Passive Agreement in Acehnese*

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1. Introduction

This paper considers a construction in Acehnese (Malayo-Polynesian, Sumatra) that was brought to the attention of the linguistic community by Lawler (1977). Lawler claimed that this construction is a passive that shows verbal agreement with the agent:

(1) a. Lôn geu-tingkue lé ureueng inong nyan
   1sg 3Pol-carry LE person female that
   “I was carried by the woman” (I:152)

   b. * Lôn lôn-tingkue lé ureueng inong nyan
      1sg 1sg-carry LE person female that
      “I was carried by the woman” (I:152)

   c. Ureueng inong nyan neu-ba lé droeneuh
      person female that 2-take LE you
      “The woman was brought by you”

In contrast, Durie (1985, 1988) claimed that the construction is not a passive, but rather a theme-topic construction. On this analysis, the particle lé, which Lawler translates as by,

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1Unless otherwise noted, data are from my notes, cited by book (I or II) and page number.
is not a preposition but rather an ergative case marker that appears only when the agent is post-verbal, and is deleted when the agent is topicalized. I refer to this construction as the LE-construction.

In this paper, I argue that Lawler was largely correct, and propose an analysis of the apparent agreement with the agent in a by-phrase in terms of interpretable features on v. Thus, I suggest that Acehnese is a Malay/Indonesian-style Austronesian language, showing three clause-types (see Cole & Hermon 2005 and Cole et al 2008 for related Malay/Indonesian data)—active, passive, and object voice:

(1) a. Active

Dokto ka geu-peu-ubat Ibrahim
doctor Perf 3Pol-Cause-medicine Ibrahim

“Ibrahim has treated the doctor”

b. Passive (the LE-Construction)

Ibrahim ka geu-peu-ubat le dokto
Ibrahim Perf 3Pol-Cause-medicine LE doctor

“Ibrahim was treated by the doctor”

c. Object Voice

Ibrahim ka dokto peu-ubat
Ibrahim Perf doctor Cause-medicine

“Ibrahim was treated by the doctor” (II:15)

The paper is organized as follows. First, I provide evidence that the raised theme in the LE-construction occupies an A-position. Next, I show that the lé + agent behaves as a PP (hence, by-phrase), rather than a DP (hence, ergative case marked subject). Finally, I provide an explanation of the agreement patterns in terms of interpretable features on v.

2. The Raised Theme

The two types of analyses under consideration predict different behaviour for the LE-construction, based on their differing types of positions. On a Durie-style topicalization analysis, the raised theme is a topic, hence occupies an A-bar position. On a Lawler-style passive analysis, the raised theme is a grammatical subject, hence occupies an A-position. Data from Weak Crossover, Condition C, and controlled PRO support a passive analysis.

First, consider Weak Crossover, the condition that requires quantifier phrases to bind any covarying pronouns from an A-position. To test the behaviour of the theme for Weak Crossover, I use two quantifier phrases in Acehnese tieptiep “every” and karap mandeum “almost all”. Notice that these show the expected behaviour of quantifiers: in the active, the agent can bind into the theme, but not vice versa, since the agent asymmetrically c-commands the theme from an A-position:

2We return to the object voice construction below, which is like the passive in involving A-movement of the object to subject position, but unlike the passive in that the external argument is not demoted.
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(3) Active
a. tieptiep maq  geu-lindong aneuk geuh
every  mother 3Pol-protect child 3Pol
   ‘Every mother_{i} protects her_{i} child’ (II:52)
b. aneuk geuh geu-lindong tieptiep maq
   child 3Pol 3Pol-protect every  mother
   ‘His/her_{k\slash_{i}} child protects every mother_{i}’ (II:52)

(4) Active
a. Karap mandeum gurée  geu-peu-runoe mured geuh
   almost all  teacher 3Pol-Cause-learn student 3Pol
   “Almost all the teachers_{i} taught their_{i} students.” (II:55)
b. Gurée  jih  geu-peu-runoe karap mandeum mured
teacher 3Fam 3Pol-Cause-learn almost all  student
   “His/her_{k\slash_{i}} teacher taught almost all the students_{i}” (II:55)

Turning to the LE-construction, we discover that the raised theme binds into the agent:

(5) LE-Construction
a. Tieptiep aneuk geu-lindong lé  maq  droe-jih
   every  child 3Pol-protect LE mother self-3Fam
   “Every child_{i} is protected by his/her_{i} mother” (II:53)
b. Karap mandeum mured geu-peu-runoe lé  gurée  droe-jih
   almost all  student 3Pol-Cause-learn LE teacher self-3Fam
   “Almost all the students_{i} were being taught by their_{i} own teacher” (II:56)

This pattern is explained if the theme has raised to become the grammatical subject, and thus occupies an A-position from which quantificational binding of a pronoun is possible. If the theme has been topicalized, on the other hand, these examples should be ungrammatical as Weak Crossover violations.

Next, consider Condition C. I assume (following for example Lebeaux 1995 and Fox 1999) that Condition C reconstruction effects are found with A-bar movement, but not with A-movement. In other words, A-movement repairs an underlying Condition C violation, but A-bar movement does not.

In the active, we find standard Condition C effects between the subject and object. An R-expression embedded in the agent can corefer with a pronominal object; the reverse is impossible.3:

(6) Active
a. Mie aneuk-aneuk miet  nyan  ji-kap  awak  nyan
   cat  child-child  small  that  3Fam-bite person that
   “The children’s cat bit them_{i/k}” (II:60)

3Note that awak nyan is literally “person that”, however it functions as the pronoun “they”
A topicalization analysis would predict that the Condition C effect seen in (6b) is maintained in the LE-construction. A passive analysis would predict that a pronoun in the by-phrase would not trigger a Condition C violation for an R-expression embedded in the theme, since the pronoun never c-commands the theme. Furthermore, even if the pronoun were able to c-command out of the by-phrase, the underlying Condition C effect would be repaired by the A-movement of the theme. As predicted by the passive analysis, no Condition C effect appears in the LE-construction corresponding to (6b):

(7) LE-Construction

Mie aneuk-anek miet nyan ji-poh lé awak nyan
   cat   child-child small that 3Pol-hit LE person that

“The children’s cat was hit by them” (II:60)

Finally, consider the behaviour of controlled PRO in Acehnese. Given that only grammatical subjects may be controlled PRO (e.g. Manning 1996), a passive analysis predicts that the raised theme in the LE-construction may be PRO, whereas the topicalization analysis predicts that it may not. I have been able to identify at least one subject control verb in Acehnese, namely tém “want”:

(8) Dokto geu-tém peu-ubat aneuk miet nyan
doctor 3Pol-want Caus-medicine child small that

“The doctor wants to treat the child” (I:145)

Note that an overt subject is also allowed with this verb, in which case lower verb is most naturally marked with beu- “should”:

(9) Lôn tém ngon lôn beu-trôh singoh
   1sg want friend 1sg should-arrive tomorrow

“I want my friend to arrive tomorrow” (I:147)

In the LE-construction, my consultants agree that the raised theme can be controlled PRO:

(10) LE-Construction

a. Aneuk miet nyan di-tém geu-peu-ubat lé dokto
    child small that 3Fam-want 3Pol-Caus-medicine LE doctor

“The child wants to be treated by the doctor” (I:145)

b. Aneuk miet nyan di-tém geu-tingkue lé ureueng inong nyan
    child small that 3Fam-want 3Pol-carry LE person female that

“The child wants to be carried by the woman” (I:152)
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A note of caution is in order, however. Durie (1987) reports control of theme as ungrammatical, citing the following, which my consultants find grammatical:

(11) * Aneuk agam nyan ji-tém  geu-peuréksa lé dokto
    child  male  that 3Fam-want 3Pol-examine LE doctor
    “That boy wants to be examined by the doctor” (Durie 1987:373)

Although I do not have an explanation for the discrepancy, it is worth noting that Durie’s speakers came from a different dialect region (Cot Trieng, Bireuen, in North Aceh) and a previous generation (40+ years of age in 1987).

In summary, the raised theme in the LE-construction behaves as an A-position for pronominal binding by quantifiers, Condition C reconstruction effects, and controlled PRO, supporting the passive analysis.

3. The lé-Phrase

In this section, we turn to the lé-phrase. Durie proposes that lé is an ergative case marker that appears only when the agent is post-verbal; thus, on this type of topicalization analysis, the lé-phrase is a DP. On a passive analysis in contrast, lé is a preposition, like English by (and Indonesian oleh); thus, the lé-phrase is a PP. In this section I present three arguments that the lé phrase is a PP.

First, consider the uniqueness of the initial DP position (which under the passive analysis, is the grammatical subject position). Only one DP may appear preceding modals, negation, and aspectual particles, but PPs may precede this DP position:

(12) a. * Ibrahim dokto ka geu-peu-ubat
    Ibrahim doctor Perf 3Pol-Caus-medicine
    “The doctor treated Ibrahim” (II:15)

b. * Lôn asèe ka di-kap baroe
    1sg  dog  Perf 3Fam-bite yesterday
    “The dog bit me yesterday” (I:61)

c. Keu ureueng inong nyan boh mamplam ka lôn-jok
    to  person  female  that  fruit  mango  Perf 1sg-give
    “To that woman the mango I gave” (I:82)

d. Di sinoe aneuk miet  meukèn-meukèn.
    at here  child  small  play-play
    “Children play here.” (I:136)

Like prepositional phrases and unlike DPs, the lé-phrase may precede this DP position:

(13) a. Lé uleue nyan aneuk miet  nyan di-kap
    LE snake that  child  small  that 3Fam-bite
    “By the snake, that child was bitten” (I:97)
b. Lé dokto Ibrahim ka geu-peu-ubat
   LE doctor Ibrahim Perf 3Pol-Cause-medicine
   “By the doctor, Ibrahim was treated” (II:63)

As an aside, note also that such examples do not pattern as Durie would expect – lé appears with the agent, even though the agent is topicalized and not post-verbal.

Next, consider the distribution of the complementizer yang. DPs may be questioned with yang; but prepositional phrases may not:

(14) a. Soe (yang) geu-peu-ubat lé dokto?
    who RelC 3Pol-Caus-medicine LE doctor
    “Who was treated by the doctor?” (II:15)

b. Peue (yang) Fatima pajôh?
    what RelC Fatima eat
    “What did Fatima eat?” (II:17)

c. Pat (*yang) Fatima geu-kalon Ibrahim?
    where RelC Fatima 3Pol-see Ibrahim
    “Where did Fatima see Ibrahim?” (II:17)

d. Keu soe (*yang) geu-jok lé ureueng agam nyan aneuk miet nyan?
    to who RelC 3Pol-give LE person male Dem child small Dem
    “To whom was the child given by the man?” (II:13)

Like prepositional phrases, the lé-phrase cannot be questioned with yang:

(15) a. Lé soe (*yang) aneuk miet nyan geu-jok keu ureueng inong nyan
    LE who RelC child small Dem 3Pol-give to person female Dem
    “By whom was the baby given to the woman?” (II:13)

b. Lé soe (*yang) Ibrahim geu-peu-ubat?
    LE who RelC Ibrahim 3Pol-Cause-medicine
    “By whom was Ibrahim treated?” (II:63)

Finally, consider floating quantifiers like dum “much”, or mandum “all”. Such quantifiers may float from DPs but not PPs:

(16) a. ureueng nyan ka (dum) geu-pajoh (dum) boh drien (dum) uroe nyoe
    person that Perf much 3Pol-eat much fruit durian much day this
    “That person ate a lot of durian today” (II:37)

b. ureueng agam nyan ka mandum geu-koh pade lam blang nyan
    person male that Perf all 3Pol-cut rice in field that
    “All the men cut rice in the field”
    *“The men cut rice in all the fields” (II:37b)

Note that yang is the Indonesian complementizer; the Acehnese is nyang. Our primary consultant varies between the two in pronunciation, but writes the word as yang, so I have followed that practice.
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Like PPs, quantifiers may not float from the \textit{lé}-phrase:

\begin{itemize}
\item[(17)] a. aneuk miet nyan ka mandum ji-kap lé asee child small that Perf all 3Fam-bite LE dog
   “All the children were bitten by the dogs”
   *“The children were bitten by all the dogs” (II:37a)
\item[(17)] b. mandum ka geu-pajoh boh drien lé ureueng nyan all Perf 3Pol-eat fruit durian LE person that
   “All the durians were eaten by the people”
   *“Durian fruit was eaten by all the people” (II:37a)
\end{itemize}

In summary, the \textit{lé}-phrase behaves as a prepositional phrase for these three tests, again supporting the passive analysis.

I conclude that the LE-construction should be analysed as a passive. However, this raises Lawler’s initial problem again: how do we explain agent agreement in a passive?

4. Agent Agreement

The apparent agent agreement is illustrated again in (18). Note that the verb shows third person agreement with the agent in the \textit{by}-phrase, rather than first person agreement with the raised theme in the grammatical subject position:

\begin{itemize}
\item[(18)] Lôn geu-tingkue lé ureueng inong nyan 1sg 3Pol-carry LE person female that
   “I was carried by the woman” (I:152)
\end{itemize}

I propose that this is not agreement in the standard sense, but rather interpretable features on \textit{v}, expressing properties of the thematic subject – person, inclusiveness, and relative position in the social hierarchy. These features do not saturate the external argument position, but rather restrict the possible external arguments (in the sense of Chung & Ladusaw 2004). This proposal immediately accounts for the split-S agreement property of Acehnese (e.g. Durie 1985): unergative verbs show agreement, while unaccusative verbs do not.

\begin{itemize}
\item[(19)] Unergative
   \item[(19)] a. Lôn lôn-duek ateueh kursi 1sg 1sg-sit above chair
      “I sat on the chair” (W11-p-S #11)
   \item[(19)] b. Ureueng agam nyan geu-plueng person male that 3Pol-run
      “The man is running” (I:91)
\end{itemize}

\begin{itemize}
\item[(20)] Unaccusative
\end{itemize}
This proposal explains the agent agreement in passives. Following for example Marantz 2000 and Embick 2004, passives involve an agentive $v$ without a specifier; instead of the agent being introduced into the specifier of $vP$, the $vP$ combines directly with a passive head. This $v$ does not differ from other agentive $v$s, and thus includes the interpretable features of the (implicit) agent. As expected, passives in Acehnese show implicit agent effects (like the ability to license agent-oriented adverbs), due to the presence of the agentive $v$, while unaccusatives do not (Ko 2008).

Furthermore, this explains the fact that the agreement is not dependent on the presence of the $by$-phrase. The features are not triggered through agreement with the agent, but rather through the presence of the $v$.$^5$

In addition, the analysis correctly predicts the position of the agreement morphology in the phrase structure. Agreement is located on the lexical verb that assigns the external $\theta$-role, not on any higher modal or aspectual markers:

$^5$Lawler (1977:224 ftn 11) claims that the $by$-phrase is obligatory, however this is corrected by Durie (1988:108 ftn 8). The initial source of confusion was likely that out of context, a passive without a $by$-phrase is ambiguous, and could be interpreted as an active.
The analysis is also compatible with the possibility for titles to appear in place of the agreement morphology (according to Asyik 1987:273-278 for the North Aceh dialect), including *apa* “uncle”, *ayah* “father”, *abang* “elder brother”, *teungku* “religious scholar”, and *guru* “teacher”:

(24) a. Macut h’an jeuet macut-woe meunyo golom bu
    aunt NEG can aunt-go home if not yet rice
    “You aunt cannot go home if you have not eaten rice with us yet” (Asyik 1987:275)

b. Teungku teungku-piyūh u dalam
    religious.scholar religious.scholar-rest to inside
    “You “teungku”, please rest inside here” (Asyik 1987:274)

Finally, the proposed analysis potentially provides insight into contexts in which the agreement morphology is obligatorily omitted. In the object voice, the agent appears in the specifier of vP and the agreement is obligatorily absent.6

(25) Object Voice

a. Aneuk miet nyan uleue nyan (*di)-kap
    child small that snake that 3Fam-bite
    “The snake bit the child” (I:97)

b. Aneuk miet nyan akan ureueng inong nyan (*geu)-tingkue
    child small that will person female that 3-Pol-carry.in.cloth
    “The woman will carry the child” (II:11)

This fact can be understood from an Austronesian perspective, using Sportiche’s (1992) Doubly Filled Voice Filter, adapted by Travis (2000) for Tagalog and Pearson (2001) for Malagasy. For example, in Tagalog, when the specifier of a causative v is pronounced, the causative head cannot be. The Achenese object voice is amenable to a similar analysis: the agent remains in the specifier of vP, preventing the v head from being pronounced.

In addition, when a DP A-bar trace appears in spec, v, (due to cyclic movement through the phase edge, see Chomsky 2000) the agreement must also be omitted. This is found with A-bar movement of the theme7 and long distance A-bar movement past an active verb, but not past a passive verb.8

(26) Active, A-bar Theme

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6The tests showing that the raised theme occupies an A-position in the passive apply equally to the object voice.

7Durie 1985 reports thematic object relativization in the active as ungrammatical, but his example has the verb marked with agreement.

8Agreement is also omitted in agent A-bar movement. This falls under the same generalization, if we assume with Chomsky 2007, that movement of the agent to the grammatical subject position and wh-movement of the agent to the specifier of CP proceed independently, forming distinct chains.
a. Ureueng yang dokto ka (*geu)-peu-ubat ka sihat
   person RelC doctor Perf 3Pol-Cause-medicine Perf healthy
   “The person that the doctor treated is healthy” (II:16)

b. Aneuk miet yang uleue nyan hana kap pih ji-moe
   child small RelC snake that NEG bite even 3Fam-cry
   “Even that child that’s not bitten by the snake is crying” (I:144)

(27) Active, Long Distance Movement
a. Uleue yang Ibrahim peugah kap aneuk miet nyan raya
   snake RelC Ibrahim said bite child small that big
   “The snake that Ibrahim said bit the boy is big” (II:35)

b. Sie yang Ibrahim akan peugah Fatima haroo h taguen na di dapu
   meat RelC Ibrahim will say Fatima should cook is in kitchen
   “The meat that Ibrahim will say Fatima should cook is in the kitchen” (II:50)

(28) Passive (LE-construction), A-bar Theme
a. Aneuk miet yang di-kap lé mie nyan ka trôh u rumoh
   child small RelC 3Fam-bite LE cat that Perf arrive to house
   “The child who was bit by the cat arrived home” (I:111)

b. Nyoe padé yang di-pajoh lé geubeuh nyan
   this rice RelC 3Fam-eat LE buffalo that
   “This is the rice that the buffalos ate” (I:113)

(29) Passive, Long Distance Movement
a. Asee yang geu-peugah lé Ibrahim hana juah kap aneuk miet nyan
   dog RelC 3Pol-say LE Ibrahim not wild bit child small that
   “The dog that Ibrahim said was not wild bit the child” (II:36)

b. Sie yang geu-peugah lé Ibrahim Fatima taguen mangat that
   meat RelC 3Pol-say LE Ibrahim Fatima cook delicious very
   “The meat that Ibrahim said Fatima cooked is delicious” (II:49)

This pattern again locates the agreement in $v$ rather than any higher functional projections. An A-bar trace in the specifier of $vP$ also prevents the realization of the features in $v$. Detailed analysis of this pattern awaits further research (for related patterns, see for example Cole et al 2008 on Indonesian, and Rackowski & Richards on Tagalog).

5. Conclusions

To conclude, I have argued that Acehnese shows three basic clause types: active, passive, and object voice. Apparent split-S agreement in the language are explained through interpretable features of $v$ that restrict (rather than saturate) the external argument position.
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References


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