The verbal prefix meN- and the unergative/unaccusative distinction in Malay

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1. Introduction

Problem:
The verbal prefix meN- in Malay blocks DP movement across it in transitive sentences (Saddy 1991; Soh 1998; Cole and Hermon 1998).

However, no such blocking effect is found in intransitive sentences that contain verb roots that are usually considered unaccusative.

This is unexpected given that Malay syntax is sensitive to the unergative/unaccusative distinction (Nomoto, forthcoming-a), in accordance with the Unaccusative Hypothesis (Perlmutter 1978).

Proposal:
No blocking effect is observed in intransitive sentences with meN- because all intransitive meN- sentences are unergative.

Implications:
(i) Lexical versus structural approaches to the unergative/unaccusative distinction:
   Our analysis supports specifying the unergative/unaccusative distinction through syntactic structure.
(ii) The semantic associations of unergative/unaccusative structures:
    The association between an unergative structure with an internally caused event and an unaccusative structure with an externally caused event as proposed in Levin and Rappaport Hovav (1995) needs to be loosened.
(iii) The function and meaning of meN-:
    Our analysis provides a new data point for evaluating competing analyses of meN-.

2. Background

2.1 The verbal prefix meN-

There is no consensus as to the grammatical function or the semantic contribution of meN-.

MeN- has been claimed to be an active voice marker (Sneddon 1996; Voskuil 2000; Son and Cole 2004; Nomoto and Shoho 2007), a transitive marker (Chung 1976; Cole and Hermon 1998), an agentive (trigger) marker (Wouk 1989; Cumming 1991; Gil 2002; Englebretson 2003), an object Case marker (Guilfoyle, Hung and Travis 1992) or recipient (Voskuil 1993), an object clitic/antipassive marker (Fortin, in press), an agreement marker (Willett 1993), among others.

More recently, we showed that meN- has aspectual effects, and that it shares with a progressive marker a restricted distribution in stative sentences (Soh and Nomoto, forthcoming).

Despite this, there is general agreement about its syntactic effect, namely it blocks DP movement across it.

2.2 The ban on DP movement across meN-

A-bar movement of a DP may not cross the prefix meN- in Malay (Saddy 1991; Soh 1998; Cole and Hermon 1998).¹

(1) a. Apa Ali beli?
   what Ali buy
   ‘What did Ali buy?’

   b. [CP Apa, [TP Ali beli t1]]

(2) a. *Apa Ali mem-beli?
    what Ali meN-buy

   b. *[CP Apa, [TP Ali mem-beli t1]]

¹ See Hasal (2005) for cases where this restriction does not appear to hold.
3. Problem

*Men-* does not appear to block DP movement in sentences containing verb roots that are usually considered unaccusative.

This is unexpected given that Malay syntax is sensitive to the unergative/unaccusative distinction (Nomoto, forthcoming-a), in accordance with the Unaccusative Hypothesis (Perlmutter 1978).

### 3.1 The unergative/unaccusative distinction in Malay

On the use of the terms ‘unergative/unaccusative’ in this paper (Perlmutter 1978):

- **Unergative structure/syntax:** A structure where the sole argument of the intransitive verb is an external argument (thus the argument behaves like the subject of a transitive verb).
- **Unaccusative structure/syntax:** A structure where the sole argument of the intransitive verb is an internal argument (thus the sole argument behaves like the direct object of a transitive verb).

- **Unergative verbs:** Verbs that appear in an unergative structure.
- **Unaccusative verbs:** Verbs that appear in an unaccusative structure.
- **Unergative roots:** Unaffixed unergative verbs.
- **Unaccusative roots:** Unaffixed unaccusative verbs.

As we will argue later in section 4, an unergative structure may contain an unaccusative root. Thus, our analysis suggests that the unergative/unaccusative distinction is a structural distinction, as opposed to one that is specified on the verb root. However, we will use the terms unergative/unaccusative verbs/roots for discussion purposes.

#### 3.1.1 The positioning of the argument

The sole argument of a class of unaccusative verbs, called ‘pivot verbs’ in Shooh (1998), can appear in a pre-verbal or a post-verbal position, while the sole argument of an unergative verb can appear only in a pre-verbal position (Nomoto, forthcoming-a).

### (7) Unaccusative verbs

a. *Se-orang lelaki tinggi datang* dari jauh.
   1-CLF man tall come from far
   ‘A tall man came from a distance.’

b. Dari jauh *datang se-orang lelaki tinggi*.
   from far come 1-CLF man tall
   ‘From a distance came a tall man.’

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2 Cole and Hermon’s argument is based on sentences like (4), which are often referred to variously as object-preposed sentences (Chung 1976; Willett 1993), Passive Type 2 (Dardjowidjojo 1978, Sneddon 1996), bare passive sentences (Voskuil 2000; Nomoto and Shooh 2007), whereas Nomoto’s argument is based on the distribution of *men-* in ‘funny control’ sentences.
(8) Unergative verbs
   a. Se-orang lelaki tinggi pergi ke pasar.
      1-CLF man tall go to market
      ‘A tall man went to a market.’
   b. *Ke pasar pergi se-orang lelaki tinggi.
      to market go 1-CLF man tall

The word order with the argument of an unaccusative verb in a post-verbal position is observed much more frequently in adverbial clauses, especially conditionals, compared to main and embedded clauses (Nomoto, forthcoming-a).

(9) a. Bagaimana kita hendak mengambil tindakan
      how we will take action
      jika sesuatu berlaku di luar pengetahuan kita?
      if something happen at outside knowledge our
      ‘How are we going to react if anything happens without our knowing it?’
      (Utusan Malaysia, 29/01/2002)
   b. ... jika berlaku sesuatu kecemasan
      if happen something emergency
      mereka akan menghubungi saya atau Dr. Tan dengan segera.
      they will contact me or Dr. Tan with quick
      ‘... if any emergency happens, they will contact me or Dr. Tan immediately.’
      (Utusan Malaysia, 11/11/2002)

The contrast between unergative and unaccusative verbs in the possible positions of their sole argument is in accordance with the Unaccusative Hypothesis (Perlmutter 1978), which specifies that an unergative verb has an external argument, while an unaccusative verb has an internal argument.\(^3\)

(10) a. Unergative
      \[
      [\text{TP} \quad [\text{VP} \quad [\text{DP} \quad [\text{V} \text{]]}]]
      \]

b. Unaccusative
      \[
      [\text{TP} \quad [\text{VP} \quad [\text{V} \text{DP} \text{]} \text{]}]]
      \]

Assuming that the post-verbal position is an object position, the argument of an unaccusative verb may appear there as that is its merged position. The argument of an unergative verb may not, as there is no point in the derivation where its argument occupies an object position.

3.1.2 Causativization with the suffix -kan

The suffix -kan has multiple functions and meanings (see, e.g. Asmah 1993; Cole and Son 2004; Kroeger 2007; Son and Cole 2008).\(^4\) Causativization is one of them.

Causativization with -kan is possible with an unaccusative verb root, but not with an unergative verb root (Vamarasi 1999:27-33).

(11) a. Unergative roots + -kan
      pergi ‘to go’ *pergi-kan/*mem-(p)ergi-kan\(^5\) *’to cause x to go’
      nyanyi ‘to sing’ nyanyi-kan/me-nyanyi-kan *’to cause x to sing’
      fikir ‘to think’ fikir-kan/mem-(f)ikir-kan *’to cause x to think’
      ‘to think about x’

\(^3\) Unlike Chomsky (1995), we assume following Marantz (1997) and Chomsky (2001) that the verbal structure of an unaccusative is also headed by a v, though of a different type than that heading the verbal structure of a transitive and an unergative sentence. The v of an unaccusative lacks an external argument.

\(^4\) Although there may be differences between Malay and Indonesian with respect to the use of the suffix -kan (cf. Kaswanti Purwo 2004), the causative use and the contrast between unergative and unaccusative verbs with respect to -kan described below are common to both. See Son and Cole (2008) for a unified analysis of the various types of constructions that -kan is found in Indonesian.

\(^5\) Wolff (1980:210) lists mem-(p)ergi-kan as meaning ‘to send out’ (= to cause x to go). Vamarasi (1999:33) states that it does not exist in Indonesian and regards it as an accidental gap. Two Indonesian speakers we consulted confirmed Vamarasi’s observation. The relevant form appears to be non-existent in Malay too.
b. Unaccusative roots + -kan
datang ‘to come’ datang-kan/men-datang-kan ‘to cause x to come’
jatuh ‘to fall’ jatuh-kan/men-jatuh-kan ‘to cause x to fall’
wujud ‘to exist’ wujud-kan/me-wujud-kan ‘to cause x to exist’

This is expected if causative -kan introduces an external argument and can only combine with a root that is not associated with an external argument.\textsuperscript{6}

3.2 No blocking effect

Given the Unaccusative Hypothesis and the blocking effect of me\textsuperscript{N}, we expect not to find unaccusative me\textsuperscript{N}- sentences with its sole argument in a pre-verbal position.

\text{Turun} ‘to fall’ may also be causativized with the suffix -kan.

\text{(13)} Kerajaan \text{telah} men-(t)urun-\text{kan} harga minyak.
\text{government PERF meN-fall-KAN price oil}
\text{‘The government has lowered the price of oil.’}

However, it may also occur with the prefix me\textsuperscript{N}, with its argument in a pre-verbal subject position.

\text{(14)} a. Harga elektrik turun.
\text{price electricity fall}
\text{‘The electricity price fell.’}

b. Harga elektrik men-(t)urun.
\text{price electricity meN-fall}
\text{‘The electricity price is falling.’}

\text{(14b)} is unexpected because the movement of the internal argument crossing me\textsuperscript{N}- does not give rise to ungrammaticality.

\text{(15)} a. [\text{TP} Harga elektrik, turun \text{t}, ]

b. [\text{TP} Harga elektrik, meN-(t)urun \text{t}, ]

It is not desirable to posit two distinct me\textsuperscript{N}-, one that appears in transitive sentences and another that appears in intransitive sentences, as a possible solution to the problem.

\textsuperscript{6} In the analysis proposed in Son and Cole (2008) for -kan in Indonesian, -kan is not associated with the introduction of an external argument/causer (in its causative use). They propose that -kan is a morphological reflex of a RESULT head, and the various -kan constructions share a result state component in their event structure, which is syntactically expressed. The semantics of RESULT gives rise to a causative interpretation. In fact, they argue specifically against analyzing -kan as heading a CAUSE phrase, along the line of Travis’s (2000) analysis of the causative mophemes in Tagalog and Malagasy. The contrast between unergative and unaccusative verbs with respect to -kan is not explicitly discussed, however. We leave how their analysis may be extended to account for this contrast in future work.
Besides having to explain why these two meN- morphemes have the same form, one needs to also explain why they share other properties (e.g., a restricted distribution in stative sentences (Soh and Nomoto, forthcoming)).

4. **Proposal**

No blocking effect is observed in intransitive sentences with meN- because all intransitive meN- sentences are unergative.

4.1 **The positioning of the argument**

MeN- sentences with an unaccusative root pattern like unergatives and unlike unaccusatives in the positioning of its sole argument.

**Unergative roots**

The argument of an unergative root may only appear in a pre-verbal position, regardless of the presence of meN-.

(16) Unergative root

a. Kalau anak nyanyi dalam kereta api, if child sing in train ibu bapa-nya harus menegur-nya. parents-3SG should reprimand-3SG
   ‘If a child sings in the train, his/her parents should reprimand him/her.’

b. *Kalau nyanyi anak dalam kereta api, if ME sing child in train ibu bapa-nya harus menegur-nya. parents-3SG should reprimand-3SG

**Unaccusative roots**

The argument of an unaccusative root differs in its possible positions depending on the presence of meN-.

Without the prefix meN-, it may appear in a pre-verbal or a post-verbal position.

(18) Unaccusative root

(= (12)) a. Kalau harga minyak tidak turun, kita akan bankrup. if price oil not fall we will bankrupt
   ‘If the oil price doesn’t fall, we’ll go bankrupt.’

b. Kalau tidak turun harga minyak, kita akan bankrup. if not fall price oil we will bankrupt
   ‘If the oil price doesn’t fall, we’ll go bankrupt.’

However, with the prefix meN-, it may only appear in a pre-verbal position, patterning like an unergative root with or without meN-.

(19) Unaccusative root with meN-

a. Kalau harga minyak tidak men-(t)urun, kita akan bankrup. if price oil not fall we will bankrupt
   ‘If the oil price doesn’t fall, we’ll go bankrupt.’

b. *Kalau tidak men-(t)urun harga minyak, kita akan bankrup. if not men-fall price oil we will bankrupt
This patterning suggests that the sole argument in a meN- intransitive sentence is always an external argument regardless of whether the verb root is considered unergative or unaccusative.

4.2 Causativization with -kan

If a [meN+ unaccusative root] form is associated with an unergative structure, we expect that the suffix -kan cannot attach to it with a causative interpretation.

This expectation does not appear to be borne out at first glance. Forms like men-(t)urun-kan ‘to lower’ exist as causatives as in (20).

(20) Kerajaan men-(t)urun-kan harga minyak sebanyak 15 sen. government MEN-fall-kan price oil as.much.as 15 cent ‘The government reduced the oil price by 15 cents.’

However, we argue that men-(t)urun-kan ‘to lower’ is a result of the merging of meN- to turun-kan as in (22), rather than the merging of -kan to men-(t)urun as in (21).  

(21) *Causative

prediction:
meN-Root-kan → meN-Root
WRONG

cf. (23) 1st and 3rd columns

(22) Causative

prediction:
meN-Root-kan → Root-kan
CORRECT

cf. (23) 1st and 2nd columns

The existence of a meN-X-kan causative entails that of a X-kan form, but not a meN-X form.

(23) meN-X-kan X-kan meN-X
meny-(s)ampai-kan sampai-kan *meny-(s)ampai
‘to convey’ ‘to convey’ (sampai ‘to reach’)
men-(t)idur-kan tidur-kan *men-(t)idur
‘to put to sleep’ ‘to put to sleep’
mem-ber-henti-kan ber-henti-kan *mem-berhenti
‘to dismiss’ ‘to dismiss’ (ber-henti ‘to resign’)

We do not find meN-X-kan verbs that do not have X-kan forms.

That -kan is more closely related to the verbal root than meN- has been argued for on the basis of phonological evidence from a related language, Indonesian. Cohn and McCarthy (1998) treat X-kan as a prosodic unit (= Prosodic Word or PrWd) to the exclusion of meN- to account for stress patterns and syllabification in Indonesian.

(23) a. [X]_PrWd
b. [X-kan]_PrWd
c. meN-[X-kan]_PrWd

To the extent that stress and syllabification in Malay are the same as Indonesian in the relevant respects, the independently proposed structure corroborates our analysis.

8 Some authors (e.g. Vamarasi 1999; Kroeger 2007) conclude that a prefixed form like ber-henti ‘to resign; to stop (intransitive)’ is unaccusative based on the fact that its base (henti in this case) can be causativized with -kan as in meng-henti-kan ‘to stop (transitive)’. Other verbs that are concluded to be unaccusative based on the same reasoning include meng-hilang ‘to disappear’, men-jadi ‘to become’, meng-alir ‘to flow’, meny-(s)ebierang ‘to cross’ and men-(t)angis ‘to cry’. Such an analysis is problematic as it ignores the difference between bare forms and prefixed forms. The causative diagnostic indicates that bare form may appear in an unaccusative structure, but does not necessarily suggest that the prefixed form can appear in an unaccusative structure as well.

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footnote 7: Son and Cole (2008) also argue for a structure with the relevant hierarchy as in (22). They claim that -kan is an overt instantiation of the head of Result phrase (RP), and assume that meN- occupies the Voice head (which they take to be equivalent to v). RP appears below VoiceP and VP as shown below.

(i) [VoiceP External Argument meN- [VP V [RP -kan XP]]].
To sum up,

- All intransitive sentences with meN- are unergative, regardless of whether the roots are considered unergative or unaccusative (contra Vamarasi 1999; Postman 2002; Kroeger 2007).
- Therefore, no DP movement takes place across meN-.

5. Implications

5.1 Lexical versus structural approaches to the unergative/unaccusative distinction

Two approaches to argument realization (unergative/unaccusative distinction):

(i) Lexical:
- Verbs have structured lexical semantic representations from which syntactic structures are projected (Levin and Rappaport Hovav 1995; Rappaport Hovav and Levin 1998, 2002).

Levin and Rappaport Hovav (1995) on unergative/unaccusative distinction:
- Verbs are specified as being unergative or unaccusative, and an unergative verb describes an internally caused event while an unaccusative verb describes an externally caused event.
- Arguments are projected in accordance with the verb’s categorization as unergative or unaccusative.
- Different nuances of verb meaning are due to different lexical verbs, e.g. An intransitive verb describing an externally caused event is unaccusative, while one describing an internally caused event is unergative.

(ii) Structural:
- The meaning of a verb in a given use is determined compositionally from the meaning of the verb root and the syntactic environment in which the verb appears (Ritter and Rosen 1998; Marantz 1997; Borer 2005; Pylkkänen 2008; Ramchand 2008).

Borer (2005) on unergative/unaccusative distinction:
- Verbs are not specified as being unergative or unaccusative.
- Arguments are projected freely.
- Different nuances of verb meaning are associated with the different structure in which the verb appears.

A single root with the same relevant meaning may have an unaccusative or unergative use depending on the surrounding structural elements in the functional domain (i.e., the presence of meN-).

Hence, the analysis supports specifying the unergative/unaccusative distinction through syntactic structure (e.g., Borer 2005), rather than lexical encoding (Perlmutter 1978; Perlmutter and Postal 1984; Levin and Rappaport Hovav 1995; Rappaport Hovav and Levin 1998, 2002).

Our analysis suggests that it is important to distinguish affixed forms from non-affixed forms when determining whether they can appear in an unergative or unaccusative structure (see footnote 8).

5.2 The semantic associations of unergative/unaccusative structures

Levin and Rappaport Hovav (1995) propose that verbs have structured lexical semantic representations from which syntactic structures are projected.

They relate the unergative structure with a verb that describes an eventuality that is conceptualized as ‘internally caused’, and the unaccusative structure with a verb that describes an eventuality that is conceptualized as ‘externally caused’.

Under this view, turun ‘to fall’ is a variable behaviour verb (like roll verbs in English (Levin and Rappaport Hovav 1995:209)) in that it may have an unergative use as well as an unaccusative use.

With an animate volitional/agentive argument, the eventuality may be conceptualized as internally caused, and hence unergative. With an inanimate argument, the eventuality is conceptualized as externally caused, and hence unaccusative.

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9 Vamarasi (1999:29) contends that prefixless verbs are all unaccusative. However, this claim is too strong because it does not allow for the existence of prefixless unergative verbs, which we believe exist (e.g. perg ‘to go’ (8)). Also, it does not allow for cases where the same prefixless verb can appear in both unaccusative and unergative structures (variable behaviour verbs) (e.g. turun ‘to fall; to alight’ (25)).

10 See Soh (1994:14) for an early suggestion of this possibility.
(25) a. Dia turun dari bas.
he alight from bus
‘He alighted from the bus.’

(b) Harga minyak turun.
price oil fall
‘The oil price fell.’

However, the situations described by (26a) and (26b) are both conceptualized as externally caused. Yet, (26a) without the prefix meN- involves an unaccusative structure, while (26b) with the prefix meN- involves an unergative structure.

(26) a. Harga elektrik turun.
price electricity fall
‘The electricity price fell.’

b. Harga elektrik men-(t)urun.
price electricity meN-fall
‘The electricity price is falling.’

This means that the connection between the type of the eventuality described (whether internally or externally caused) and argument realization in Levin and Rappaport Hovav (1995) needs to be loosened.

5.3 The analysis of the function and meaning of meN-

This new observation about the occurrence of meN- being associated with the existence of an external argument (which need not be an agent; cf. Dowty 1991; Ramchand 2008) raises questions about analyses that treat meN- as associated with an internal argument.

Such analyses include those that treat meN- as a transitive marker (e.g., Chung 1976; Cole and Hermon 1998), an objective Case marker (Guifolyle, Hung and Travis 1992) or recipient (Voskuil 1993) or as an object/clitic/antipassive marker (Fortin, in press).

6. Future work

Why is it that meN- has the particular effect that it does? Is it a syntactic effect due to meN- being a v that requires an argument in its Spec or does meN- contribute a certain meaning that is relevant to the argument realization of the verb?

In Soh and Nomoto (forthcoming), we argue that meN- has a “progressive-like” aspectual effect not only in the subclass of unaccusative verbs like turun ‘to fall’, but also with other transitive and intransitive verbs, and that it shares with a progressive marker a restricted distribution in stative sentences.

Q: How is this aspectual effect of meN- related to the finding in the present study about intransitive meN- sentences being unergative?

While previous studies on the unergative/unaccusative distinction have explored the relation between situation aspect and argument realization (e.g., Dowty 1991), to the extent that meN- can be viewed as a progressive view point marker, the present study raises the question about what role, if any, viewpoint aspect may play in argument realization.

References


Soh, Hooi Ling, and Hiroki Nomoto. Forthcoming. Progressive aspect, the verbal prefix meN-, and the stative sentences in Malay. *Oceanic Linguistics*.


