On the Definition of Subject: A perspective from Sulawesi

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Part One:
The notion of Subject
The Notion of Subject

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The Notion of Subject

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- **Basic Definition**: “a noun that refers to the agent of a sentence.”

(1) **John** wrote that book
(2) **John** menulis buku itu

**Subject**  **Verb**  **Object**
The Notion of Subject

- Linguistic research has always seen the notion of “subject” as important.
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  - First Discovered: Classical Philosophy (Aristotle, Plato)
  - Modern linguistics: Important Concept (Chomsky 1965)
The Notion of Subject

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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)
Why are subjects important?

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  - Languages might seem different on the surface,
  - But: they share a **single underlying abstract structure**.
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Why are subjects important?

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

```
Sentence
  Subject
    John
  Predicate
    Verb
      wrote
      menulis
    Object
      that book
      buku itu
```
Why are subjects important?

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

```
Sentence
  | Subject
  | John
  | Predicate
  | Verb
  | wrote
  | menulis
  | Object
  | that book
  | buku itu
```
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?
Why are subjects important?

- The goal of today’s talk:

  to show how Indonesian languages help us to understand “subjecthood”
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  to show how Indonesian languages help us to understand “subjecthood”

1. Research on Bahasa Indonesia
2. Research on the languages of Sulawesi
Part Two:
Subjects in an Indonesian Context
The Basic Facts

- Classical research has recognized that subjects have similar properties in languages that are spoken all over the world (Li & Thomson 1976)
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   (3) John wrote that book

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Subject
The Basic Facts

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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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(5) John writes books like that
(6) John and Mary write books like that

Subject marking
The Basic Facts

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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: the object can become a subject if the agent is moved.
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(3) John wrote that book
(7) That book was written by John

Subject passive verb Agent
Indonesian: A Theoretical Update

- This theory has been improved through research on Bahasa Indonesia.
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(Chung 1976; Guilfoyle, Hung, & Travis 1992; Cole & Hermon 2005)
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0. Special position: the subject does appear at the start of the sentence, but...
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0. **Special position:** the subject does appear at the start of the sentence, but…

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Subject
Indonesian: A Theoretical Update

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1. **Special marking:** the subject *does not always* change the shape of the verb.
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1. **Special marking:** the subject **does not always** change the shape of the verb.

   (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
Indonesian: A Theoretical Update

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1. Special marking: the subject does not always change the shape of the verb.
2. Passive: objects can become subjects even if the agent is not moved
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   a. Passive → agent at the end.
Indonesian: A Theoretical Update

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(2) That book was written by John
(8) Buku itu ditulis oleh John

Subject passive verb Agent
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1. Special marking: the subject **does not always** change the shape of the verb.
2. Passive: objects can become subjects **even if** the agent is not moved.
   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.
  3. Passive: objects can become subjects if the agent is moved.

- 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
The Basic Facts

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- These languages are very diverse, but they generally share one property:

  Verb-Initial Word Order

- Example: Bahasa Makassar

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

  (Jukes 2006)
The Basic Facts

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

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

(Jukes 2006)

?  ?  ?  ?
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

- **New Proposal:** verb-initial sentences do have the “universal” structure.

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

   (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)
The Position of the Subject

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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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   - (Reinhart 1983; Chomsky 1986)
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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.
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.
What we have learned

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  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 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

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  - 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)
References