

**A SYNTACTIC ANALYSIS OF PASSIVE CONSTRUCTIONS IN AMANUBAN
DIALECT OF UAB METO (DAWAN) IN OE'O VILLAGE, OENINO SUBDISTRICT,
TIMOR TENGAH SELATAN DISTRICT**

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Abstract

This study provides a syntactic analysis of passive constructions in the Amanuban dialect of Uab Meto, an Austronesian language spoken in East Nusa Tenggara, Indonesia. Using a qualitative descriptive method, data were collected from four native speakers through elicitation tasks involving active–passive pair transformations. The analysis reveals that passive voice in Amanuban Uab Meto is encoded exclusively through word-order rearrangement without any morphological marking on the verb. Active clauses follow an SVO order, while passive clauses exhibit a rigid S (patient) – O (agent) – V pattern. The agent is syntactically obligatory, and tense/aspect features are hosted on the agent phrase rather than on the verb. Ditransitive constructions allow promotion of the direct object to subject. These findings indicate that the passive in this dialect is a purely syntactic phenomenon driven by constituent reordering. The study contributes to the typology of voice systems in Austronesian languages and provides documentation of an underdescribed dialect.

Keywords: passive voice, Uab Meto, Amanuban dialect, syntactic typology, word order

INTRODUCTION

Voice is a grammatical category that reflects the relationship between the semantic roles of arguments and their syntactic positions (Kroeger, 2005). In many languages, the active-passive alternation involves a change in grammatical relations: the active subject (agent) is demoted to an oblique or omitted, while the active object (patient) is promoted to subject. Cross-linguistically, passive constructions are marked through various formal means, including verbal morphology (e.g., Indonesian *di-*), periphrastic structures (e.g., English *be + past participle*), or syntactic reordering (e.g., certain Austronesian and Papuan languages).

Uab Meto (also known as Dawan) is a Malayo-Polynesian language spoken by the Atoen Meto people in Timor, East Nusa Tenggara. It exhibits significant dialectal variation. The Amanuban dialect, spoken in the southern part of Timor Tengah Selatan, has been noted to possess a passive construction that deviates from the canonical SVO word order. Preliminary observation suggests that the passive is not marked morphologically but rather through a systematic rearrangement of constituents. This phenomenon is of theoretical interest because it challenges the

assumption that passive voice necessarily involves verbal morphology and provides data for the typology of voice systems.

This study aims to provide a detailed syntactic description of passive constructions in the Amanuban dialect, focusing on the structural properties, constituent order, and the syntactic behavior of arguments. The central research question is: What are the syntactic characteristics of passive voice in the Amanuban dialect of Uab Meto?

RESEACRH METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative approach with a descriptive syntactic design. Data were collected from four native speakers of the Amanuban dialect who were born in Neke Village (Oenino Subdistrict) and used the dialect as their primary language. The primary data collection technique was a translation elicitation task. The researcher provided a set of active sentences in Bahasa Indonesia and requested informants to produce both the active and passive equivalents in the Amanuban dialect. A total of 25 active-passive pairs were collected, covering monotransitive and ditransitive constructions, various tense-aspect configurations, and negation.

Data were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using constituent analysis, focusing on the linear order of major syntactic constituents (subject, verb, object), the morphological form of the verb across active-passive pairs, and the syntactic status of the agent phrase.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

RESULT

This study presents a syntactic analysis of passive constructions in the Amanuban dialect of Uab Meto (also known as Dawan), as spoken by the community in Oe'o Village, Oenino Subdistrict, Timor Tengah Selatan District. Uab Meto is an Austronesian language spoken primarily in West Timor, Indonesia, and across the border in Timor-Leste. The Amanuban dialect is one of the major varieties of this language, yet its syntactic structures particularly passive constructions remain largely under-documented in the linguistic literature. This research aims to fill that gap by providing a systematic description of the morphosyntactic properties of passives in this under-described variety. Data were collected through fieldwork with native speakers in Oe'o Village, utilizing elicitation techniques based on natural discourse and controlled sentence prompts. The analysis focuses on several key syntactic features: basic word order in active clauses, passive clause structure, morphological (in)variance of the verb, the (obligatory or optional) status of the agent phrase, tense-aspect marking patterns, and passive formation in ditransitive constructions.

The findings reveal that the Amanuban dialect employs a typologically rare passive system characterized by a strict SOV word order (contrasting with active SVO), complete absence of

passive morphology on the verb, an obligatory agent phrase, tense-aspect marking on the agent phrase rather than the verb, and asymmetric promotion in ditransitives where only the theme can become subject.

The following sections present the results of the analysis, followed by a detailed discussion of each syntactic property and its theoretical implications.

The analysis revealed several key syntactic properties of passive constructions in the Amanuban dialect of Uab Meto (also known as Dawan), as spoken by the community in Oe'o Village, Oenino Subdistrict, Timor Tengah Selatan District

1. Analysis of Word Order Variation (SVO in Active vs. SOV in Passive)

The shift from SVO to SOV in passive clauses is syntactically significant. In configurational terms, this suggests that the passive construction in Amanuban involves leftward movement of the object (patient) to a pre-subject position, possibly a topic or focus projection (TopP or FocP), while the verb remains in its base position or raises only to a lower head. The clause-final position of the verb indicates that Amanuban may have a head-final VP in passive clauses, unlike in active clauses where the verb precedes the object.

Analytical implication: This word order alternation is not merely stylistic but encodes a grammatical voice distinction. The SOV order is a reliable diagnostic for passive voice, even in the absence of passive morphology. From a typological perspective, this is unusual because most SVO languages that mark passive do so via verb morphology (e.g., English -en, Swahili -w-) without altering basic word order. *Amanuban* dialect thus belongs to a rare type: an SVO language that uses OV order as the sole exponent of passive.

2. Analysis of Morphological Invariance

The lack of any verbal morphology to mark passive voice raises the question: How does a listener distinguish a passive clause from an active clause when both contain an agent and a patient? The answer lies in word order alone. In an active clause, the agent precedes the verb and the patient follows it (SVO). In a passive clause, the patient precedes the agent, and the verb appears clause-finally (SOV). Therefore, the passive is a purely configurational construction.

Analytical implication: This finding challenges the principle of morphological visibility in some syntactic theories (e.g., Distributed Morphology), which assumes that grammatical features like [passive] must be realized on the verb. In *Amanuban* dialect, the feature [passive] is instead realized at the clausal level through linear ordering constraints. This suggests that parametric variation includes not only the presence/absence of morphology but also the locus of feature expression (verb vs. word order).

3. Analysis of the Obligatory Agent Phrase

The ungrammaticality of agentless passives is a striking deviation from canonical passives (e.g., English *The house was built*). Several analyses are possible:

- Analysis A (No Agent Suppression): *Amanuban* dialect lacks a syntactic operation that suppresses the external argument. The agent must always be projected and phonetically realized.
- Analysis B (Oblique Status): The agent phrase is not a true oblique but a required adjunct. Its omission violates a discourse constraint requiring semantic agents to be expressed.
- Analysis C (Not a True Passive): The construction is better analyzed as a topicalized patient construction with no detransitivization. In this view, the clause remains transitive, but the patient is fronted for discourse prominence.

Analytical implication: If Analysis C is correct, then what we call "passive" in *Amanuban* dialect is actually a pragmatic voice rather than a syntactic detransitivization. This aligns with the observation that many Austronesian languages (e.g., Tagalog, Malagasy) have voice systems that do not fit the Indo-European passive prototype. *Amanuban* dialect may represent a simplified or reduced version of such a system.

4. Analysis of Tense-Aspect Marking on the Agent Phrase

The fact that TAM distinctions are not marked on the verb but on the agent phrase or preverbal elements suggests that the verb in *Amanuban* dialect is bare and non-inflecting. The agent phrase thus functions as a clausal predicate in some sense, carrying inflectional features. This is typologically reminiscent of ****nominal tense**** systems found in some Papuan and Amazonian languages, where tense is marked on nouns or noun phrases rather than verbs.

Analytical implication: From a Minimalist perspective, the inflectional features [Tense] and [Aspect] are associated with the agent phrase, which may occupy Spec,TP or adjoin to T'. The verb remains in VP and does not raise to T. This would mean that *Amanuban* has a split inflectional system: person/number (agent) and TAM are bundled together, while the verb is purely lexical. Further research should test whether the agent phrase bears subject agreement morphology, which could support a pronominal argument analysis.

5. Analysis of Ditransitive Passives

In ditransitive constructions, only the theme (direct object) can be promoted to subject. The recipient (indirect object) remains oblique, marked by *neu* 'to'. This pattern follows the primary

object typology: the language treats the theme as the more patient-like argument, eligible for passivization, while the recipient is treated as an oblique adjunct.

Analytical implication: The inability to promote the indirect object to subject distinguishes Amanuban dialect from languages like English, where both *A book was given to her* (theme promotion) and *She was given a book* (recipient promotion) are possible. This suggests that Amanuban has a strict asymmetric passive system where only the direct object can become the subject. This may correlate with the absence of dative shift or applicative morphology in the language.

6. Alternative Analysis: Is This a Passive or an Antipassive?

One could argue that the *Amanuban* dialect construction is not a true passive but an antipassive a valency-reducing construction that promotes the agent to subject and demotes the patient to an oblique. However, in canonical antipassives (e.g., in ergative languages), the patient becomes oblique, whereas in *Amanuban* dialect the patient becomes subject. Therefore, this analysis is unlikely. A more plausible alternative is that *Amanuban* dialect has a symmetric voice system similar to Philippine-type languages, where both agent-voice and patient-voice exist without valency change. In this view, the patient-voice (our "passive") is not derived from an active counterpart but is a basic clause type. The obligatory agent phrase is required because the patient-voice clause remains fully transitive.

The additional analysis presented above demonstrates that each syntactic property of the Amanuban dialect passive construction carries significant theoretical weight. The absence of passive morphology, the obligatory agent phrase, the SOV word order, the TAM marking on the agent, and the restricted promotion in ditransitives collectively suggest that Amanuban employs a word-order-driven voice system that is typologically rare. Future research should investigate whether similar patterns exist in neighboring Timor languages (e.g., Dawan, Tetun, Kemak) to determine whether this is an areal feature or a unique innovation within the *Amanuban* dialect.

DISCUSSION

The analysis of passive constructions in the *Amanuban* dialect reveals several typologically significant features that warrant deeper discussion. These findings not only contribute to the documentation of this under-described Austronesian language but also raise questions about the relationship between word order, morphological marking, and syntactic obligatoriness.

1. Word Order Shift and Typological Implications

The observed shift from canonical SVO in active clauses to S-O-V in passive clauses is notable. While many Austronesian languages, such as Indonesian and Tagalog, exhibit flexible word order or voice alternations that retain SVO, Amanuban appears to employ a more rigid syntactic reordering. The resulting S-O-V order in passives aligns with the typological observation that OV order often correlates with accusative alignment and morphological ergativity in some western Austronesian languages, though Amanuban lacks ergative morphology. This suggests that word order alone encodes grammatical relations in passive constructions, a relatively rare strategy among SVO languages, which typically promote the patient to preverbal subject position without moving the verb to the end. The clause-final positioning of the verb in passives mirrors patterns found in some SOV languages, hinting at possible historical contact or internal drift.

2. Morphological Invariance: A Deviation from Canonical Passives

One of the most striking findings is the morphological invariance of the verb between active and passive clauses. In many well-known languages (e.g., English, Latin, Japanese), passivization involves overt verbal morphology such as affixes, auxiliaries, or stem changes. The *Amanuban* dialect, however, employs no such marking; the verb stem remains unchanged. This challenges the common assumption that passive constructions are universally marked on the verb. Instead, *Amanuban* relies purely on word order and the obligatory presence of the agent phrase to signal passive voice. This suggests that passive in *Amanuban* is a syntactic rather than a morphological phenomenon, which is typologically rare but not unattested (e.g., in some dialects of colloquial Arabic or in certain Chinese varieties).

3. Obligatory Agent Phrase: A Counter-Typological Feature

Perhaps the most theoretically significant finding is the obligatory nature of the agent phrase. In standard passive typology (e.g., Keenan & Dryer, 2007), passives are defined by the optionality or demotion of the agent, allowing agentless passives. *Amanuban* ungrammatically rejects passives without an explicit agent. This suggests that what appears to be a passive may, in fact, be a type of agent-focused topicalization or an inverse construction rather than a canonical passive. Alternatively, it could be a preservation of a proto-Austronesian voice system where a "patient voice" still requires an overt agent as an oblique. Further research should explore whether the "agent phrase" behaves syntactically as an oblique or as a core argument.

4. Tense-Aspect Encoding on the Agent Phrase

The finding that tense and aspect distinctions are encoded on the agent phrase or on preverbal elements is highly unusual. In most languages, TAM is marked on the verb or via auxiliaries. In *Amanuban*, however, the verb remains invariant, and elements such as *au* (I) in example *Oe klases au he' iun* carry future meaning. This suggests that the agent phrase (or a preverbal particle associated with it) has absorbed temporal and aspectual functions. This could reflect a historical reanalysis where former auxiliaries fused with pronouns or agent markers. It also raises the question of whether the agent phrase in passives behaves more like a clausal modifier than a true argument.

5. Ditransitive Passives and Oblique Retention

The data on ditransitive passives show that the direct object (theme) is promoted to subject, while the indirect object (recipient) surfaces as an oblique marked by the preposition *neu* 'to'. This pattern is consistent with the general cross-linguistic tendency: in passives of ditransitives, the theme is the preferred promoted argument, and the recipient must be encoded as an oblique. Importantly, this supports the syntactic analysis that the theme is the primary object in active clauses. The retention of the recipient as an oblique parallels patterns in English (A book was given to her) and further strengthens the analysis of *Amanuban* as a language with a symmetrical but syntactically constrained voice system.

6. Implications for Language Typology and Documentation

From a descriptive perspective, the *Amanuban* dialect presents a unique passive system that blends SVO word order with SOV passive syntax, lacks verbal morphology, demands an overt agent, and encodes TAM on the agent phrase. These features are sufficiently uncommon to warrant careful re-examination of the definition of "passive" in Austronesian linguistics. Future research should investigate: (i) whether the "agent phrase" is indeed an oblique or a subject, (ii) whether the construction is truly a passive or an inverse/antipassive, and (iii) how these structures vary across other dialects of *Uab Meto*.

7. Syntactic Status of the "Subject" in Passive Clauses

A crucial analytical question arises regarding the grammatical status of the clause-initial patient. Although we have labeled it the "subject" based on its position, standard subjecthood tests (e.g., control into adjunct clauses, relativization, reflexivization) should be applied. Preliminary observation suggests that the clause-initial patient in *Amanuban* passives cannot control a missing subject in a subsequent clause, unlike canonical subjects in active clauses. For example, in *Ume sin nafen e*, the patient *ume* 'house' does not serve as the controller of an imperative or a purposive clause. This indicates that the clause-initial patient may be a topic

rather than a true grammatical subject. If this holds, then *Amanuban* passives are more accurately described as topic-prominent constructions where the patient is pragmatically foregrounded but syntactically retains object properties. This would align the dialect with other western Austronesian languages that exhibit discourse-configurational syntax.

8. Comparison with Malay/Indonesian Passive Systems

A comparison with Standard Indonesian (SI) is instructive. SI employs two passive types: di-passives (with optional agent) and ter-passives (stative/accidental). Neither pattern matches *Amanuban*. In SI, the passive verb bears a prefix (di-), the agent can be omitted, and the verb does not move clause-finally. *Amanuban* lacks all these features. However, *Amanuban* does resemble Colloquial Indonesian used in East Nusa Tenggara, where agent-verb-object order occurs in some contact varieties. This suggests possible areal diffusion: the *Amanuban* passive may have emerged through contact with Malay-based trade languages, combined with retention of Proto-Meto word order patterns. A diachronic study comparing *Amanuban* with neighboring dialects (e.g., *Molo*, *Miomaffo*) could reveal whether the passive system is innovative or conservative.

9. The Passive as a Pragmatic Detransitivization Strategy

Functionally, the *Amanuban* passive serves not only to promote the patient but also to detransitivize the clause without reducing valency—since the agent remains obligatory. This is paradoxical from a typological perspective: canonical passives reduce valency by omitting or demoting the agent. In *Amanuban*, the agent is syntactically obligatory but may be pragmatically backgrounded via its post-verbal position. Thus, the passive primarily serves a discourse-pragmatic function: it places the patient in topic position (clause-initial) and demotes the agent to a later, less prominent position. The obligatory presence of the agent suggests that *Amanuban* lacks a syntactic mechanism for agent deletion, unlike English or Indonesian. This may be due to a prohibition against null pronouns in oblique positions—a parametric property of the language.

10. Theoretical Implications for Universal Grammar

From a generative perspective (Chomsky's Principles and Parameters framework), the *Amanuban* passive raises challenges for the standard analysis of passive as involving (a) suppression of the external argument and (b) absorption of accusative Case. In *Amanuban*, the external argument (agent) is not suppressed—it remains overt and obligatory. Moreover, the verb does not acquire passive morphology. One could analyze the construction as a VP-internal

subject structure: the patient raises to Spec,TP for EPP purposes, while the agent remains in its base position (Spec,vP) and receives partitive or inherent Case. The clause-final verb suggests that the language may have head-final properties in passive clauses only, indicating that word order is not a basic parameter but a construction-specific reflex of information structure. This would require a cartographic approach where different projections (Topic P, Focus P) dominate TP in passives but not in actives.

CONCLUSION

In summary, the Amanuban passive construction challenges several universal tendencies in passive typology and underscores the importance of detailed documentation of lesser-known Austronesian varieties. The additional analyses presented here—concerning subject criteria, comparative data with Indonesian, pragmatic functions, and theoretical implications for Universal Grammar—reveal that the dialect occupies a unique syntactic space. Further fieldwork may reveal even more divergence from canonical passive patterns, particularly regarding the interaction of passives with negation, questions, and embedding clauses. A corpus-based study of spontaneous speech would also help determine whether agentless passives occur in discourse even if judged ungrammatical in elicitation.

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