

Questions in Syntactic Theory

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Background

I'm a graduate student and a linguist who studies **syntax**

(the abstract structure of human language).

The central questions of syntactic research:

- In different languages, how is sentence structure **different?**
- Across languages, how must sentence structure be **the same?**

Background

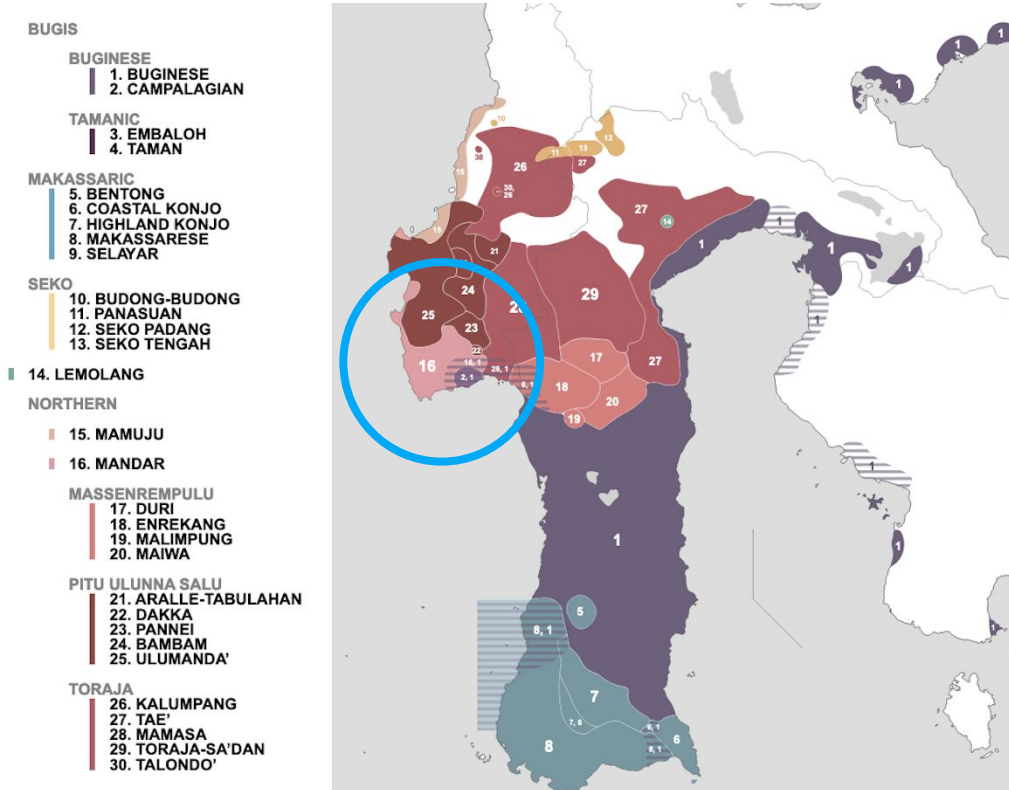
Since 2019, I have been doing research on **Bahasa Mandar**

(A regional language of West Sulawesi).

Bahasa Mandar is similar to the languages of South Sulawesi.
(Bugis, Makassar, Toraja...)

All of those languages form a small “language family.”
they all descend from a single older language, spoken by
the first people to migrate to Sulawesi, 3000 years ago.

Background



Our Focus

We'll look into **two syntactic systems in Mandar:**

- Subject-Verb Agreement
- Question Formation

We'll then study how those two systems interact.

- ... and connect our results to patterns in other languages,
- and ultimately build toward a theory of **Universal Grammar**.

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1.

Agreement

Subjects and Verbs

Sentences are traditionally divided into two parts:

(Aristotle, Greece, 350 BCE; also Noam Chomsky, 1965)

- (1) **Budi** **berangkat**
Subject **Verb**

Subjects and Verbs

In some languages, the shape of the **verb** is always the same, even when we change the **subject**:

- (2) **saya** berangkat
kamu berangkat
dia berangkat

Subjects and Verbs

But in other languages, the shape of the **verb** will change depending on the identity of the **subject**:

(3) Spanish:

| | |
|-----------|---------------|
| yo | fui |
| tu | fuiste |
| él | fue |

Subjects and Verbs

English used to be like this, too:

(4) Old English:

| | |
|----|--------|
| iċ | singe |
| þu | singst |
| hē | singþ |

Agreement

There is a special term for this kind of relationship between the nature of the **subject** and the shape of the **verb**:

(5) Agreement

- The **verb** “checks” the shape of the **subject**,
- ... and then the **verb** takes a specific ending.
- which “**agrees**” with the features of the **subject**.

Agreement

We can see how this works by going back to Old English:

| | | |
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We start by putting together the subject and the “basic” verb:

| | | | |
|-----|-----------|---|--------------|
| (6) | iċ | + | sing_ |
|-----|-----------|---|--------------|

Agreement


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(4) **iċ** **singe**
 pu **singst**
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We start by putting together the subject and the “basic” verb:

(6) **iċ** + **sing_**

... Then we check the subject and add the “matching” ending:

(7) **iċ** + **singe**


Bahasa Mandar

There's a very similar system in many languages of Sulawesi.
- The **verb** changes shape depending on the **subject**.

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mambaca a'
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Here are some examples from **Bahasa Mandar**:

(8) **mambaca** i **guru**
“Gurunya membaca”

mambaca a' **yau**
“Saya membaca”

mambaca o **i'o**
“Kamu membaca”

Bahasa Mandar

This is a pretty normal system of agreement:

(9) Summary:

| V | Agreement | S |
|----------------|-----------|---------------------|
| mambaca | a' | yau (aku) |
| mambaca | o | i'o (engkau) |
| mambaca | i | guru |

Bahasa Mandar

... and the system works in the same way.

We start by putting together the subject and the “basic” verb, and then we check the subject and add a “matching” ending:

(10) “Aku membaca”:

stage 1: **mambaca** _ + **yau**

stage 2: **mambaca a'** + **yau**



2.

Questions

Questions

Now let's look at a second syntactic phenomenon: **movement**.

All languages have “question words”:

- (11) Kamu lihat **siapa**?
Dia beli **apa**?
Harganya **berapa**?

Questions

In some languages, things are pretty normal in questions:

(12) Saya lihat **Budi** tadi.

Sek sek sek,
Kamu lihat **siapa** tadi?

Questions

But in other languages, question words have to “**move**”:

(13) I just saw **Budi**.

Wait, wait, wait-

(a) you saw **WHO?**

(b) **Who** did you see _____?



Summary

Here's a rough summary of different languages here:


| Question words are normal | Question words move to the front |
|-----------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------|
| “Kamu lihat siapa ?” | “ Who did you see ___?” |
| Indonesia Barat (Jawa, Sunda, Minangkabau, Bali) | Indonesia Timur (Bahasa daerah Sulawesi, NTB, NTT...) |
| Asia Timur (Cina, Jepang, Korea) | Eropa Barat (Inggris, Jerman, Spanyol) |
| Asia Tengah (Mongolia, Uzbek) | Timur Tengah (Ibrani, Arab, Mesir Kuno) |

Bahasa Mandar

And here's an example in bahasa Mandar:

(14) Mambaca i guru.
“Gurunya membaca”

Innai mambaca _____?
“Siapa membaca?”



Bahasa Mandar

In Bahasa Mandar, question words **always move to the front**.

(15) **Innai** mambaca ____?
“Siapa membaca?”

Pirang mambaca ____?
“Kapan membaca?”

*Mambaca **pirang?**
“Membaca kapan?”



3.

Anti-Agreement

Questions + Agreement

Something funny happens in questions in Bahasa Mandar:
the agreement with the subject goes away.

(14) Mambaca i guru.
“Gurunya membaca”

Innai mambaca ___?
“Siapa membaca?”

Questions + Agreement

This is part of a much larger pattern in Sulawesi:

Subject-verb agreement stops in questions.

This pattern occurs in all 34 languages of Sulsel + Sulbar.

e.g., Mamuju: Strømme 1994

Toraja: Sande et al 1996

Konjo: Friberg 1996

Selayarese: Finer 1997

Makassarese: Jukes 2006

Bugis: Laskowske 2016

Anti-Agreement

There's a special name for this kind of pattern:

(15) **The Anti-Agreement Effect.**

“Verbs usually show **agreement** with subjects,
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Mandar:

Mambaca **i** **guru**.

“Gurunya membaca”

Innai **mambaca** ?

“Siapa membaca?”

Anti-Agreement

This interaction happens in many places beyond Sulawesi.

(16) Agreement disappears in subject questions in...

- (a) Italian languages (Northern Italy)
- (b) Celtic languages (Ireland, Scotland, Wales)
- (c) Berber languages (Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia)
- (d) West African languages (Senegal, Gambia)
- (e) Tupian languages (Northern Brazil)

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4.

Summary

Two Systems

Today we have studied three basic effects:

1. Some languages show **agreement between the subject + verb.**
2. Some languages require **question words to move to the front.**
3. In some languages,
Subject-verb agreement disappears
when question-words move to the front.

Two Systems

The goal of theoretical linguistics: **to ask WHY.**

1. Why do some languages show subject-verb **agreement**?
Why do other languages avoid that system?
2. Why do some languages make **question words move to the front**?
Why do other languages avoid that?
3. ... and why in the world, in some languages,
should subject-verb agreement disappear
when question-words move to the front?

The future

There's a rich and exciting field that studies these questions.

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In the languages where question words move to the front:

1. There are deep and consistent differences between
 - (a) questions about subjects (“**who** left?”)
 - (b) questions about non-subjects (“**what** did you see ?”)

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1. There are deep and consistent differences between
 - (a) questions about subjects (“**who** left?”)
 - (b) questions about non-subjects (“**what** did you see ?”)
2. Questions about subjects, in an abstract way, often seem to be “missing pieces of grammatical structure.”

→ the disappearance of agreement in some languages = part of this

The future

It's **extremely important** to study the languages of Indonesia.

- More than 700 native languages
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You guys can all make big contributions to linguistics!

- The best possible thing: for Indonesian scholars to study them.
- Everyone can make a difference!



6.

Acknowledgments

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