

Indonesian Clause Structure from a Comparative Austronesian Perspective

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Indonesian is widely recognized to be an SVO language. In this respect, it differs from many other Western Malayo-Polynesian languages, as well as from languages at the geographical peripheries of the Austronesian-speaking area (e.g. most Formosan and Polynesian languages). This talk attempts to understand Indonesian clause structure from a comparative Austronesian perspective. Specifically, I ask whether Indonesian's SVO clauses might be derived from an SVO structure by VP raising (as suggested by e.g. Masmam, Pearson, Rackowski and Travis, and Aldridge for different verb-initial Austronesian languages), followed by raising of the subject to a topic position. Such a derivation would assimilate Indonesian's clause structure to the clause structure of its verb-initial relatives within the Austronesian family; on this view, SVO clauses would simply involve VP raising plus 'something more'. I present evidence that argues that Indonesian does not, after all, have VP raising in SVO clauses. However, the facts are more equivocal with respect to the issue of whether the subject of these clauses occupies an A' position. The evidence leads me to suggest that the SVO clauses of contemporary spoken Indonesian probably involve no more raising of maximal projections than occurs in e.g. English. But previous versions of Malay/Indonesian—perhaps preserved in the varieties described in prescriptive grammars—might well have involved one or both of the raisings just described. Given that proto-Austronesian is believed to have been a verb-initial language, the speculation suggests one route by which Indonesian's SVO order might have arisen historically.