

Unravelling (a)symmetry in grammar: reciprocity and reflexivity in Barrier Islands languages and beyond

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Abstract

This paper explores the dynamics of (a)symmetry in grammar, a widely accepted perspective, supported by robust cross-linguistic evidence, that core layers of grammatical units (e.g., SUBJ, OBJ, and OBL) and semantics (e.g., agent, recipient, and patient) inherently exhibit asymmetry, as seen in grammatical/thematic/accessibility hierarchies (Keenan and Comrie 1977, Bresnan 2001, among others). The discussion begins by examining the linguistic implications of this asymmetry, presenting novel insights and critical data from Enggano and other Barrier Islands languages, as well as from well-studied languages of western Indonesia, such as Malay and Balinese. Delving into the intricacies of the grammar and typology of (a)symmetry in the context of Austronesian voice systems and beyond, the analysis addresses the dynamics of morphosyntax and pragmatics governing how two (a)symmetric units at one level must be expressed in (a)symmetric units at other levels. For this, the reflexive/reciprocal constructions and related argument alternations in Enggano are compared with those in other Austronesian languages, with a specific emphasis on the pragmatic-syntax motivations behind (mis)alignment and the varying degrees of symmetry within the theoretical frameworks of prominence in linguistics (DiSciullo 2002, Barrie 2011, Himmelmann and Primus 2015, Arka 2024, among others). The historical dimension of symmetry is also illuminated to support the analysis of the position of Enggano and other Barrier Islands languages within the Austronesian family.

References

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