Unergatives in Malay inside-verbals

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The puzzle. Malay (Austronesian) has an expletive subject (Expl), =*nya*, first noted by Sommerlot (2018). Constructions with this Expl mark theticity: they can answer 'What happened?' but not 'What did (subject) do?' (cf. Sasse 1987; Lambrecht 1987). These thetic constructions pattern like English presentationals in having Expl's associate sometimes in situ, and sometimes right-dislocated (what Milsark (1974) calls 'inside verbals' and 'outside verbals' respectively). Like English, Malay uses right-dislocation of the external argument (EA) in the case of transitives:

(1)   *Makan=nya ais krim laki tu.*
        eat=nya   ice cream man that
        'That man ate some ice cream.'

But while English only allows unaccusatives in inside-verbals, Malay allows both unaccusatives and unergatives (the evidence being that PPs follow rather than preceding the argument).

(2)   *Sampai=nya Nuha ke kota.*   (3)   *Jerit=nya Nuha kepada anak=nya.*
        arrive=nya N.   to city.   shout=nya N.   to   child=POSS
        'Nuha arrived to the city.'   'Nuha shouted at her child.'

The research context. Recent work on English Expl has accounted for the English facts by base-generating expletive *there* not in Spec-T, but rather in Spec-*v* (Richards & Biberauer 2005; Richards 2007; Deal 2009; Bjorkman & Cowper 2015). Focusing just on inside-verbals, this explains *there*'s co-occurrence with unaccusatives but not transitives/unergatives as involving competition for Spec-*v* between Expl and EAs. V2 languages like Icelandic allow transitive expletive constructions because they generate Expl in Spec-C rather than Spec-*v*. Naturally, this theorizing predicts that no language should allow inside-verbals with unergatives but not transitives. And yet, this is precisely what is found in Malay.

Unergatives with unaccusative syntax. I propose the difference between Malay and English arises from Malay's ability to treat unergatives as having unaccusative syntax. That is, Malay can base-generate the argument of unergatives in Compl-V. This explains why inside-verbal unergatives' argument appears *after* the verb (see (3)) without needing to stipulate that the verb moves higher than its normal Voice/*v* position. This hypothesis predicts that under Expl, an unergative's argument can only receive a non-agentive ϑ-role. Preliminary results show this is the case.

First note that English has been argued to show a 'deagentivisation' effect in locative-inversion:

(4)   Across the bridge (slowly) walked five bearded men (*slowly). (cf. Nishihara 1999:395)

In (4), the leftward *slowly* is interpretable as an event adverb, while the rightward *slowly* can only be interpreted as a manner adverb (Travis 1988). This means that the latter requires an agentive argument (hence why it is barred) while the former does not (the slowness could have arisen from e.g. walking against a crowd) and, thus, is allowed. Crucially, the same contrast appears in Malay. In the thetic (6), Ali could not have intentionally yelled loudly (in contrast to the non-thetic (5)).

(5)   *Ali jerit (ngan kuat) kepada polis (ngan kuat).*
        A. yell (with loud) to   police (with loud)
        'Ali (loudly) yelled to the police (loudly).'

(6)   *Jerit=nya (ngan kuat) Ali kepada polis (*ngan kuat).*

The rightward *ngan kuat* is barred in thetic (6) because it can only be a manner adverb, incompatible with the deagentivisation effect stemming from the argument's generation in Compl-V.

Summary and significance. The Malay data provide evidence that there are languages where unergatives can be treated as unaccusative in a 'spontaneous' fashion (contra Levin & Rappaport Hovav 1995). This explains why Malay allows unergatives in its inside-verbals. Clearly this is a point of crosslinguistic variation, since English bars this.

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