ON THE QUESTIONS OF ACEHNESE 'PASSIVE'

JOHN M. LAWLER

University of Michigan

The paper of Durie 1988 raises interesting and useful questions about some work I did twelve years ago. Before I consider the substantive issues involved, however, some background is in order about the genesis of that work and the questions it raised.

In 1975 I wrote two papers on the language I called 'Achenese'. As I noted (1977:220, fn. 4), the language was also known (in English) as 'Acehnese', in Indonesian as 'Bahasa Aceh', and in the close phonemic orthography which I adopted in that paper (based on the Montasiek dialect) as 'Bat$^\theta$a Aceh'. In 1979, an official modification of the orthography was adopted at Syiah Kuala University; in this system, the name of the language is 'Basa Aceh'. Additionally, 'Acehnese' has now been accepted as the proper English spelling for what I will here call, simply, 'Ac'.

My two papers were published in different venues. The longer paper, written first, described Ac agreement as a problem for R[elational] G[rammar]; it was published as a chapter in a book in 1977. But the paper which was written second, proposing a functionally-based explanation of Ac agreement, had already appeared in 1975. Thus a most infelicitous reversal occurred: the bibliographic citations of the papers do not reflect the order in which they were written (and were intended to be read).

In 1974–75 I was teaching a field methods course at the University of Michigan, with Ac as the language under investigation. I had mentioned to Paul Postal, who was at that time beginning to develop the theory of RG, that agreement phenomena in the Ac construction traditionally called 'Passive' seemed to pose some problems for his conception of Passive—then, as now, a central idea in RG. In return, Postal suggested I document the details. The result was my paper published in 1977, in which I attempted to state what I had been able to find out about Ac agreement in a grammatical framework consistent with the 1975 state of RG. That theory was derivational in nature; but unlike 1975 varieties of most other theories derived from Transformational-Generative roots, it posited the Grammatical Relations of Subject, Direct Object, and Indirect Object as universal primitive categories. Thus it REQUIRED that Ac (like all human languages) must have a category Subject; and it also posited a derivational apparatus for sentence generation, which licensed the use of time-metaphor terms like 'final' and 'initial' to refer to stages of derivations and their constituents. Hence 'initial subject' and 'final subject' are distinguished in this theory. This particular variety of RG theory is no longer viable, and in fact had been abandoned by Postal and others by the time my paper saw print in 1977.

I argued in that paper that, in an RG account of Ac, there had to be a Subject which agreed with the Verb, since Ac has a morphological system of what Durie 1985 calls 'argument clitics' ('agreement prefixes' in my paper); in 1975,

RG allowed no other possibilities. Further, the Ac 'Passive' construction matched the criteria for a cyclic derivational Passive rule in that theory. Finally, the fact that the agreement on the verb was the same for corresponding Ac 'Active' and 'Passive' sentences (respectively, the 'initial' and 'final' stages of a 'Passive' derivation) posed a problem for anyone attempting to describe it in this theory, requiring one or more of the following conclusions:

(a) Ac grammar does not use the category 'Subject'.

(b) The Ac 'Passive' construction is not a Passive (within the 1975 RG understanding of the term).

(c) The Ac 'Agreement' phenomena do not constitute Subject-Verb Agreement (in that same understanding).

(d) The 1975 RG treatment of Subject-Verb Agreement needed to be revised to allow agreement with non-terms in the 'final' stage of a derivation, provided they were terms 'initially'.

My own preference was to accept conclusion (a). In Austronesian languages generally, and in Ac specifically, the RG notion of Subject seems to me to be far less useful as a descriptive grammatical term than it ought to be. Accepting (a) solves the problem, though it is incompatible with universal claims of RG. As I suggested (1977:246),

> 'Much of the problem with agreement in RG is derived from a strict adherence to discrete categories like "term", "subject", "agreement", etc. It seems much more likely that such notions are not discrete at all, but consist of clusters of properties shared to greater or lesser degree among the NP's in an S; Austronesian languages are well-known to exploit some of the latitude inherent in this schema.'

There is thus a specific question raised here:

(1) Is 'Subject' a necessary category for describing Ac?

There is also a general one:

(2) Is 'Subject' a necessary category for describing all human languages?

These lead to a metalinguistic one:

(3) What is meant by 'Subject'—and, by extension, any term depending on it, like 'Passive'?

RG theories postulate affirmative answers to 1–2, and provide axiomatic definitions as answers for 3. Unsurprisingly, (a) is not an acceptable conclusion in any RG framework: its acceptance provides a direct negative answer to 1, gives a negative answer by counterexample to 2, and renders moot the usual RG answers to 3.

The account of this construction in Durie 1988 adopts a different strategy. He proposes that conclusion (b) above is in fact correct—that the Ac construction which I called 'Passive' is in fact NOT Passive. I find this somewhat surprising, since the derivational theory against which I was arguing in Lawler 1977 has not been accepted by RG theorists for over a decade. It is surely unusual to appeal to such preliminary understandings of what 'Passive' means—especially in view of the possibility that it means nothing at all in this context, since it depends on 'Subject' for its epistemological existence.

Nevertheless, D has plenty of data and good arguments, and his account (based as it is on extensive field work and careful analysis) deserves to be taken seriously. I certainly have no objection to his conclusion about Ac 'Passive'; I had already rejected the concept in principle in my papers by rejecting the universal validity of the 'Subject'—on which the notion of 'Passive' depends—with Ac as a specific example. I probably erred in not putting SUBJECT and PASSIVE in scare quotes throughout the papers; my only defense is that these are traditional terms in Indonesian linguistics, and convenient for use in descriptions. Further, scare quotes wear quickly, as I am afraid I demonstrate here. This may have led to unfortunate conclusions being drawn by those who have read my papers for their data rather than their theoretical arguments (which are probably only of historical interest by now).

That said, I must take issue with several points raised by Durie. First and most important, accepting his analysis as it stands leads one back full-circle to the problem of Ac agreement. One of the most prominent features of Ac grammar is its system of agreement markers, and some definitive account of this is clearly necessary. D's account leaves this open again: if Ac has no Passive (or 'Passive'), then what DOES the verb agree with? D uses the term 'transitive subject' without identifying what species he intends, qualifying it as 'a convenient descriptive term for this surface grammatical relation' (note 12). I agree it is convenient, but how is it determined?

Second, I am in principle suspicious of any argument that attributes a linguistic phenomenon to word-order variation. This is, essentially, an argument from ignorance. Word order varies, but never freely—certainly not in Ac (though D is correct that it has much more latitude in this respect than I originally suggested). The reasons for such variation are rarely explainable in strict grammatical terms, but this does not mean that word-order variation can be invoked freely as an explanation for the existence of a construction; and Ac clearly does have a distinct construction type corresponding to what I called 'Passive'. The question of the provenance and function of that construction remains.

Finally, while D's analysis does constitute a proof by construction that it is possible to provide an account of Ac grammar without requiring 'Passive', it is very far from proving that no satisfactory account using 'Passive' CAN be provided. It argues well against an obsolete syntactic derivational approach; but, necessarily, it says little or nothing about the function of the constructions which it discusses, since it is limited to considerations of syntactic phenomena. This objection would be a mere quibble (proofs of linguistic non-existence being rare and notoriously unreliable) if it were not for the existence of the recent dissertation grammar of Asyik 1987 (hereafter A).

D's dissertation grammar of Ac (1985) was the first thorough modern grammar of the language; A's is the second, and the first ever written by a native speaker. As the title suggests, it is intended to provide a CONTEXTUAL sentence grammar of Ac. A's method throughout is to provide descriptions of construction types as used by native speakers, in context, with annotation of their

pragmatic and semantic significance and of the implications of their variations—including word-order variation.

A's grammatical framework is quite traditional, and employs the terms 'Subject' as well as 'Passive' in describing Ac sentence constructions. In this he differs strongly from D's preference (and my own) for avoiding these terms as syntactically inappropriate for Ac. Nevertheless, A makes a most convincing case that these terms ARE appropriate for a grammar that deals with more than the purely syntactic phenomena of a language.

We thus have two different answers to question 1 above, each appropriate to a different kind of description. D provides a good description that does not use the category 'Subject', demonstrating that it is not strictly necessary; A provides a good description that does use the category, demonstrating that it can be useful. Ac can be analysed productively from both viewpoints, it would seem. In a mere dozen years, Ac has gone from being one of the least described to one of the best described of Indonesian languages, and that is surely a marvelous development.

Given this descriptive richesse, we are left with a final question: If Ac can be adequately described either with or without reference to grammatical relational categories like 'Subject', what conclusions can be drawn for linguistic theory? One possible answer is that such metalinguistic questions bear not on what is necessary or possible in linguistic description, but rather on what is useful. If a linguist can successfully employ a theory or a term in a communicative fashion (or refrain from employing them) to describe linguistic phenomena, so much the better. It seems unlikely that we have yet arrived at a necessary and sufficient set of descriptive terms for all human languages.

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