

On the Definition of Subject: A perspective from Sulawesi

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Part One:

The notion of Subject

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(1)	John	wrote	that book
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	Subject	Verb	Object

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 - First Discovered: Classical Philosophy (Aristotle, Plato)
 - Modern linguistics: Important Concept (Chomsky 1965)

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 - First appears in early Dutch work (van der Tuuk 1864, Adriani 1889)
 - Modern times: major focus of research (Cole & Hermon 2005)

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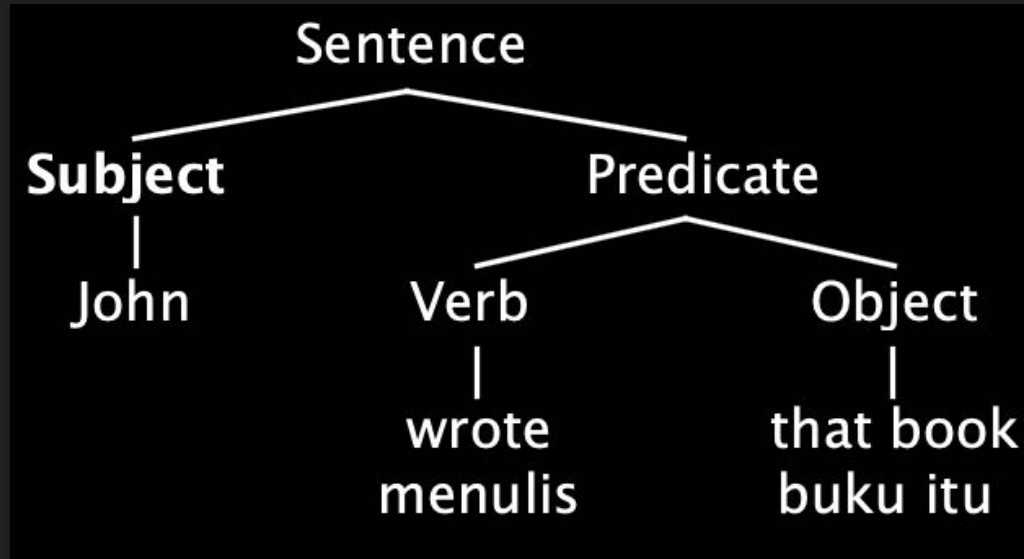
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- Chomsky 1965: “**The Theory of Universal Grammar**”

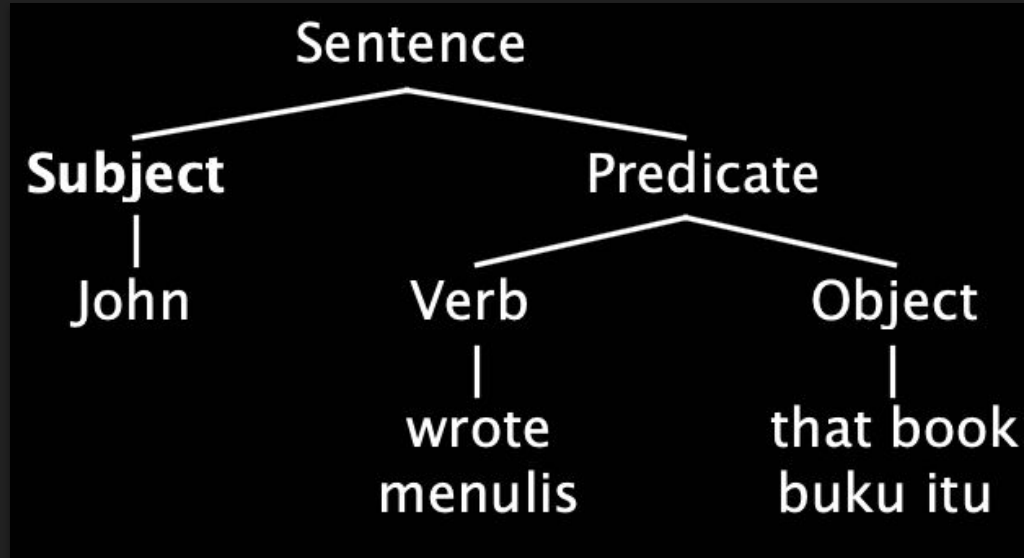
Why are subjects important?

- The Universal Theory of Subjecthood (Chomsky 1965 et seq).
 - Every sentence is built from two parts: **subject** + **predicate**



Why are subjects important?

- Question: in every language, **do all sentences have this shape?**



Why are subjects important?

- Follow-up questions:
 - Does every language **have subjects**?
 - Across different languages, **do subjects have the same properties**?
 - How can we understand **variation between languages in this domain**?

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1. Research on [Bahasa Indonesia](#)
2. Research on [the languages of Sulawesi](#)

Part Two:

Subjects in an Indonesian Context

The Basic Facts

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Subject

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(5) **John** writes books like that

(6) **John and Mary** write books like that

Subject marking

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(3) **John** wrote that book

(7) **That book** was written by **John**

Subject

passive verb

Agent

Indonesian: A Theoretical Update

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(Chung 1976; Guilfoyle, Hung, & Travis 1992; Cole & Hermon 2005)

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Indonesian: A Theoretical Update

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(5)	John	writes	books like that
(6)	John and Mary	write	books like that
(8)	Buku itu	ditulis__	oleh John
(9)	Buku-buku itu	ditulis__	oleh John

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(2) That book	was written	by John
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Subject	passive verb	Agent

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- This theory has been improved through research on Bahasa Indonesia
 1. Special marking: the subject **does not always** change the shape of the verb.
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 - a. Passive → **agent** at the end.
 - b. Pasif Semu → **agent** remains in place.

(10) **Buku ini** **saya** tulis

Subject **Agent** Pasif Semu

Summary

- Although early research claimed that subjects have these three properties:
 1. Special Position: the subject appears at the start of the sentence.
 2. Special marking: the subject often determines the shape of the verb.
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- Research on Bahasa Indonesia **has shown that these are not universal.**

Summary

- Although early research claimed that subjects have these three properties:
 1. Special Position: the subject appears at the start of the sentence.
 2. Special marking: the subject often determines the shape of the verb.
 3. Passive: objects can become subjects if the agent is moved.
- Research on Bahasa Indonesia has shown that these are not universal.
 - The subject does not need to determine the shape of the verb.
 - The object can become a subject even if the agent is not moved.

Part Three:
Subjects in Sulawesi

The Basic Facts

- The island of Sulawesi contains about 115 languages
- These languages are very diverse, but they generally share one property:

Verb-Initial Word Order

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- Example: Bahasa Makassar

(11)

Naciniki

i Ali

i Udin

Melihat

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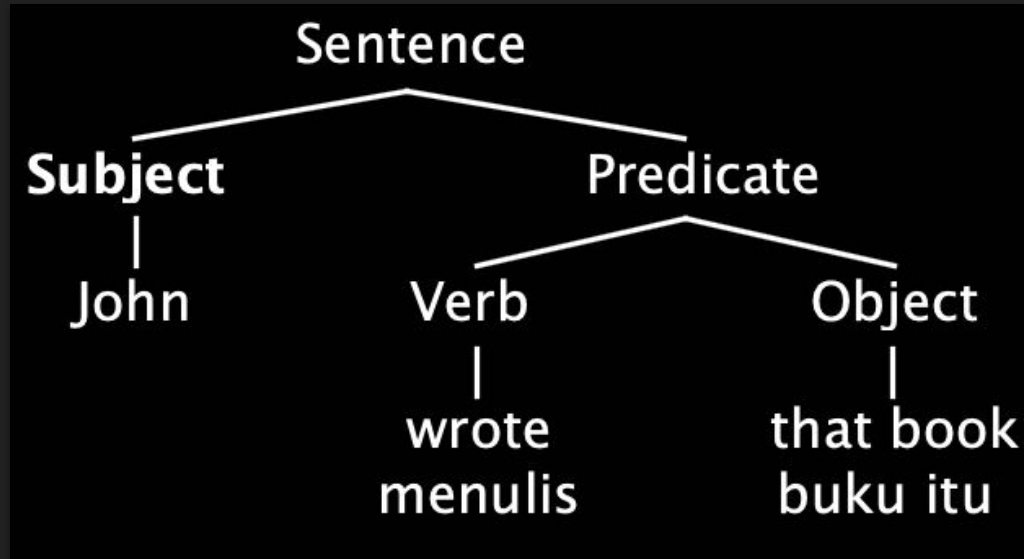
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- **Problem:** verb-initial sentences do not fit with the original theory of subjects.
 - Chomsky 1965: sentence = subject + predicate
 - Question: **what is the predicate?**

(11)

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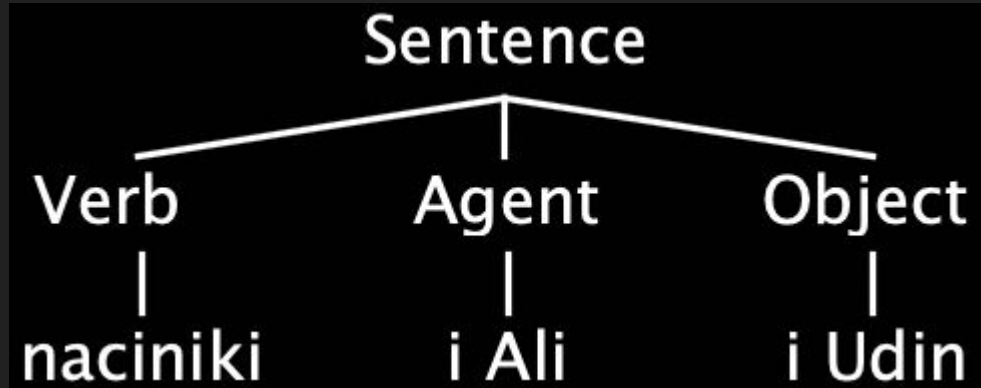
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The Position of the Subject

- **The Old Theory:** “**verb-initial sentences have a different structure.**”

(11) **Naciniki** i Ali i Udin
 Melihat si Ali si Udin



Chung 1983

The Position of the Subject

- There are many patterns which show that this view is correct:

In the languages of Sulawesi, **verb-initial clauses have subjects.**

The Position of the Subject

- There are many patterns which show that this view is correct:

In the languages of Sulawesi, **verb-initial clauses have subjects.**

(outside of Sulawesi: Guilfoyle, Hung, & Travis 1992; Pearson 2005)

(in Sulawesi: Brodkin 2020, 2021...)

The Position of the Subject

- Many patterns show that **verb-initial clauses have subjects.**
1. **Special marking:** the subject **does** change the shape of the verb.

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(11) **Na**-ciniki i Ali i Udin
 Dia-melihat si Ali si Udin

(12) **Ku**-ciniki inakke i Udin
 Ku-melihat aku si Udin

The Position of the Subject

- Many patterns show that **verb-initial clauses have subjects.**
1. Special marking: the subject **does** change the shape of the verb.
 2. **Definiteness:** the subject has to be definite; the object does not.
(Adams & Manaster-Ramer 1988)

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(13) **Ang-nganre** **i Ali** ruku.
Makan **si Ali** rumput
`Ali ate grass.'

(12) ***Ni-kanre** ruku di tedong
 Di-makan rumput oleh kerbau
(Impossible): “Grass was eaten by the buffalo”

The Position of the Subject

- Many patterns show that **verb-initial clauses have subjects.**
1. Special marking: the subject **does** change the shape of the verb.
 2. Definiteness: the subject has to be definite; the object does not.
 3. **Coreference:** the subject can refer to things that the object cannot.
(Reinhart 1983; Chomsky 1986)

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 4. Variable binding: the subject has privilege for “semantic scope”
 5. **Extraction restrictions:** the subject can be repositioned; the object cannot.
- (Guilfoyle, Hung, & Travis 1992)

Part Four:

Conclusion

What we have learned

- Although early research claimed that subjects have these three properties:
 1. Special Position: the subject appears at the start of the sentence.
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 3. Passive: the object can be a “subject” if the agent is removed.
- Research on Indonesian languages **has helped us build a better theory.**

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- Although early research claimed that subjects have these three properties:
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 2. Special marking: the subject often determines the shape of the verb.
 3. Passive: the object can be a “subject” if the agent is removed.
- Research on Indonesian languages has helped us build a better theory.
 - The subject **does not need to determine the shape of the verb.**
 - The subject **can be an object even if the agent is not moved.**
 - The subject **does not have to be at the start of the sentence.**

What we have learned

- This work suggests that the notion of “subjecthood” must be decomposed:
 - Subjects **do not have the same properties** in every language.
 - But: **every language does have subjects**,
 - And: when a language does not show ONE property for subjecthood, it **shows other subject properties from the universal set.**

What we have learned

- Furthermore: **Indonesian languages play a key role in linguistic research.**

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- Furthermore: **Indonesian languages play a key role in linguistic research.**
 - The bloody debate over subjecthood **has been fought over Indonesian languages.**

(Keenan 1976; Durie 1987; Guilfoyle, Hung, & Travis 1992, Pearson 2005)
 - Modern theoretical work suggests that **this line of thought is on the right track.**

(Hsieh 2020; Brodkin 2021)

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