

Bornean passives in comparative perspective

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Abstract This paper investigates three types of passives in Lebo' Vo', an endangered Kenyah language of northern Borneo (Austronesian), and discusses their implications for linguistic theory and syntactic typology. Passives in Lebo' Vo' involve a preverbal analytic marker, with an agent expressed optionally in immediately preverbal or postverbal position. Echoing differences between passives with and without agents in Mandarin Chinese (Huang 1999, a.o.), these different passive types differ in their ability to form long-distance passives. We argue that these three passive types differ in terms of their probing and nominal (Case) licensing specifications.

Keywords passivization, non-canonical passives, locality, anti-locality, composite probing, A- versus \bar{A} -movement, Lebo' Vo', Kenyah, Borneo

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1 Introduction

Western Austronesian languages are well-known for their so-called “symmetrical voice” systems, where active voice alternates with one or more non-active voices, which appear to be equally morphosyntactically marked (Himmelmann 2002, Foley 2008, a.o.).¹ However, there are also other types of Austronesian languages with voice profiles that are decidedly non-symmetric. For example, many languages of central Borneo exhibit a two-way active/passive alternation where the passive is asymmetrically marked.²

Consider the active/passive voice alternation in Lebo’ Vo’, an endangered Kenyah language spoken in Long San, Sarawak, Malaysia.³ The basic, active word order with a transitive verb is SVO, with the verb appearing in a morphologically unmarked form; see (1). In contrast, passives are marked with the preverbal analytic marker *ən*; see (2).

¹ “Symmetry” is used a bit loosely in this literature. It may refer to “none of the basic voices being unambiguously derived from the other” (Donohue 2002: 86 note 9) or active and non-active voices not varying in transitivity (as in Ross 2002b: p. 24, attributed to Kroeger 1993: pp. 40–48), or to the relative symmetry in the word orders of different voices. See also discussion in Ross 2002a: pp. 457–458 and Riesberg 2014: pp. 1–2.

² The precise geographic distribution of the grammar type we describe here is not yet certain. Many languages of Sabah in northern Borneo exhibit grammars that may be described as “Philippine-type” or close derivatives thereof. Grammars with a two-way voice alternation with marked passive appear to be common for languages south of that northernmost region, thereby constituting a dominant pattern across Borneo. See for example the descriptions in Clayre 1996, 2014, Soriente 2010, 2013, Smith, Erlewine & Sommerlot 2024, Sommerlot to appear, and [various in preparation].

³ The term “Kenyah” refers to a linguistic-cultural group of people who self-identify as Kenyah. Linguistically, Kenyah is heterogeneous. Speakers of other Kenyah varieties, such as Lepo’ Tau, Badeng, and others, typically cannot understand Lebo’ Vo’. As such, the linguistic description of Lebo’ Vo’ presented here cannot be taken to extend to other Kenyah languages. In particular, Lebo’ Vo’ exhibits signs of sustained contact with nearby Kayan languages, which also exhibit analytic passive markers similar to *ən* in form: see Smith, Erlewine & Sommerlot 2024 for discussion. Other Kenyah languages have different passive marker forms: see Soriente 2013 and also elicitation data in Blust 1994.

(1) **Baseline SVO active clause in Lebo' Vo':**⁴

Kule nəvəŋ kayu bioʔ ini.
Kule cut.down tree big DEM
'Kule cut down the big tree.'

(2) **Three *ən* passives in Lebo' Vo': agentless, preverbal agent, and postverbal agent**

kayu bioʔ ini ən (Kule) nəvəŋ (Kule) ____ .
tree big DEM PASS Kule cut.down Kule
'The big tree was cut down (by Kule).'

The passive example in (2) reflects the existence of three different subtypes of passives: with the agent left implicit and unspecified, or appearing between the passive marker *ən* and the verb (“PASS agent V”) or immediately following the verb (“PASS V agent”). From the perspective of Austronesian syntactic typology, the postverbal agent position is unsurprising. In Malay/Indonesian, varieties of which constitute the *linguae francae* of Borneo (also SVO, but with active and passive both morphologically marked), agents appear optionally in postverbal position for the canonical (*di-*) passive (see e.g. Arka & Manning 1998). Non-subject agents are also generally in postverbal position in the historically more conservative languages of the Philippines as well, which are predicate-initial.

In contrast, the passive with a preverbal agent with “PASS agent V” word order bears a striking resemblance to well-studied passives of Chinese languages (Huang 1999, a.o.); see (3) below. Passives with “PASS (agent) V” word order are also attested in various highly analytic languages of Mainland Southeast Asia; see for example Creswell & Snyder 2000 on Hmong, Kim 2014 on Khmer, Prasithratsint 2003 and Sudmuk 2003 on Thai, and Simpson & Ho 2008, 2013, and Bruening & Tran 2015 on Vietnamese, as well as Prasithratsint 2004 for related discussion.

⁴ Following practices in the Austronesianist literature, our examples use a broad IPA transcription, with the exception that <y> represents the glide [j].

(3) **Two *bèi* passives in Mandarin Chinese:**

(Huang 1999: p. 425)

Zhāng Sān bèi (Lǐ Sì) dǎ-le ____.
Zhang San PASS Li Si hit-PFV
'Zhang San was hit (by Li Si).'

In this chapter, we offer a first description and analysis of these *ən* passives in Lebo' Vo', based on our original elicitation work on the language. In particular, echoing the well-known asymmetries between Mandarin Chinese *bèi* passives with and without agents (see e.g. Huang 1999), we will show that Lebo' Vo' *ən* passives with agents involve \bar{A} -movement and can target embedded clause arguments, whereas agent-less *ən* passives cannot be similarly long-distance. Interestingly, *ən* passives with preverbal agents versus postverbal agents differ further, with the latter instantiating what Branagan & Erlewine (2024) call " \bar{A} -probing for the closest DP." We propose that these types of passives and their locality profiles can be productively described based on a restricted inventory of verbal functional heads and independently-motivated assumptions regarding the behavior of probing operations.

2 Lebo' Vo' passivization in the typology of movement types

2.1 Passivization and the A/\bar{A} -distinction

The notion of passivization is traditionally associated with two properties: promotion of a theme to subject position, together with demotion/suppression of the agent, which corresponds to the active subject.⁵ In the generative tradition (following e.g. Chomsky 1981, 1995, Jaeggli 1986,

⁵ In this paragraph and the next, "agent" can be understood as extending to external arguments and "theme" to internal arguments, more generally.

Baker, Johnson & Roberts 1989), these two properties are causally linked, based on the idea that movement to subject position (here, Spec,TP) targets the closest nominal and assigns it nominative case, thereby (Case) licensing it.

We first briefly summarize this traditional logic of subject movement and passivization. All arguments are base-generated within the predicative domain (see e.g. Kitagawa 1986, Kuroda 1988, Guilfoyle, Hung & Travis 1992, Huang 1993) and, in particular, agents are generated higher than themes (see e.g. Baker 1988). Attraction of the closest nominal by T will therefore target the agent in the basic case, making it the active subject. For the theme of a transitive verb to be attracted by T, the agent must somehow be skipped. Suppressing the projection of the agent is the most straightforward solution (although see also Collins 2005) for making the theme the closest nominal target for movement to subject position. In both actives and passives, subject movement attracts the closest nominal to a (Case) licensed position, thereby constituting the prototypical example of A-movement.

Here we take a moment to comment on the notion of “A-movement,” which stands in opposition to “ \bar{A} -movement.” The former is represented by movement to subject position, with the traditional view of passivization above falling under this umbrella. The latter is exemplified by processes such as *wh*-movement and relativization. For the purposes of this paper, we will treat the A- versus \bar{A} -distinction as a theoretical primitive. We will further assume the following common — although not uncontroversial — assumptions regarding these two classes of movements:

(4) **Assumed properties of A- versus \bar{A} -movement:**

α -movement triggered by head H...

	$\alpha = A$	$\alpha = \bar{A}$	
a. must target the closest nominal	yes	no	
b. targets Case-licensed nominals	no	yes	
c. can Case-license its goal	yes	no	
d. reconstructs for binding	no	yes	
e. can target the specifier of H's sister	yes	no	(see Erlewine 2016 a.o.)

See also Safir 2019: pp. 287–289 for a recent and succinct summary of the distinct properties associated with A- versus \bar{A} -movement and some related intellectual history. Concretely, the correlated properties of targeting the closest nominal and feeding Case-licensing (4a,b) are what identifies passivization as described above an example of A-movement. The last two properties in (4d,e) will play important roles in our investigation and proposal below.

Subsequent cross-linguistic work has shown that not all passives fit this traditional description. In particular, the study of the Mandarin Chinese *bèi* passive highlighted the possibility of passives *without* agent demotion. For instance, Huang (1999) shows that the subject-oriented long-distance reflexive *zìjǐ* may be bound by the passive subject or its optional agent, suggesting that the passive agent is not only still an argument but in fact retains its subject status. See (5).

(5) **No agent demotion in the Mandarin *bèi* passive:** (Huang 1999: p. 431)

Zhāng Sān_i bèi Lǐ Sì_j guān zài zìjǐ_{i/j}-de jiā-lǐ.
 Zhang San PASS Li Si lock at self-POSS home-inside
 ‘Zhang San_i was locked by Li Si_j in self_{i/j}’s home.’

This and other evidence suggests that the optional agent of a Mandarin *bèi* passive is not an oblique or prepositional argument which might potentially be skipped for A-movement. The

agent (*Li Si*) intervenes between the passive subject (*Zhang San*) and the corresponding theme gap of ‘lock.’

In fact, Huang (1974) observes (see Huang 1999: 439 note 10) that *bèi* passives with agents can target arguments of embedded non-finite clauses for promotion to subject, crossing multiple intervening nominals and verbs in a potentially unbounded fashion; see (6). Note that we give periphrastic translations for long-distance passives, which do not have direct equivalents in English.

(6) **Mandarin *bèi* passives with agents can be long-distance:**

(Huang 1999: p. 440, Huang, Li & Li 2009: p. 132)

- a. Zhāng Sān bèi *(Lǐ Sì) pài jǐngchá zhuāzǒu-le ____ .
 Zhang San PASS Li Si send police arrest-PFV
 ≈ ‘Zhang San_x was: Li Si sent police to arrest him_x.’
- b. Nà-fēng xìn bèi *(wǒ) jiào Lǐ Sì qǐng Wáng Wǔ tuō tā mèimei
 that-CL letter PASS 1sg tell Li Si ask Wang Wu entrust 3sg sister
 jìzǒu-le ____ .
 send-PFV
 ≈ ‘That letter_x was: I told Li Si to ask Wang Wu to trust his sister to send it_x.’

At the same time, as we see in (6), *bèi* passives without agents cannot target embedded clause arguments.⁶ Such facts have led scholars to the conclusion that Mandarin *bèi* passives with and without agents differ substantially in their syntax.⁷ More specifically, Mandarin *bèi* passives with agents have been claimed to exhibit a mix of A- and \bar{A} -behaviors; see Chen 2022, 2023 for recent overviews. One influential line of work thus proposes that a null operator \bar{A} -moves inside the *bèi* structure but that the passive subject itself is generated higher in an A-position (Feng

⁶ Long-distance passivization of arguments of embedded *finite* clauses reflects a slightly different pattern, as we show in (10) below.

Simpson & Ho (2008: p. 829, 2013: p. 161) report that Vietnamese *bị* passives can also target embedded clause arguments if and only if the passive agent is expressed, but see also discussion in Bruening & Tran 2015.

1990, Ting 1998, Huang 1999, 2013, Huang, Li & Li 2009), echoing the Chomsky 1981 analysis of English *tough*-constructions. In contrast, agent-less *bèi* passives involve only A-movement and/or a control dependency, necessarily targeting the closest nominal argument position, without any \bar{A} -movement steps.

The study of such passives without agent demotion challenges our overall understanding of the notional category of passive constructions. In particular, they motivate the idea that passivization may involve A- or \bar{A} -dependencies, or a combination thereof, in part correlating with the presence or absence of an agent. These ideas inform our own study of Lebo' Vo' passives.

2.2 *Long-distance passivization in Lebo' Vo'*

With this background in place, we turn now to take a closer look at passivization in Lebo' Vo'. Recall that the basic word order in Lebo' Vo' is S(Aux)VO, as exemplified in (1) above. There are no morphological case distinctions on core arguments.⁸

Our empirical focus here is on the possibility of *long-distance passives*, where passivization targets an argument of an embedded clause for promotion to the subject position. For concreteness, our examples here will all involve the embedding verb *njio?* 'think.' There is no overt complementizer for these embedded clauses.

⁷ Many works in the literature on (Chinese) passives refer to passives with and without agents as “long passives” and “short passives,” respectively. We avoid these terms here, as we will frequently refer to passives that target embedded clause arguments as “long-distance.”

⁸ A distinct, genitive pronominal set exists for possessors. The third-singular animate pronoun *yi* may optionally appear in its genitive form *ni* when used as a preverbal passive agent, which may suggest a vestigial case distinction (reflecting the genitive case on non-subject agents in Philippine-type languages) but may also invite alternative descriptions. See [Borneo book paper] for data and discussion.

(7) **Baseline with embedded clause under *ɲio?* ‘think’:**

pulis ɲio? [Kule nəkaw yap ni] .
 police think Kule steal chicken DEM
 ‘The police think that Kule stole the chicken.’

We first consider the case of passivization targeting the embedded clause subject (*Kule*) for promotion to matrix subject position. Passivization of this form is grammatical if there is an agent (italicized in (8a,b)), but is ungrammatical without an agent (8c). Here we give periphrastic translations, reflecting the nature of these embedded clauses as corresponding to finite clauses in English.⁹

(8) **Passive of embedded subject:**

- a. Kule ən *pulis* ɲio? [___ nəkaw yap ni] .
 Kule PASS police think steal chicken DEM
 ≈ ‘Kule_x is: the police think that he_x stole the chicken.’ preverbal
- b. Kule ən ɲio? *pulis* [___ nəkaw yap ni] .
 Kule PASS think police steal chicken DEM
 ≈ ‘Kule_x is: the police think that he_x stole the chicken.’ postverbal
- c. * Kule ən ɲio? [___ nəkaw yap ni] .
 Kule PASS think steal chicken DEM
 ≈ ‘Kule_x is thought that he_x stole the chicken.’ agentless

The unavailability of agentless passivization of the embedded clause subject in example (8c) itself supports the view that these embedded clauses are finite. Suppose hypothetically that *ɲio?* ‘think’ could take an ECM/raising-to-object complement, where the notional embedded subject receives accusative case from *ɲio?*. In that case, we would expect the agentless passivization as in (8c) to be grammatical, parallel to the English ECM passive *Kule is thought to have stolen the*

⁹ Semantically, the embedded descriptions of stealing and matrix descriptions of thinking in these examples clearly refer to temporally independent events, which support this view. However, beyond this, we note that we do not yet know whether finiteness is a relevant categorial distinction among embedded clauses in Lebo’ Vo’. A full investigation of the size and structure of embedded clauses in Lebo’ Vo’ is left for future work.

chicken. The ungrammaticality of example (8c) constitutes an argument against this possibility. We therefore instead pursue the view that these embedded clauses are consistently finite, and that such clauses are opaque for agentless passivization but accessible for passivization with agents.

Next, we consider passivization targeting the embedded clause object (*yap ni* ‘the chicken’). Here we see a split between the two passives with agents: passivization of the embedded object is possible with a preverbal agent passive (9a) but impossible with a postverbal agent passive (9b) or agent-less passive (9c).

(9) **Passive of embedded object:**

- a. yap ni ən pulis ŋioʔ [Kule nekau ___] .
 chicken DEM PASS police think Kule steal
 ≈ ‘The chicken_x is: the police think that Kule stole it_x.’ preverbal

- b. * yap ni ən ŋioʔ pulis [Kule nekau ___] .
 chicken DEM PASS think police Kule steal
 ≈ ‘The chicken_x is: the police think that Kule stole it_x.’ postverbal

- c. * yap ni ən ŋioʔ [Kule nekau ___] .
 chicken DEM PASS think Kule steal
 ≈ ‘The chicken_x is thought, that Kule stole it_x.’ agentless

In summary, we observe that the three different types of *ən* passives in Lebo’ Vo’ — with preverbal agent, postverbal agent, or no agent — exhibit a three-way distinction in terms of the range of arguments that they can target for passivization. Preverbal agent passives are the most flexible in being able to target embedded clause subjects or objects, skipping intervening nominals. Postverbal agent passives can form long-distance passives but only targeting embedded subjects. Finally, agentless passives can only form local passives.

As an aside, we note that the Lebo’ Vo’ pattern of long-distance passivization with postverbal agents — able to target an embedded finite clause’s subject (8b) but not its object (9b) — echoes what is possible with Mandarin *bèi* passives with embedded finite clauses. Consider

the asymmetry between the agentless *bèi* passives in (10a,b) below. Chen (2022: p. 57, 2023: pp. 80–84) reports the same contrast between targeting subjects and objects of embedded finite clauses with *bèi* passives with agents.

(10) **Mandarin *bèi* passives can target finite embedded subjects but not objects:**

(Huang 2022: p. 41)

- a. Tā bèi bàoliào [___ céngjīng jià-gěi Lǐ Sì].
 3sg PASS break.news before marry-to Li Si
 ≈ ‘She_x was alleged [by explosive news], that she_x was married to Li Si before.’
- b. *Tā bèi bàoliào [Lǐ Sì céngjīng qǔ-guò ___].
 3sg PASS break.news Li Si before marry-EXP
 ≈ ‘She_x was alleged [by explosive news], that Li Si was married to her_x before.’

Huang (2022) furthermore reports that it is possible to first passivize the theme of *qǔ* ‘marry’ as in (10b) within the embedded clause, feeding matrix passivization that targets the finite embedded clause’s subject position; see (11).

(11) **Embedded *bèi* passive feeding higher passive in Mandarin:** (Huang 2022: p. 42)

- Tā bèi bàoliào [___ céngjīng bèi Lǐ Sì qǔ-guò ___].
 3sg PASS break.news before PASS Li Si marry-EXP
 ≈ ‘She_x was alleged [by explosive news], that she_x was ‘married by Li Si’ before.’

Interestingly, embedded passives feeding higher passivization is also possible in Lebo’ Vo’. The subject of the finite complement of *ŋio?* ‘think’ — derived by embedded passivization — can be targeted by preverbal and postverbal agent passivization in the matrix clause, as in (12a,b), but not by higher agentless passivization in (12c). This contrast is predicted by our description above, that agentless passives cannot target arguments of finite embedded clauses.

(12) **Embedded passive feeding matrix passives in Lebo' Vo':**

- a. yap ni ən pulis ŋioʔ [___ ən Kule nekau ___] .
 chicken DEM PASS police think PASS Kule steal
 ≈ 'The chicken_x is: the police thinks that it_x was stolen by Kule.' preverbal
- b. yap ni ən ŋioʔ pulis [___ ən Kule nekau ___] .
 chicken DEM PASS think police PASS Kule steal
 ≈ 'The chicken_x is: the police thinks that it_x was stolen by Kule.' postverbal
- c. *yap ni ən ŋioʔ [___ ən Kule nekau ___] .
 chicken DEM PASS think PASS Kule steal
 ≈ 'The chicken_x is thought, that it_x was stolen by Kule.' agentless

The ability of postverbal agent passives in Lebo' Vo' to target a finite embedded clause's subject (8b) but not its object (9b), unless via independent passivization in the embedded clause as in (12b), thus directly parallels the behavior of Mandarin *bèi* passives with finite embedded clauses as in (10–11). We however caution that Lebo' Vo' *ən* passives also differ from Mandarin *bèi* passives in important ways, such as in their binding behaviors, which we introduce in the following section (see note 10). We will therefore concentrate on the Lebo' Vo' facts and their analysis, leaving the further exploration of these parallels between Lebo' Vo' and Mandarin for future work.

2.3 \bar{A} -properties of Lebo' Vo' passives with agents

The possibility of long-distance passivization suggests that at least some varieties of Lebo' Vo' passives involve \bar{A} -dependencies. We investigate this possibility by testing the effects of passivization on nominal coreference restrictions (Condition C), a classic A- vs \bar{A} -movement diagnostic. The results here suggest that both preverbal and postverbal agent passives involve a form of \bar{A} -movement.

We begin by establishing a baseline for restrictions on nominal coreference in Lebo' Vo'.

Example (13a) shows that the R-expression *Kule* cannot be bound by a coreferential pronoun, thereby forcing an interpretation where the subject pronoun *yɪ* is disjoint with *Kule*. This reflects the restriction on coreference known as Condition C. In another configuration, where the R-expression is not bound by the pronoun, the two can corefer or be disjoint, as in (13b).

(13) **Condition C baselines:**

- | | |
|---|--|
| <p>a. <i>yɪ_{i/*j}</i> makan [<i>asu Kule_j</i>] .
 3sg feed dog Kule
 ‘He/she_{i/*j} feeds <i>Kule_j</i>’s dog.’</p> | <p>b. [<i>asu Kule_j</i>] <i>ɲasay yɪ_{i/j}</i> .
 dog Kule bite 3sg
 ‘<i>Kule_j</i>’s dog bites him/her_{i/j}.’</p> |
|---|--|

We now consider passive clauses formed based on the sentence in example (13a). In both the preverbal agent passive in (14a) and the postverbal agent passive in (14b), the agent pronoun *yɪ* cannot refer to *Kule*, just as in the source sentence (13a). These passives notably do not pattern with the active sentence in (13b) where *asu Kule* ‘*Kule*’s dog’ precedes and is structurally superior to the pronoun *yɪ*; instead, their interpretation is restricted as though the subject is interpreted in their hypothesized base positions, indicated by gaps. Long-distance passives also exhibit the same pattern of behavior; see (15).

(14) **Local passive reconstructs for Condition C:**

- | | |
|--|---|
| <p>a. [<i>asu Kule_j</i>] <i>ən yɪ_{i/*j}</i> makan __ .
 dog Kule PASS 3sg feed
 ‘<i>Kule_j</i>’s dog was fed by him/her_{i/*j}.’</p> | <p>b. [<i>asu Kule_j</i>] <i>ən</i> makan <i>yɪ_{i/*j}</i> __ .
 dog Kule PASS feed 3sg
 ‘<i>Kule_j</i>’s dog was fed by him/her_{i/*j}.’</p> |
|--|---|

(15) **Long-distance passive reconstructs for Condition C:**

- | |
|--|
| <p>a. [<i>asu Kule_j</i>] <i>ən yɪ_{i/*j}</i> <i>ɲio?</i> [___ <i>saket</i>] .
 dog Kule PASS 3sg think sick
 ≈ ‘<i>Kule_j</i>’s dog_x is thought, by him/her_{i/*j}, that it_x is sick.’</p> |
| <p>b. [<i>asu Kule_j</i>] <i>ən pulis</i> <i>ɲio?</i> [<i>yɪ_{i/*j}</i> makan ___] .
 dog Kule PASS police think 3sg feed
 ≈ ‘<i>Kule_j</i>’s dog_x is thought, by the police, that he/she_{i/*j} fed it_x.’</p> |

We conclude that passive subjects exhibit “reconstruction” for Condition C, interpreted as if they are in their gap positions, which is a characteristic \bar{A} -movement behavior. We also note that we would not expect this behavior if passive subjects in Lebo’ Vo’ were base-generated high, binding a null operator, as per the analysis of Mandarin *bèi* passives with agents in Feng 1990, Ting 1998, Huang 1999, 2013, Huang, Li & Li 2009.¹⁰

As another example of typical \bar{A} -movement properties, we demonstrate the sensitivity of long-distance passives to syntactic islands. We test this using preverbal agent passives, as preverbal agent passives are the most permissive in the range of embedded clause positions they can target, as shown in the preceding section. In both (16) and (17) below, the (b) example is an attempted long-distance passive, targeting an argument inside the relative clause as in the baseline sentence in (a). The ungrammaticality of the (b) examples demonstrates the island-sensitivity of long-distance passivization, strengthening the view that movement is involved, rather than another type of long-distance dependency such as binding.

(16) **From a subject-pivot relative clause:**

- a. pulis ləpəh nakəp laki [RC yaʔ ___rel nəkaw alot ni] .
 police ASP catch man REL steal boat DEM
 ‘The police caught the man that stole the boat.’
- b. *alot itu ən pulis nakəp laki [RC yaʔ ___rel nəkaw ___pass] .
 boat DEM police ASP catch man REL steal
 ≈ ‘This boat_x is: the police caught the man that stole it_x.’

¹⁰ Indeed, Mandarin *bèi* passives do not exhibit reconstruction for Condition C, allowing for coreference between *Zhang San* and the pronoun in (i):

(i) [Zhāng Sān_j -de péngyǒu] bèi tā_{ij} pīpíng-le ____ .
 Zhang San POSS friend PASS 3sg criticize-PFV
 ‘Zhang San_i’s friend was criticized by him_{ij}.’ (Chen 2022: p. 47)

This is compatible with the null operator analysis, as well as with an approach that treats the final step of movement in *bèi* passives as an A-step as in Chen 2022, 2023. See also Liu & Huang 2016: 391 note 3 on this alternative.

(17) **From an object-pivot relative clause:**

- a. akeʔ bəli boop [_{RC} yaʔ Aping jurat ____{rel}] .
 1sg buy book REL Aping write
 ‘I bought the book that Aping wrote.’
- b. * laki itu ən pulis jupaʔ alot [_{RC} yaʔ ____{pass} nəkaw ____{rel}] .
 man DEM PASS police find boat REL steal
 ≈ ‘This man_x is: the police found the boat that he_x stole.’

2.4 Summary

Lebo’ Vo’ *ən* passives come in three types, with an immediately preverbal agent, immediately postverbal agent, or no agent. Our original data collection on this language, guided by previous work on non-canonical passive constructions in languages of Asia such as Mandarin Chinese, shows that these three passive types in Lebo’ Vo’ differ in their syntactic behavior beyond just the obvious differences in agent appearance and position. In particular, we observe that passives with agents are able to form long-distance passives that target embedded clause arguments, unlike agentless passives, thus echoing the well-known contrast between passives with similar word orders with and without agents in Mandarin (and Vietnamese; see note 6).

We propose to analyze this first-order difference between passives with and without agents as reflecting a difference in the variety of movement involved. Passives with agents involve \bar{A} -movement, which can target Case-licensed argument positions within embedded finite clauses. The idea that passivization with agents in Lebo’ Vo’ involves \bar{A} -movement is supported by the Condition C reconstruction facts presented in the preceding section. In contrast, agentless passives are limited to targeting a local internal argument and thus compatible with the traditional treatment of passives as involving A-movement of an internal argument which would receive accusative case in the active voice.

In addition, however, we have observed a further difference between preverbal and postverbal agent passives, in that postverbal agent passives may only target embedded clause subjects. Descriptively, then, this constitutes a case of \bar{A} -movement that is limited in necessarily targeting the closest nominal, a form of movement attested in various languages of the world according to Branan & Erlewine (2024). These empirical patterns are summarized in (18) below, together with our analytic description of each movement type.

(18) **Summary of possible subjects by passive type:**

	local	embedded under ‘think’		
	theme (2)	subject (8)	object (9)	
preverbal agent	ok	ok	ok	\bar{A} -movement
postverbal agent	ok	ok	*	\bar{A} -movement of the closest DP
agentless	ok	*	*	A-movement

We turn next to our proposal for these three types of passives, which derives these distinct locality restrictions as related to the variable presence and position of the agent.

3 Proposal

3.1 *Lebo’ Vo’ clausal syntax*

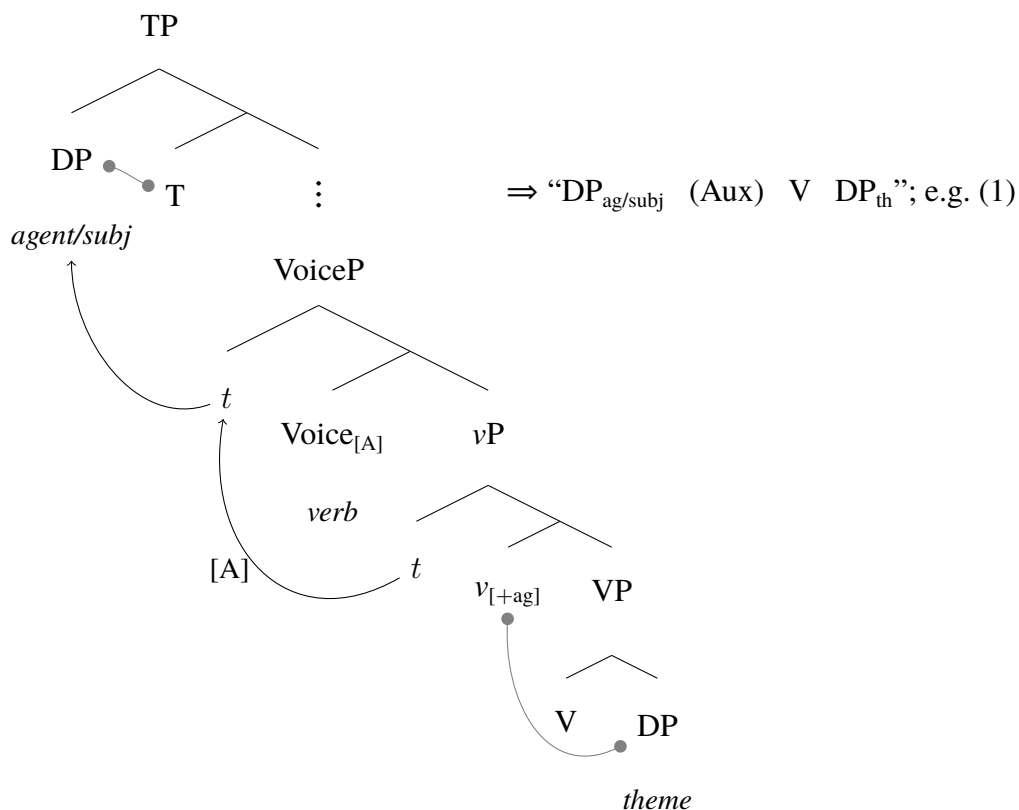
We begin by sketching the basic clausal syntax of *Lebo’ Vo’* active transitive clauses. Our proposal here loosely follows a set of recent proposals (especially Nomoto 2015, 2021, Erlewine & Sommerlot 2024) for the syntax of nearby Malayic languages, which are also Austronesian languages with dominant S(Aux)VO word order and no morphological case distinctions. For

a simple bivalent verb, the theme is generated as the complement to the lexical verb head V and the agent is introduced as the specifier of a higher functional head v . Following standard assumptions, we assume that nominals must be licensed (receive abstract Case) and that the head v which introduces the agent — which for perspicuity we call $v_{[+ag]}$ — licenses one nominal that it c-commands (in familiar case terms, assigning accusative case).

We furthermore assume that there is one higher functional head, Voice, which serves as the phase head. Voice bears an A-movement probe, which we notate $[A]$,¹¹ and which can attract one nominal to Spec,VoiceP. We refer to this variant of Voice head as $Voice_{[A]}$ and discuss other variants of Voice below. A functional head T above VoiceP attracts the closest nominal that it c-commands, regardless of its Case-licensing status, and then *can* license it (assigning nominative case) if necessary. In a simple transitive clause, the theme will be licensed by v , but the agent will be unlicensed within the lower phase. Voice therefore must attract the agent to Spec,VoiceP, so that it can move to and be licensed in the subject position. (In addition, the A-movement probe on Voice must target the closest nominal, reinforcing this same result of agent movement.) We illustrate the derivation of the basic active transitive clause in (19) below.

¹¹ In the $[\bullet F \bullet]$ notation for structure-building features (Heck & Müller 2007, a.o.), we may treat $[A]$ as standing in for $[\bullet D \bullet]$. We also make reference to $[\bar{A}]$ on Voice below, which we can treat as $[\bullet PASS \bullet]$, where $[PASS]$ is a formal feature that can be optionally added to any (nominal) phrase to make it a potential target for passivization via $[\bar{A}]$.

(19) **Lebo' Vo' active transitive clause:**



Licensing relationships are indicated by ●● in gray. The arrows here indicate the A-movement chain of the subject to its licensing position in Spec,TP. We also annotate each movement triggered by a Voice head with the corresponding probe feature. The lexical verb head-moves via *v* to Voice and is pronounced there, but these head-movement steps are not illustrated here.

3.2 Agent-less passives

Following the approach to passive phrase structure in Bruening 2006, we propose that passive clauses in Lebo' Vo' have an additional functional head, Pass, which takes VoiceP as a complement and imposes particular requirements on it.¹² Pass heads realize the passive marker *ən*.

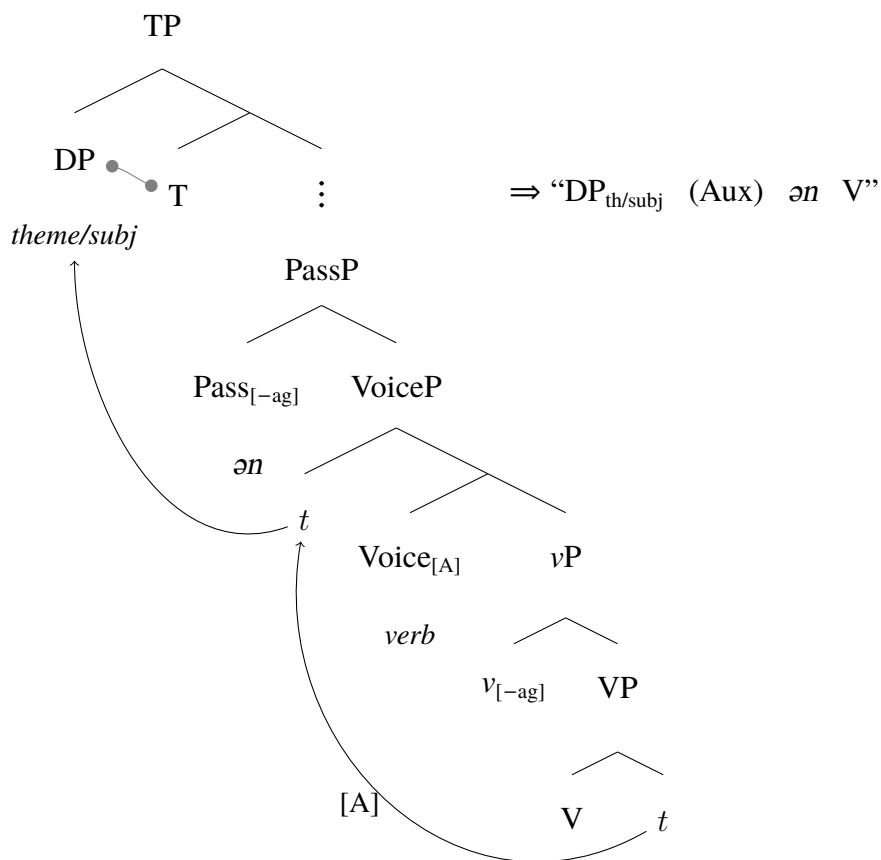
VoiceP in passives is still a phase.

We first discuss the case of agent-less passives, which involves one particular variant of the head Voice. Again for perspicuity, we call this head $\text{Pass}_{[-\text{ag}]}$. $\text{Pass}_{[-\text{ag}]}$ selects for a VoiceP headed by $\text{Voice}_{[\text{A}]}$ and which includes a v head that does not project an agent, $v_{[-\text{ag}]}$, which correspondingly does not license a c-commanded nominal (or in other words, does not assign accusative case).¹³ Voice attracts the theme to Spec, VoiceP , which then can move to the subject position and be licensed there. We illustrate this derivation of a local, agentless passive in (20):

¹² Here our analysis for Lebo' Vo' departs from the analyses for Malayic languages that we followed as in (19) above. This difference reflects the fact that active and passive voices are distinctly but equally morphologically marked (so-called "symmetric voice") in Malayic languages, whereas passive clauses in Lebo' Vo' are clearly more morphologically marked than active clauses.

¹³ Note that the different varieties of VoiceP/ v P which are selected by particular Pass heads do not vary in their verbal morphology. The alternation here thus constitutes a case of what Nomoto & Wahab (2012) call a "covert voice alternation."

(20) **Lebo' Vo' agentless passive clause:**



Recall that agentless passives cannot target the arguments of an embedded clause complement of *ŋio?* ‘think.’ We repeat the examples that demonstrate this restriction in (21) below.

(21) **Agentless passivization cannot target embedded clause arguments:**

- a. * Kule ən ŋio? [___ nəkaw yap ni] .
 Kule PASS think ___ steal chicken DEM
 ≈ ‘Kule_x is thought that he_x stole the chicken.’ = (8c)
- b. * yap ni ən ŋio? [Kule nekau ___] .
 chicken DEM PASS think Kule steal
 ≈ ‘The chicken_x is thought, that Kule stole it_x.’ = (9c)

These restrictions are explained by our analysis. Recall that we have argued that the complement clause of *ŋio?* is finite, and therefore both its subject and object positions will be Case-licensed. As an A-movement probe, we assume that [A] on Voice_[A] can only target nominals

which are not yet Case-licensed (see movement properties in (4) above), explaining the ungrammaticality of agentless *ən* passives targeting these embedded clause arguments.

3.3 *Passives with agents*

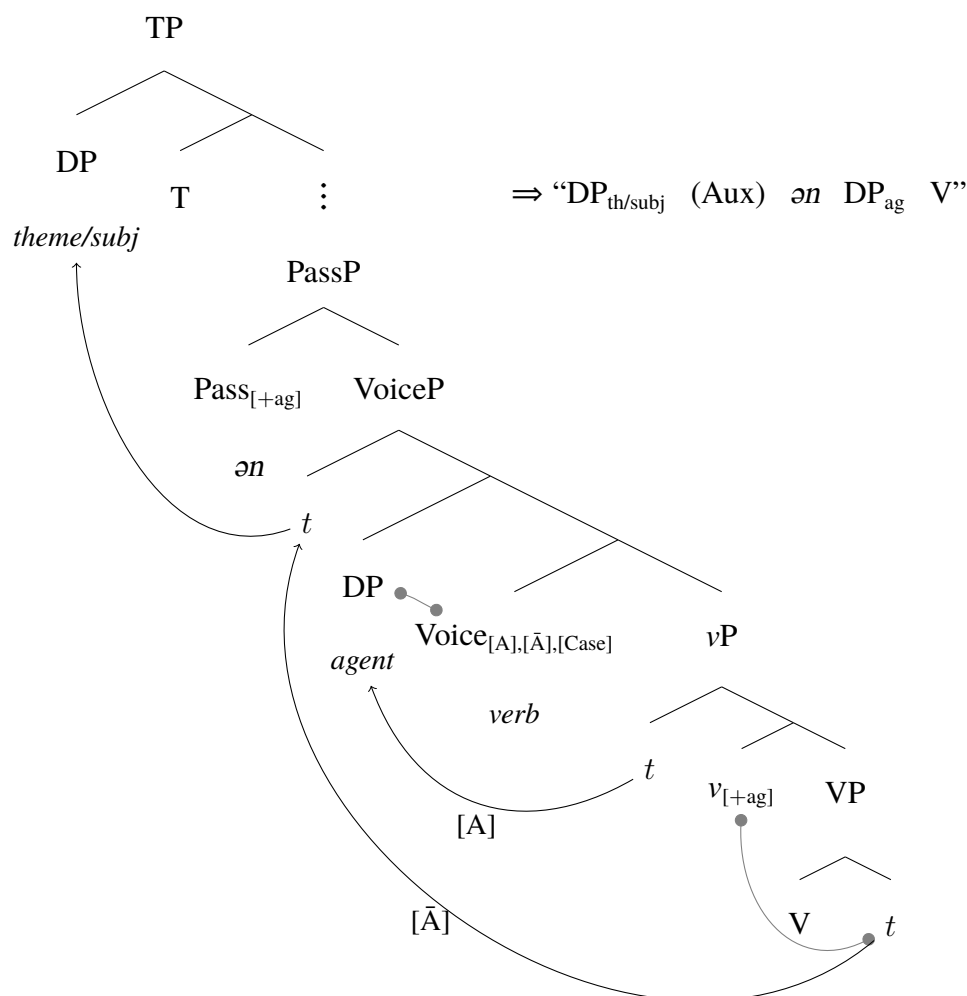
We propose that passives with agents involve a variant of the Pass head that we call $\text{Pass}_{[+ag]}$, which in turn selects for a VoiceP with $v_{[+ag]}$ and a different Voice head which bears both A- and \bar{A} -movement probes and an additional Case-licensing probe. We refer to the latter as $\text{Voice}_{[A],[\bar{A}],[\text{Case}]}$ in the general case. We furthermore follow a body of literature that suggests that movement-triggering probes on a single head may probe together or separately, resulting in different numbers of phrases being moved (see e.g. Van Urk & Richards 2015, Bossi & Diercks 2019, Lohninger & Yip 2023). We therefore consider two different possible behaviors for the Voice head, with the two movement probes [A] and [\bar{A}] probing separately or jointly, as one composite probe [A+ \bar{A}].

We first consider the case where [A] and [\bar{A}] on Voice probe independently, illustrated in (22) below. As these passives involve $v_{[+ag]}$, the internal structure of vP will resemble that of an active clause, as in (19) above, including the projection of an agent in Spec,vP and the theme being Case-licensed. The A-movement probe [A] targets the closest nominal, the agent, and moves it to $\text{Spec},\text{VoiceP}$.¹⁴ The Case-licensing probe will also target this goal of the A-movement probe (as a “free rider” in the terms of Chomsky 1995: ch. 4) and license it. The \bar{A} -probe then attracts the target of passivization (here, simply the local theme) and moves it to another $\text{Spec},\text{VoiceP}$, feeding movement to Spec,TP .¹⁵ This derives the preverbal agent passive:

¹⁴ We note that this movement of the agent is quite “short,” in potential violation of certain proposed “anti-locality” constraints on movement. Such a constraint will indeed play a role in our proposal below.

¹⁵ This tree shows A-movement of the agent to an inner specifier of VoiceP and (intermediate) \bar{A} -movement of the

(22) **Lebo' Vo' preverbal agent passive:**



In (22), the nominal that moves to occupy the subject position is the local theme. The theme is itself Case-licensed in its base position and then \bar{A} -moves to the subject position, correctly predicting the observed \bar{A} -movement behavior of preverbal agent passivization: the position where the nominal receives Case-licensing is active for Condition C (Takahashi & Hulsey 2009, Gong to appear), explaining the reconstruction facts in (14a) and (15). Similarly, the \bar{A} -movement

theme to an outer specifier. For our proposal here, the order of these two specifiers and indeed the order of operations between probing by [A] and $[\bar{A}]$ could be different. As both specifiers of VoiceP will be Case-licensed nominals, standard A-probing by T will be insufficient to satisfy the EPP. We tentatively suggest that T in this case uses an \bar{A} -probe to satisfy its EPP requirement, thereby necessarily targeting the \bar{A} -derived specifier of VoiceP (here, the theme) rather than its A-derived specifier.

triggered by Voice would be able to target an argument of a finite embedded clause and feed its movement to the higher subject position as well, thus successfully deriving the availability of long-distance passivization that is constrained only by syntactic islands. The Voice head proposed with the possibility of separate [A] and [\bar{A}] probing thus derives the correct word order as well as observed behavior for preverbal agent passives.

Next, we consider the case where [A] and [\bar{A}] on Voice form a composite probe, [A+ \bar{A}]. Case studies in the literature suggest that individual languages (and perhaps individual heads) vary in the behavior of such composite probes. In the case of Lebo’ Vo’ passives, composite probing with [A+ \bar{A}] manifests what Branan & Erlewine 2024 call “ \bar{A} -probing for the closest DP.”¹⁶ More specifically, we assume that [A+ \bar{A}] is subject to locality restrictions associated with both [A] and [\bar{A}], as in (23a) and (23e) below, and then forms a movement chain that exhibits \bar{A} -properties; see (23b–d).

(23) **Properties of movement probes on Voice:**

Phrasal movement triggered by α on head H...

	$\alpha = [A]$	$\alpha = [\bar{A}]$	$\alpha = [A+\bar{A}]$
a. must target the closest nominal	yes	no	yes
b. targets Case-licensed nominals	no	yes	no
c. can Case-license its goal	yes	no	no
d. reconstructs for binding	no	yes	yes
e. can target the specifier of H’s sister	yes	no	no

We propose that the behavior of composite probing by [A+ \bar{A}] on Voice, as summarized in (23), underlies the derivation of postverbal agent passives. We again start with a derivation

¹⁶ See also Erlewine 2018 (especially pp. 686–687) for earlier discussion and motivation for a composite A/ \bar{A} -probe with this behavior. In the terminology of Lohninger, Kovač & Wurmbrand 2022, this is a case of “dependent satisfaction.”

with vP headed by $v_{[+ag]}$, which resembles that in an active clause (19) or a preverbal agent passive (22). Now consider the effects of probing by $[A+\bar{A}]$. Interestingly, the inherited locality requirements in (23a,e) are in conflict in this structure: the closest nominal to Voice is the agent in $Spec, vP$, but as a form of \bar{A} -movement, moving the agent from $Spec, vP$ to $Spec, VoiceP$ would violate the principle of Spec-to-Spec Anti-Locality (24). We follow the proposal of Branan (2023) in (25), which in effect states that movement probes simply skip potential goals that would violate anti-locality constraints, and then must attract the closest possible goal.

(24) **Spec-to-Spec Anti-Locality:** (Erlewine 2016: p. 431)

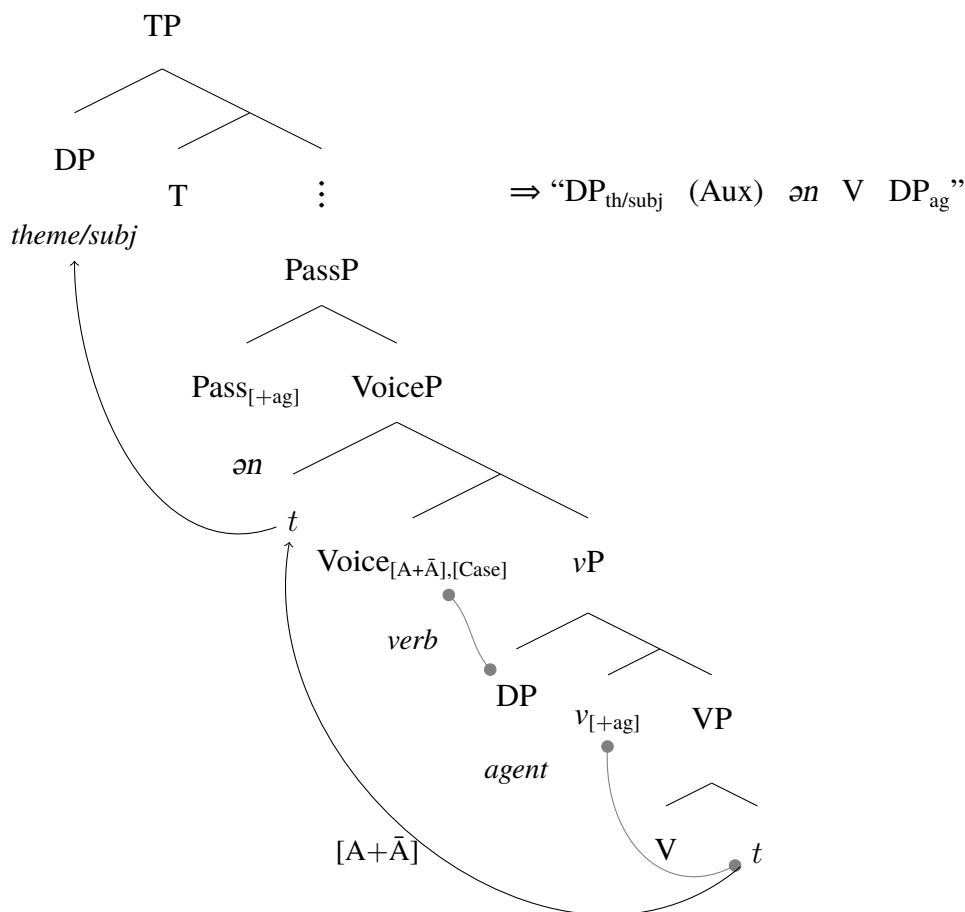
\bar{A} -movement of a phrase from the Specifier of XP must cross a maximal projection other than XP.

(25) **Principle of Conflicting Requirements:** (Branan 2023: p. 2)

Elements do not count for [Closest] if their movement would violate [Anti-Locality].

The result of this logic is that $[A+\bar{A}]$ on Voice will skip the agent in $Spec, vP$ and attract the *next* closest nominal for movement, which in this case is the local theme. The Case-licensing probe activates independently, licensing the closest nominal, which is the agent in $Spec, vP$, without moving it. This derives the postverbal agent as in (26).

(26) **Lebo' Vo' postverbal agent passive:**



Again, similar to the case of the preverbal agent passive, the surface subject is Case-licensed in its base position and then \bar{A} -moved, explaining its \bar{A} -movement property of Condition C reconstruction to its Case-licensed position, as per Takahashi & Hulsey 2009 and Gong to appear.

Finally, we consider the examples of postverbal agent passives targeting arguments of the complement clause of *ɲioʔ* ‘think,’ repeated in (27). In these cases, there is no nominal lower than the agent within the higher clause, making the embedded clause subject the closest nominal to Voice which does not violate anti-locality. The Principle of Conflicting Requirements (25) therefore correctly predicts that only the embedded subject can be targeted for long-distance passivization.¹⁷

¹⁷ Here for simplicity, we have left out discussion of intermediate movement at CP edges and its trigger. In the case of (9b/27b), we might wonder whether a pure \bar{A} -probe at the embedded clause edge could move the embedded object over the embedded subject to feed the higher clause’s postverbal agent passive, similar to what is possible with

(27) **Postverbal agent passive can target the embedded subject but not the embedded object:**

- a. Kule ən ɲioʔ pulis [___ nəkaw yap ni] .
 Kule PASS think police steal chicken DEM
 ≈ ‘Kule_x is: the police think that he_x stole the chicken.’ = (8b)
- b. * yap ni ən ɲioʔ pulis [Kule nekau ___] .
 chicken DEM PASS think police Kule steal
 ≈ ‘The chicken_x is: the police think that Kule stole it_x.’ = (9b)

In summary, we have offered a proposal for the syntax of Kenyah *ən* passives with agents, which posits the same inventory of verbal functional heads for preverbal and postverbal agent variants. Optionality in how the A- and \bar{A} -movement probes on Voice operate — as two separate probes or as one composite probe — derives the two word order variants as well as their corresponding differences in locality, with preverbal agent passives exhibiting \bar{A} -probing behavior whereas postverbal agent passives exhibit \bar{A} -probing limited to the closest DP.

4 Conclusion

In this chapter, we have presented the first theoretical analysis of an analytic passive in a language of Borneo. Unlike many better-studied Austronesian languages, many Austronesian languages of Borneo make use of analytic passives with “PASS (agent) V” and/or “PASS V (agent)” word orders (see [in prep] for a typological overview). Here we have concentrated on the *ən* passive of Lebo’ Vo’, an endangered Kenyah language of northern Borneo, which allows for agentless, preverbal agent, and postverbal agent uses. Informed by previous theoretical litera-

embedded passivization as in (12b). However, Longenbaugh (2017) argues that a pure \bar{A} -movement step cannot feed composite A/ \bar{A} -movement, as an instance of the ban on improper movement.

ture on analytic passives with “PASS (agent) V” word order in various Chinese languages (as in Huang 1999) and in Mainland Southeast Asia, we investigated the ability of these three subtypes of Lebo’ Vo’ passives to form long-distance passives, which target an embedded clause argument for movement to the subject position.

Our study shows that the three varieties of *ən* passives in Lebo’ Vo’ vary not only in the immediate surface differences regarding the presence and position of the passive agent, but vary substantially in the range of arguments that they can target for subject movement. These differences make clear that the relationship between these three forms of passives should not simply be described in terms of the availability of a null pronoun or flexibility in the position of an optional agent-encoding adjunct.

An important question in the background of this study is why and how adult speakers of Lebo’ Vo’ exhibit grammars that the three types of passives as they do, when the passives that they encounter in the course of language acquisition are presumably overwhelmingly local. Although we are not in a position to seriously take on this acquisition question, we might find some relief in the observation that this three-way distinction appears to follow a certain rule-governed logic, observed internal to Lebo’ Vo’ and in comparison with other languages.

The first-order split between passives with and without agents can be understood as the effect of Burzio’s generalization, the potentially universal generalization in (28). In our framework of analysis, Burzio’s generalization is implicitly reflected in our inventory of *v* heads, with $v_{[+ag]}$ introducing the agent and assigning accusative case, but $v_{[-ag]}$ having neither behavior.

(28) **Burzio’s Generalization:** (Burzio 1986: p. 178)

All and only the verbs that can assign θ -role to the subject [agent] can assign (accusative)

Case to an object.

Suppose we — both learners and linguists — limit our attention first to local passives with

theme subjects, such as those repeated in (29) below. Assuming Burzio’s generalization (28), we may deduce that the theme in agentless passives lacks Case-licensing in its base position, thereby requiring A-movement to a Case-licensing position. In contrast, the theme *is* Case-licensed in its base position in passives without agent demotion. Movement to subject position in these passives with agents thus targets a Case-licensed nominal and crosses over an intervening nominal (the agent), and therefore must be an instance of \bar{A} -movement.

(29) **Lebo’ Vo’ *ən* passives with and without agents:** = (2)

kayu bioʔ ini ən (Kule) nəvəŋ (Kule) ____ .
 tree big DEM PASS Kule cut.down Kule

‘The big tree was cut down (by Kule).’

Generalizing from these lessons from local passives — that agentless passives reflect an A-probe whereas passives with agents involve an \bar{A} -probe — we may reason that the former cannot target arguments of finite embedded clauses, which are Case-licensed, but the latter can.

The plausibility of this form of reasoning finds support from the fact that an entirely unrelated language, Mandarin Chinese, exhibits a parallel contrast in the locality of passives with and without agents: passives without agents are more restricted in their locality, reflecting an A-dependency, whereas passives with agents exhibit less restricted, \bar{A} -dependency behavior. See especially Chen 2023: ch. 2 for a recent approach to Mandarin *bèi* passives where consideration of Burzio’s generalization plays a major role.

Unlike Mandarin, however, Lebo’ Vo’ passives reflect a further division between those with agents in immediately preverbal and immediately postverbal positions. Assuming that both are in argument positions, we may infer that there is an optional, short A-movement that can bring the agent to the phase edge in preverbal agent passives. In postverbal agent passives, where we do not observe the effect of this short A-movement step, we may hypothesize that the A-probe on the phase head is involved in another function, by being bundled with the \bar{A} -probe. In this way,

one might deduce that postverbal agent passives exhibit a more restricted form of \bar{A} -probing, which is one possible outcome of composite probing for A- and \bar{A} -features (Branan & Erlewine 2024; see also Lohninger, Kovač & Wurmbrand 2022).

In this way, we hope that our study here — although representing only a modest first step in the description and analysis of passives in Lebo' Vo' — may nonetheless further our understanding of the grammatical mechanisms that underly the logic of passivization. Just as the rich prior literature on Mandarin *bèi* passives has informed our investigation into this understudied and endangered language, we hope that our contribution here may serve as inspiration for future work on passives in other languages of Borneo and beyond.

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