

Between Scylla and Carybdis: Stress and Circumfixation in Indonesia

This paper examines the relationship between circumfixation and intonation contours in Indonesian. Circumfixation has often been accepted as a unitary morphological process by Austronesianists, given its frequent occurrence and productivity in many Austronesian languages—though to my knowledge this has never been firmly demonstrated. Other scholars, however, have debated whether circumfixation represents a unitary morphological process as opposed to simultaneous prefixation and suffixation. Here, I adduce prosodic, morphological, and semantic evidence demonstrating clearly that circumfixation is an independent phenomenon, at least in Indonesian (and related languages)¹.

Further, I explore the repercussions of circumfixation, particularly the prosodic evidence, for analyses of Indonesian stress. There has been a good deal of recent work on stress patterns in Indonesian (Cohn, Halle & Idsardi, McCarthy). These scholars have all proposed various analyses of word level stress in Indonesian. Other scholars have argued that Indonesian in fact has no fixed word level stress (Gil, Tadmor p.c.) I present original data here from several Javanese speakers of Indonesian. A clear pattern of neutral, word level, prosodic contours, emerges. I shall not directly address whether this is genuine word level stress, or some other, higher level prosodic event, though my feeling is that it is the latter. For simplicity, I use the word ‘stress’ with this larger understanding.

For Javanese speakers of Indonesian, stress generally falls on the penultimate syllable (as it does in Javanese as well²). Prefixes are not part of the stressed foot. Suffixation causes the underlying prosodic domain to be reanalyzed, with the suffix included in the resulting foot. So, in a disyllabic root, the penult will be stressed: *tú.a* ‘old’. When a suffix is added, the stress falls on the new penult: *tu.á-an* ‘older’. Further suffixation shows the same pattern (ignoring here secondary stress): *tu.a-án-nya* ‘the older one’. However, a distinct pattern emerges when the root undergoes circumfixation: *ke-tú.a-an* ‘too old’, where the stress falls on the antepenult and not the penult as expected. Suffixation of an already circumfixed root, returns to the penultimate pattern: *ke-tu.a-án-nya* ‘it’s too old’.

This is the strongest independent evidence for circumfixation as a unitary morphological process. It is also a major problem for each of the previous analyses of stress in Indonesian, as none have noted the distinct patterns that emerge with circumfixation. I offer several suggestions here (both for Cohn’s constraint based and Halle & Idsardi’s templatic approach) which would reconcile these analyses with this new data.

¹ I remain agnostic on whether the frequently debated German and French cases of *parasyntesis* should also be considered genuine circumfixation.

² The pattern is clearly influenced by Javanese. However, circumfixation in Javanese and Indonesian crucially differ in that in Javanese a sequence of vowels undergoes sandhi, resulting in a single segment, whereas in Indonesian no such coalescence takes place.