

Philippine Voice and Split Absolute Syntax

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May 28, 2021

Voice Systems

The “Philippine-type” languages of the Philippines, Taiwan, and Indonesia show *voice systems*.

- They have an ‘Agent Voice’ construction, where the external argument is absolutive. AV; EXT
- This contrasts with a ‘Patient Voice’ construction, where the internal argument is. PV; INT

In many languages, voice also interacts \bar{A} -extraction and the definiteness of the INT.

(1) *South Sulawesi: the Voice System*¹

- | | | |
|---|---|--------|
| a. Mam-baca=a’ buku.
AV-read=1ABS book
‘I’m reading a book.’ | b. U-baca=i iting buku.
1ERG-read=3ABS that book
‘I read that book.’ | Mandar |
|---|---|--------|

Across these languages, the absolutive argument (“pivot”) shows systematic hierarchical privilege. This pattern has led to near-consensus that this argument sits above all others in the clause.

Guilfoyle et al. 1992; Aldridge 2004; Rackowski & Richards 2005; Hsieh 2020

The Proposal

Nevertheless, there is little agreement over the position of the absolutive and the nature of its movement. In today’s talk, I argue for a “High-Licensing” analysis: (*Guilfoyle et al., 1992; Brodkin & Royer, 2021*)

The absolutive argument undergoes A-movement to SPEC,TP as a result of licensing by τ^0 .

This view allows these languages to be understood through the lens of “High-Absolutive” syntax.

The Licensing Prediction

The central insight of this model is that the absolutive argument cannot be licensed below τ^0 . This logic leads to a systematic prediction about Philippine-type languages:

When τ^0 is unavailable, these languages may need to employ special strategies to license arguments.

Today’s Talk

My goal today is to show that this prediction is correct for many languages of the island of Sulawesi. These languages systematically resort to a special construction when the INT cannot interact with τ^0 .

Proposal: this construction implicates an exceptional strategy of Low Absolute Licensing.

It reveals that these languages show requirements for licensing that are typically not met below τ^0 .

Deep thanks to my primary Mandar consultant, Jupri Talib, to Sandy Chung for guidance throughout this project, and to Judith Aissen, Pranav Anand, Jessica Coon, Tyler Lemon, Justin Royer, Jed Sam Pizarro-Guevara, Lisa Travis, Tamisha Tan, Connie Ting, Erik Zobel, Erik Zyman, and audiences at various events at UC Santa Cruz for productive discussion.

¹GLOSSING: AV/PV: Agent/Patient Voice, ABS: Absolutive, ERG: Ergative, EXT/INT: External/Internal Argument

1 The Licensing Analysis

Previous Approaches

The literature typically derives the high position of the absolutive argument in one of two ways.

1. The HIGH/LICENSING approach: (Guilfoyle *et al.*, 1992)
 - The absolutive argument undergoes movement to a dedicated subject position: SPEC,TP.
 - This movement occurs as the byproduct of a systematic licensing relationship with T^0 .
2. The LOW/SHIFT approach: (Aldridge, 2004)
 - There is no “absolutive position” and no systematic relationship between the absolutive and T^0 .
 - The INT reaches its final position in PV through a process of object shift within the the *vp*.
 - This process places all definite internal arguments above the EXT.

The Two-Step Model

Today’s talk argues for a version of the HIGH/LICENSING analysis in several languages of Sulawesi:

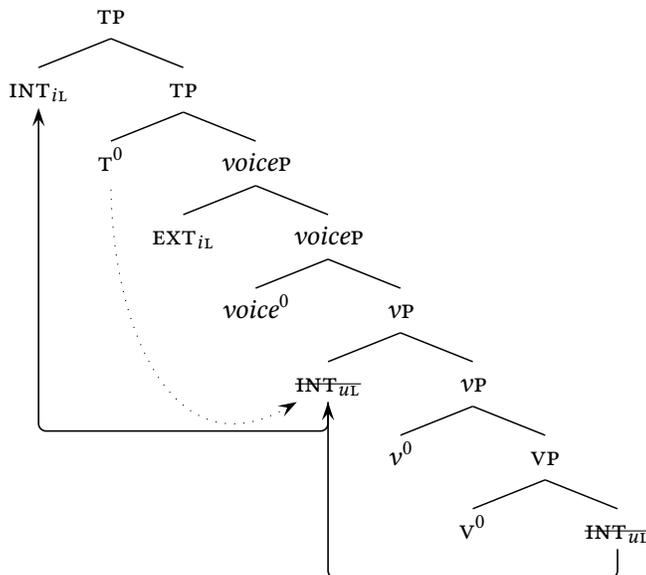
SOUTH SULAWESI, BUNGKU-TOLAKI, KAILI-PAMONA

The proposal implicates two steps:

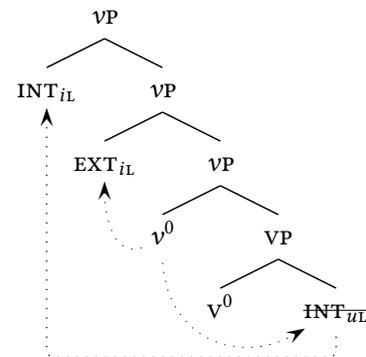
1. The absolutive argument is licensed by T^0 and moves to SPEC,TP. (Guilfoyle *et al.*, 1992)
2. Definite INTs undergo a separate step of object shift out of the *vp*. (Diesing, 1992)

Implicit Claim: object shift does NOT place the INT above the EXT. (*pace* Rackowski 2002; Aldridge 2004)

(2) **Proposal: Two Steps**



(3) **Rejected: Low/Shift**



Independent Justification

There are many reasons to adopt this view:

1. The link between the INT’s position and absolutive agreement on T^0 .
2. Beyond Sulawesi, the possibility for the INT to be definite even in AV.

The key evidence, however, lies in the behavior of definite but non-absolutive INTs.

2 The Licensing Problem

The Definiteness Effect

In matrix monotransitive contexts, many Philippine-type languages show a definiteness effect: When the INT is definite, the verb must surface in PV.

(4) *AV-Only Contexts*

a. *U-sajang=ɔ.*
 1ERG-love-2ABS
 ‘I love you.’

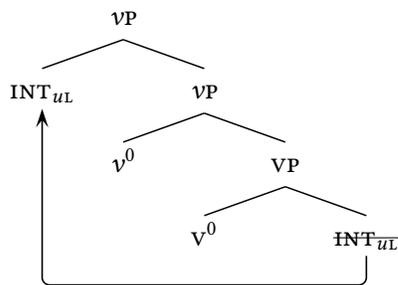
b. **Mas-sajang=a’ i’o.*
 AV-love=1ABS 2SG
 (‘I love you.’)

Mandar

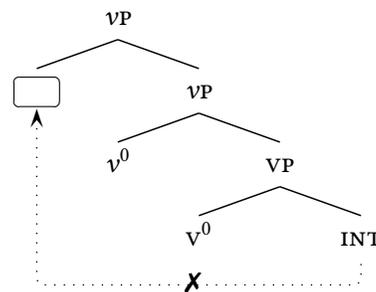
I take this to reflect a property of the v^0_{AV} : it does not allow the INT to shift.

(Rackowski, 2002)

(5) *Patient Voice: Shift*



(6) *Agent Voice: No Shift*



Patterns of Licensing

The use of PV morphology has two consequences for patterns of nominal licensing:

1. The EXT finds the means to be licensed within the *voice*p, and (Erlewine *et al.*, 2020; Ting, 2021)
2. The INT must interact with τ^0 to be licensed.

Compare AV, where the INT is an NP with no need for (case-)licensing.

(Massam, 2001)

Removing τ^0

Nevertheless, there are many contexts where the INT cannot interact with τ^0 .

“AV-only contexts”

Philippine-type languages typically require AV when the EXT is \bar{A} -extracted.

In this context, the languages of Sulawesi still allow the INT to be definite.

(7) *AV-Only Contexts*

a. *Innai [mam-baca buku] ?*
 who AV-read book
 ‘Who reads books?’

b. *Innai [mas-sajang=a’] ?*
 who AV-love=1ABS
 ‘Who loves me?’

Mandar

The Licensing Problem

This construction poses a serious challenge to any analysis which assumes that the INT undergoes object shift to a position above the EXT whenever it is definite. (Rackowski, 2002; Aldridge, 2004)

Proponents of this view need rationales to deny object shift in this context. (Aldridge, 2004, p. 372)

In Mandar, however, it is clear that the INT in (7b) undergoes “low” object shift.

(Brodkin, 2021a)

The real question is:

how can a definite INT be licensed without τ^0 ?

3 The Licensing Prediction

The Predicament

In these contexts, the HIGH/LICENSING theory predicts that there should be a problem of licensing:

1. Definite INTs have licensing needs which cannot be met in the *voiceP*.
2. In “AV-only” contexts, however, definite INTs cannot interact with τ^0 .

Given a restrictive theory of nominal licensing, this analysis forces the following prediction:

In “AV-only” contexts, these languages must allow the INT to be licensed below τ^0 .

One Comparative Observation

Beyond Sulawesi, many Philippine-type languages treat the INT differently in this context. For instance, many allow the INT to bear a case which is not typically available in AV:

(8) *Special Case-Marking*

a. *Ima wal m-anix qu sehuy qasa?*
 who AUX AV-eat ABS taro that
 ‘Who ate that taro?’ Sqliq Atayal;
Erlewine (2016, 9)

b. *Sino ang s-um-ampal sa akin?*
 who the AV-slap DAT me
 ‘Who slapped me?’ Tagalog;
Rackowski (2002, 88)

This pattern provides an initial clue that something funny is going on around v^0 .

The Agreement Prediction

The best evidence for low licensing would involve agreement.

- Agreement correlates with licensing (in a way that case does not). (Raposo, 1987)
- The behavior of agreement also has potential to reveal the structural source of licensing.

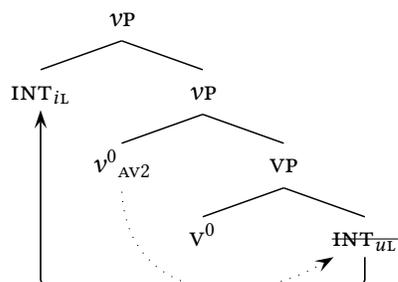
On the HIGH/LICENSING analysis, we predict the existence of languages where:

1. Licensing correlates strictly with agreement.
2. The absolutive argument systematically triggers agreement on τ^0 .
3. When the INT is definite in a “forced-AV” context, it triggers agreement lower in the clause.

The second scenario can be schemaized as follows:

$$AV + LOW\ AGR = AV2$$

(9) *Low Licensing*



Observation: this exact pattern recurs across South Sulawesi, Bungku-Tolaki, and Kaili-Pamona.

5 Bungku-Tolaki: the Same System

The Bungku-Tolaki Subfamily

The Bungku-Tolaki Subfamily: fifteen languages in SE Sulawesi (Mead, 1998)

These languages show the same AV/PV contrast and corresponding definiteness effect.

Today's focus: *Tolaki*, a verb-initial language of the Western Subgroup. (Edwards, 2014)

Licensing by τ^0

Like their relatives in South Sulawesi, the Bungku-Tolaki languages show an agreement system.

In realis contexts, the pivot triggers absolutive agreement. **N.b.:** irrealis = different.

(12) *Bungku-Tolaki: High Agreement*

- | | |
|--|---|
| <p>a. <i>Mom-behawe-i akala.</i>
 ANT-think-3ABS plan
 'He was thinking of a plan.'
 Tolaki; Mead (2002, 41)</p> | <p>b. <i>Ku-lolaha-i haape-nggu.</i>
 1ERG-look-3ABS cell-1GEN
 'I'm looking for my cell phone.'
 Tolaki; Edwards (2012, 44-88)//</p> |
|--|---|

This agreement sits in τ^0 and its target in SPEC,TP:

1. The agreement disappears in non-finite contexts,
2. It is suppressed when the pivot is extracted (Anti-Agreement), and
3. The argument which triggers agreement is the only one which can be \bar{A} -extracted.

Claim: as above, this agreement sits in τ^0 , licenses the pivot, and attracts it to SPEC,TP.

Low Licensing

The Bungku-Tolaki languages do the same thing when the INT is definite but can't agree with τ^0 :

1. They show special morphology in v^0 , and
2. They show "low" agreement with INT.

Across the subfamily, the morphological signature of AV2 is the disappearance of the prefix *poN-*.

- In the AV2 context, the AV prefix *-um-* is infixes directly into the verbal stem.
- **N.b.:** this pattern is impossible outside the AV2 context.

(13) *Bungku-Tolaki: Low Agreement*

- | | |
|---|--|
| <p>a. <i>Nggonggo mong-gaa kaluku</i>
 whoever AV1-eat coconut
 'Whoever eats coconut.'</p> | <p>b. <i>Anadalo k-um-aa-i dowo-no.</i>
 child AV2-eat-3ABS self-3GEN
 'The child who bit himself.'
 Tolaki; Edwards (2012, 33-71)</p> |
|---|--|

Agreement in v^0

It is clear that the "low agreement" which appears in this context is located in v^0 . (Brodkin, 2021a)

1. The agreement in τ^0 must target the pivot, which in AV is the EXT.
2. The agreement in τ^0 disappears when the EXT undergoes \bar{A} -extraction.
3. The agreement which indexes the INT is linked to a morphological alternation in v^0 .
4. The agreement which indexes the INT is verb-adjacent in South Sulawesi, unlike the agreement in τ .

Result: This pattern provides evidence for LOW LICENSING by v^0 .

6 Low Licensing

Proposal: these languages employ a special v^0 when the INT is definite and can't agree with τ^0 .

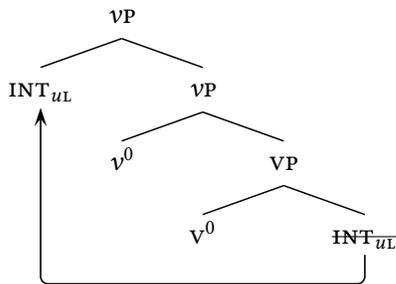
This special v^0 does two things:

1. It triggers object shift to SPEC,VP, and
2. It triggers agreement with the INT.

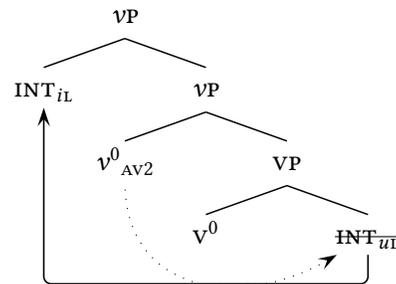
(allowing the INT to be definite)
(allowing this argument to be licensed)

In these respects, it contrasts with BOTH the AV and PV v^0 s.

(14) *PV: Shift, No Licensing*



(15) *AV2: Shift, Licensing*



Proposal: this pattern of low licensing allows a definite INT to survive without τ^0 .

Morphological Evidence

There is morphological evidence for this v^0 across South Sulawesi and Bungku-Tolaki.

These languages form the matrix AV with a complex prefix. (“*maN-*”)

- This prefix contains two parts: a reflex of *-um-* and a reflex of *paN-*.
- There are no matrix AV constructions which contain an INT but lack *paN-*.

The AV2 prefix, however, retains *-um-* but shows a null v^0 in the place of *paN-*.

(Sirk, 1989)

	* <i>um</i>	* <i>paN-</i>	AV1	AV2
KONJO	<i>am-</i>	<i>N-</i>	<i>an.N-</i>	<i>am-</i>
TOLAKI	<i>-um-</i>	<i>poN-</i>	<i>moN-</i>	<i>-um-</i>

This pattern suggests that the “special” AV prefix contains a distinct null v^0 .

Sidenote: Distribution

The appearance of this morphology is not specifically linked to the presence of \bar{A} -extraction.

For instance, there are many other constructions where these languages require AV.

- For instance, certain non-finite complement clauses do not allow PV.
- One plausible analysis: these constructions do not allow the INT to interact with τ^0 .

In these contexts, these languages recruit the same v^0 in the presence of a definite INT.

(16) *Tolaki: Control*

- a. *Tewali'iki ku-onggo* [_{NFC} *mo-saru* *la'usa-miu*]?
 may? 1ERG-want ANT-borrow ladder-2GEN
 ‘May I borrow a ladder of yours?’

Mead (1998, 215a)

- b. *Tewali'iki ku-onggo* [_{NFC} *s-um-aru-'i* *la'usa-miu*]?
 may? 1ERG-want QI-borrow-3ABS ladder-2GEN
 ‘May I borrow your ladder?’

Mead (1998, 215b)

7 High Absolutive Syntax and Licensing

The Empirical Summary

We find a consistent pattern across the South Sulawesi and Bungku Tolaki subgroups:

- In matrix monotransitive contexts, these languages require definite INTs to interact with τ^0 .
- When this becomes impossible, they show exceptional agreement with the INT on v^0 .

Claim: this pattern provides evidence for the relevance of licensing pressure to the position of the INT.

The Typological Perspective

This same pattern has a strikingly broad distribution across Philippine-type languages.

Further north, we see “special case-marking” for definite INTs in the “AV-only” contexts above.

In languages with agreement systems, moreover, we see the same LOW-ABSOLUTIVE AGREEMENT:

1. Elsewhere in Sulawesi, and (Uma: [Martens 1988](#)).
2. In many other places across Indonesia (Enggano, Old Javanese, Old Batak: [Erik Zobel, p.c.](#))

(17) Low Absolutes Across Austronesian

- | | |
|---|--|
| <p>a. <i>Hema to</i> <i>mpo-weba-ko</i>?</p> <p>who REL AV2-hit-2ABS</p> <p>‘Who hit you?’ Uma (Kaili-Pamona);
Martens (1988, 36)</p> | <p>b. <i>Ima wal m-anix</i> <i>qu sehuy qasa</i>?</p> <p>who AUX AV-eat ABS taro that</p> <p>‘Who ate that taro?’ Sqliq Atayal;
Erlewine (2016, 9)</p> |
|---|--|

The Conclusions

The agreement patterns suggest a systematic and specific conclusion about the languages above:

When τ^0 is unavailable, these languages require an exceptional strategy to license the INT.

This pattern falls out on the HIGH/LICENSING analysis of the voice system: ([Brodkin, 2021a](#))

1. Under typical circumstances, the absolutive argument must be licensed by τ^0 .
2. The high position of the absolutive argument arises as a byproduct of this relationship.
3. When an INT requires licensing but cannot interact with τ^0 , these languages face a problem.
4. In this context, they systematically resort to the “low absolutive” licensing schema below.

This analysis reflects a return to a classical analysis: ([Guilfoyle et al., 1992](#))

The high position of the absolutive argument is linked to its need to be licensed by τ^0 .

The High-Absolutive Prospectus

On this analysis, Philippine-type languages can be treated like other “High-Absolutive” languages.

1. Many ergative languages allow the absolutive argument to bear the same privilege as the “pivot.”: Mayan, Inuit, Salish, West Circassian ([Coon et al., 2014](#); [Bittner, 1994](#); [Brown, 2016](#); [Ershova, 2019](#))
2. Typical view: the high position of the absolutive is linked to licensing by τ^0 . ([Bok-Bennema, 1991](#))
3. Further evidence: like the languages of Sulawesi, many Mayan languages show special patterns of “low absolutive licensing” when the INT is definite in “AV-only” contexts. ([Coon et al., 2014](#))

These parallels provide evidence for the “High-Absolutive” analysis in the languages of Sulawesi above—and perhaps in Philippine-type languages more broadly.

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