed below). Like transitives, unergatives allow either the EA or adjuncts like locatives to become subject.

- (7) Ma-tulog ang butiki sa akong kama. (8) Tulog-an sa butiki ang akong kama.
 AV-sleep NOM lizard OBL my bed sleep-LV OBL lizard NOM my bed
 ‘The lizard will sleep in my bed.’ ‘The lizard will sleep in my bed.’

However, preliminary results suggest that, unlike transitives, there is no single preferred word order for unergatives. The examples are omitted for space, but both the AV (7) and the LV (8) are equally acceptable with the EA and locative in the opposite order. Hence, there are four basic cases:

- (9) EA subject (10) Locative subject
 a. V > Subj_{EA} > Loc a. V > Subj_{Loc} > EA
 b. V > Loc > Subj_{EA} b. V > EA > Subj_{Loc}

Recent work has proposed that unergatives’ EA is not generated in Spec-VoiceP, but lower, in Spec-*v*P (Massam 2009; Tollan 2018). Let us propose that this is actually a matter of variation, and Spec-VoiceP generation is possible too. For (10), (10b) is a transitive-like structure where the EA is in Spec-VoiceP and the subject tucks-in under it; and (10a) has the EA in Spec-*v*P, so the subject lands above it as it moves to Spec-VoiceP. For (9), (9a) involves the locative staying in situ and the subject staying in (or string-vacuously moving to) Spec-VoiceP. Finally, for (9b), let us propose that the subject stays in Spec-*v*P and the locative must move to Spec-VoiceP due to an EPP feature on Voice (cf. Levin 2017); to be sure, the EA can move to satisfy the EPP too, but this yields (9a) rather than (9b). Hence, the surprising variation with unergatives can be explained by variable generation of unergatives’ EA in Spec-*v*P or Spec-VoiceP.

References. Bell, S. 1976. Cebuano subjects in two frameworks. • Legate, J. A. 2014. Voice and v. • Levin, T. 2017. The EPP is independent of Case. • Massam, D. 2009. The structure of (un)ergatives. • Richards, N. 1997. What moves where when in which language? • Sells, P. 1997. The functions of voice markers in Philippine languages. • Sells, P. 2000. Raising and the order of clausal constituents in the Philippine languages. • Tollan, R. 2018. Unergatives are different. • Travis, L. 2010. Inner Aspect.