

***Vulnerable Agents***  
***The Ethnopragmatic Construction of Toraja Practical Philosophy***

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Abstract

By looking at naturalistic language use, this paper shows how speakers of Toraja -an Austronesian (Western Malayo-Polynesian) language of Indonesia- select between different grammatical voice forms during the course of political interaction. It is argued that aside from being determined by the semantic transitivity of the clause or by the assignment of pragmatic salience to certain nominals, voice selection is also associated to the performance of certain speech acts. Integrating linguistic and ethnographic analysis, the paper also discusses how speakers' use of actor and patient voice forms is linked to the reproduction of a culturally specific structure of agency, in which vulnerability plays an important role.

One of the properties that distinguish human beings from other species is our unique capacity to engage in a reflexive understanding of our actions.

During the unfolding of our everyday lives, with different degrees of awareness and elaboration, we are engaged in performing actions, evaluating their potential results, enjoying or regretting the actual outcomes of our (or other people's) deeds, assuming or disclaiming responsibility for the acts we actually perform or imagine to perform, assigning to ourselves and to others intentions for specific undertakings, debating whether we should act in a certain way or another.

Several contemporary philosophical traditions have discussed human agency. Action theorists highlighted the central role played by intentions in differentiating actions from events. Following a somewhat different notion of intentionality (which is not understood as a "doing something on purpose", but rather as 'aboutness', that is, as "the property of an entity of being directed-toward or being about something" –Husserl 1931: 223), German and French Phenomenologists thematized the primacy of acts over objects and reformulated the question of being as a question about the experiential, existential, and perceptual accessibility of things.

Language constitutes an important medium for the cognitive and pragmatic articulation of human "embeddedness" in intentional action. Linguistics has greatly contributed to the theoretical understanding of the intersection between language and action, as shown by a vast literature on the semantics of agency (Fillmore 1968, Jackendoff 1972, 1990, Klaiman 1991, Hopper and Thompson 1980, among the others). The analysis of the different semantic and morpho-syntactic resources available to speakers of historical-natural languages for expressing and performing actions can indeed shed light on culturally different *modi agendi*. However, the kind of explorations into "folk theories of action" (Jackendoff 2007) developed by scholars of logic, semantics, and cognitive philosophy has

mostly provided mentalist accounts in which priority is given to people's truth judgments<sup>1</sup>, rather than to the analysis of actual and situated interaction.

In this talk my aim will be to approach the relevance of language for the understanding of the structure of action and responsibility through the different route provided by anthropology and ethno-pragmatics.

One of the main goals of anthropology is to empirically describe how people live and make sense of their lives in different socio-cultural contexts. All human beings are born, live and die, but how people across different societies deal with birth, death, love, as well as with other ordinary or special moments in their life cycles? Anthropologists have developed a special technique (called ethnography), which entails observing people's practices and directly participating in their everyday interactional lives in order to achieve an understanding of both universal and culturally specific ways of being in the world.

Drawing on a corpus of naturalistic language data, video and audio recorded during political rallies, village councils, and family disputes in which I participated during my fieldwork (2002-2004) in Toraja (upland Sulawesi, Indonesia), I will analyze speakers' deployment of grammar within interaction and their usage of specific morpho-syntactic constructions to perform "speech acts" (Austin 1962) such as blaming, praising, exhorting.

Toraja (a.k.a. Toraja Tae', South Toraja, or Toraja Sa'dan, ISO language code "sda") is a Western Malayo-Polynesian, Austronesian language spoken in the highlands of the Southwestern peninsula of Sulawesi by approximately 500 000 people mostly concentrated in the *Kabupaten Tana Toraja* (Tana Toraja Regency) and by over one million of Toraja who, despite having migrated to other parts of the archipelago in search of a job, tend to maintain a strong sense of membership in the Toraja ethnic community.

Like the other languages of the South Sulawesi (SSul) family, Toraja possesses four sets of pronominals (see chart below for Toraja and Kaufman n.d. for the most comprehensive overview to date of SSul pronominal clitic syntax) and is characterized by a type of voice system in which morphological alterations on the verb result in two main voices types: An actor voice (AV) marked by the prefix uN- and by the optional presence of a 3 person enclitic cross-referencing O and a patient voice (PV) characterized by the presence of proclitic pronoun hosted by the verb and indicating person and number of the actor and sometimes an enclitic cross-referencing the patient<sup>2</sup> (see chart 2 for a synopsis of Toraja main verbal clause structures).

Writers who discussed verb morphology and voice selection in SSul languages (Friberg 1988 and 1996; Jukes 2006; Kaufman in prep.; Lee 2006; Stromme 1994; Valkama K. 1995; Valkama, S. 1995) generally agree in characterizing PV as unmarked and most frequently used and AV as rare and marked. They also tend to correlate the distribution of voice forms with the degree of discourse/semantic transitivity of the clause. Drawing on the classic definition of semantic transitivity provided by Hopper and Thompson (1980), these studies have generally argued that PV "correlates with high discourse transitivity, tending to occur in clauses which are realis, perfective, punctual, and/or main" (Wouk 1999: 103), while AV has been labelled "extended intransitive" (Lee 2006) or "semi-transitive" (Friberg 1991) to indicate its association with low discourse transitivity and its occurrence with indeterminate objects and/or in "clauses that are irrealis, imperfective, durative, and/or

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<sup>1</sup> In his recent Harvard lecture <http://blip.tv/file/509192>, for example, Jackendoff criticizes semanticists who are only interested in understanding how language work and "don't care about people". One of the primary contentions of the conceptual approach he advocates is that "sentences wouldn't exist if there weren't people to use them. (...) *So we have to think about how sentences work in people's heads. How sentences are judged true*" (my emphasis).

<sup>2</sup> The presence of these two main voice types should not lead us to consider Toraja a "symmetrical voice language" (Himmelman 2005). Indeed, Toraja looks more like a case of what Himmelman (2005) has termed "transitional languages" between two main typological categories: symmetrical voice mostly located in the western part of Indonesian archipelago and preposed possessor languages, in eastern Indonesia.

subordinate” (ibidem).

However, both my own data and the data discussed in the literature on closely related languages indicate some sort of “leakage” -to revoke Edward Sapir’s famous motto (1921: 38)- in the capacity of the transitivity parameters to determine (and/or predict) voice selection in Toraja. AV sometimes appears with definite and referential patients or in perfective and punctual clauses, while PV occurs with an indefinite or non-individuated O. This paper would then like to suggest that ethnography could help us enrich the analysis of voice selection in spontaneous language use.

Wittgenstein’s work on language games and Speech Act theorists’ ideas on the illocutionary and perlocutionary force of utterances have shown that language is not only a semiotic resource through which we produce representations of actions and events, but it is also a form of action, a “tool for doing” (Sbisa’ 1997: 4). By analyzing the micro-interactional processes through which speakers use different grammatical constructions to represent their faculty to act, I have three main aims:

1) To demonstrate that choice of grammatical voice is also motivated by orators’ attempts to mitigate (PV) or emphasize (AV) the assignment of agency and responsibility (to themselves and to others) for certain states of affairs.

2) To suggest that the mismatch between allocation of agency and mitigation of transitivity (or valency reduction) realized by Toraja AV constructions challenges the implicit equivalence between agency and transitivity (understood as a transfer of activity or as a causative relation between the agent and the patient) that seems to tacitly inform the general understanding of agency by philosophers and social theorists.

3) To show how actual language usage is an important locus for the construction of Toraja political *ethos*<sup>3</sup> and every-day practical philosophy. This line of analysis will aim at showing how the pragmatics of grammatical voice is connected with the local aesthetics of persuasion and partakes in the cultural reproduction of local notions of vulnerability and desire (*kamamaliran*), spiritual potency (*sumangga*<sup>1</sup>), and alertness (*mangilala*).

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<sup>3</sup> The term “ethos” is widely used by anthropologists to refer to a cultural style that pervades different aspects of life within a society. We owe the introduction of this term within the anthropological vocabulary to the work of Gregory Bateson (1936), who defined it as “the emotional tone” of a culture (p.2), “a certain systematic aspect (...) [that can be defined] as the expression of a culturally standardised system of organization of the instincts and emotions of the individuals” (p. 118). “When a group of young intellectual English men or women are talking and joking together wittily and with a touch of light cynicism, there is established among them for the time being a definite tone for appropriate behaviour. Such specific tones of behaviours are in all cases indicative of an ethos”.

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**CHART 1. TORAJA PRONOMINAL SETS**

	<b>Set 1</b> Proclitics  <i>ERGATIVE</i> Generally marking <b>A role</b>	<b>Set 2</b> Enclitics  <i>ABSOLUTIVE</i> Generally marking <b>S and O roles</b> <sup>4</sup>	<b>Set 3</b> Free  Used for contrastive emphasis	<b>Set 4</b> Genitive
1s	ku=	=na'	aku	=ku
1pl incl.	ta=	=ki'	kita	=ta
1pl excl.	ki=	=kan/=kanni	kami	=ki
2s	mu=  mi= (honor.) ta= (honor.)	=ko  =mi (honor.)	iko  kamu (honor.) kita (honor.)	=mu  =mi (honor.) =ta (honor.)
2pl	mi= ki= (honor.)	=kommi/=komu	kamu kita (honor.)	=mi =ta (honor.)
3	na=	=i (or zero)  NB =i ≠ from -i Locative suffix	ia	=na

<sup>4</sup> Where S stands for the single core argument of an intransitive clause, A for the more actor-like core argument of a transitive clause, and O for the more undergoer-like argument of a transitive clause.

**CHART. 2 TORAJA VERBAL CLAUSE STRUCTURES<sup>5</sup>**

<b>INTR</b>	<b>PV</b> Basic transitive clause Unmarked	<b>AV</b> Marked Used with definite and indefinite objects	<b>Antipassive</b> Rare With indefinite objects and occasional object incorporation	<b>Passive</b> Always Agentless
(NP <sup>S</sup> ) + Ma'/Ø + Verb + ABS Enclitic <sup>S</sup>	(NP <sup>O</sup> ) ERG proclitic <sup>A</sup> + Verb + Ø/ABS Enclitic <sup>O</sup> + (NP <sup>A</sup> )	NP <sup>A</sup> + uN-+ Verb + Ø/ABS Enclitic <sup>O</sup> or -i (Object indexing suffix) + NP <sup>O</sup>	uN-+ Verb+ ABS Enclitic <sup>A</sup>	NP <sup>O</sup> + di-+ Verb
Ma'-lingka=i INTR-Walk=3 He walks  Ma'-taku'=na' INTR-Walk=1.s I am scared  Male-na' Ø-Go=1.s I go  Kumande=na' Eat=1.s eat	Ku=kambei=-ko 1.s=beat=2.s I beat you  Ku=kande tu pao=mu 1.s=eat= Ø DEF mango-2.s I eat your mango  pao na=kande tato' mango 3=eat Tato'  pia'pia' na=pakande indo' Kid-RDP 3=CAUS-eat mother The mother feeds the kids	Pak lurah un-jama-i te sura' Mr Mayor uN-work-3 DEF letter The mayor compiles the document	Un-n-ala=na' pare uN-LK-take=1.s rice  daomai alang from ricebarn  I take the rice from the rice-barn  Un-ng-kande=na' pao uN-LK-eat=1.s mango  I eat mango	Pia' di-dio' dio bubun Kid PAS-bathe in Spring

<sup>5</sup> Elicited data