

Patterns of Passivisation in the Matu-Daro Melanau Dialect

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ABSTRACT

This study provides a preliminary description of passivisation in Matu-Daro Melanau, an underdocumented dialect spoken mainly in the Matu and Daro districts of Sarawak, Malaysia. It examines how selected transitive verb roots differ from forms elicited with passive meanings and asks whether the alternations can be organised into recurring morphological and morphophonological patterns. Data were obtained through structured word-list elicitation with three native speakers. Fifteen root-passive pairs were compared according to the position and shape of the added or altered material. Four provisional patterns were identified: an apparent Ci- formation involving repetition of the root-initial consonant, an apparent -en- infix after the initial consonant, a ne- prefix, and vowel-conditioned nV- forms. The pair /benuk/ to /binuk/ remains anomalous: it may reflect vowel alternation, a reduced reflex of an infix, or another lexicalised process, but the present data do not discriminate among these analyses. Agreement across the three speakers supports the attested forms within this sample, although isolated words alone cannot establish a syntactic passive construction. Confirmation requires paired active and passive clauses with overt agents and patients, acceptability judgements, and discourse contexts that test patient foregrounding and agent defocusing. A larger sample across consonant and vowel classes is also needed to determine the productivity and conditioning of the proposed patterns. The study therefore offers a cautious morphological baseline and a focused protocol for subsequent morphosyntactic analysis and documentation.

Keywords: Matu-Daro Melanau, passivisation, morphology, morphosyntax, morphophonology

INTRODUCTION

Matu-Daro Melanau is one of the Melanau dialect groupings spoken in Sarawak, Malaysia. Zaini (1998, as cited in Bohari, 2021) classifies Melanau varieties into Kuala Rajang, Seduan, Matu-Daro, Mukah, Balingian, and Bintulu based on geographical distribution and mutual intelligibility. These dialects differ in pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammatical structure. Dialect-specific description is therefore necessary, especially for grammatical processes that remain sparsely documented.

Passivisation is one such process. Existing descriptions do not adequately explain how Matu-Daro verbs encode passive meaning, whether the observed forms participate in a syntactic voice alternation, or which phonological properties condition their surface realisation. Verbal morphology alone cannot establish a passive: the analysis must also show how the agent and patient are expressed in a clause and whether the agent is backgrounded, omitted, or realised in a less prominent form. Nevertheless, a systematic comparison of verb roots and elicited passive forms is a useful first step toward identifying candidate markers for further syntactic testing.

This study addresses that preliminary task by comparing 15 transitive roots with forms supplied by native speakers for passive meanings. It asks: (1) what recurrent formal changes occur between the roots and the elicited forms; (2) how might those changes be classified morphologically and morphophonologically; and (3) what further evidence is required to verify that the forms mark syntactic passive voice? Because the dataset contains isolated lexical items, the present claims concern form correspondences rather than a complete analysis of grammatical voice.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

Passivisation, Transitivity, and Participant Prominence

Passivisation is commonly analysed as a voice operation affecting a transitive clause. In a prototypical active clause, an agent acts upon a patient; in a corresponding passive, the patient receives greater grammatical or discourse prominence and the agent is demoted, omitted, or expressed obliquely (Comrie, 1989; Payne, 1997; Siewierska, 1984). Languages differ, however, in the extent to which passivisation changes grammatical relations, constituent order, verbal morphology, and valency. An analysis of Matu-Daro should therefore be based on evidence internal to the dialect rather than on an English or Malay template.

The functional contribution of a passive is equally important. Shibatani (1985) characterises agent defocusing as central to passive and passive-like constructions. Speakers may suppress an agent because it is unknown, recoverable, irrelevant, or intentionally withheld. A candidate passive marker should thus be tested in clauses and discourse contexts to determine whether it co-occurs with patient foregrounding and reduced agent prominence. Without such evidence, an elicited verb form can be identified only as a form associated by speakers with passive meaning, not conclusively as a syntactic passive.

Morphological and Morphophonological Analysis

A root is the lexical base on which morphological operations apply (Bauer, 1983; Bauer et al., 2013). The present analysis compares each root with its elicited passive counterpart and locates additional or altered material relative to the initial consonant. Recurrent correspondences are classified provisionally as prefixation, infixation, initial-consonant copying, or vowel alternation. These labels describe surface relationships; they do not by themselves establish the historical source or underlying representation of a marker.

This caution is especially important in an Austronesian context. Infixes of the shape -in- and related reflexes are widely attested in Austronesian languages, and their surface forms may be affected by reduction, vowel loss, assimilation, or lexicalisation (Blust, 2013). Accordingly, forms such as /d-en-ulor/ and /dʒ-en-uang/ warrant comparison with an underlying infix analysis. Conversely, /benuk/ to /binuk/ should not be treated automatically as simple vowel harmony: the single pair is compatible with several accounts, including vowel replacement, contraction of earlier infixal material, or an idiosyncratic lexical alternation. More roots beginning with /b/ and controlled vowel patterns are required to choose among these hypotheses.

The analytical framework therefore links four levels of evidence: root phonological shape, the location and form of the morphological alternation, the distribution of that alternation across lexical classes, and its syntactic and discourse function in complete clauses. The present dataset supports analysis at the first two levels. Productivity and passive-voice status remain questions for expanded elicitation.

METHODOLOGY

Participants and Data Collection

We collected data through structured linguistic elicitation with three native speakers of Matu-Daro Melanau. We purposively selected the speakers for their proficiency in the dialect and familiarity with its everyday use. We gave them a list of selected transitive verb roots and asked them to provide the forms used to express

passive meanings. We used follow-up prompts to clarify meanings and resolve differences. Forms on which all three speakers agreed were retained. We identify informants as I1, I2, and I3 to protect their identities.

The original elicitation concentrated on isolated verbs representing a range of word-initial consonants. This design permits a preliminary comparison of morphological shapes but does not independently verify changes in argument structure, word order, or discourse prominence. We report no sentence-level results because the available dataset did not include such data.

Data Selection and Analysis

We coded the 15 retained roots for initial consonants, first vowel, syllable shape, elicited passive form, position of additional material, and preservation or alteration of root segments. Comparisons with English and Malay phoneme inventories were excluded because they do not directly test the formation of Matu-Daro passive verbs. Analysis instead focuses on phonotactic and morphophonological properties internal to the dialect: whether material occurs before the root or after its initial consonant, whether that consonant is repeated, whether the root vowel changes, and whether similar roots pattern together.

A pattern was treated as recurrent when it occurred in more than one lexical item. Single-item correspondences, particularly /benuk/ to /binuk/, were retained as anomalies rather than elevated to productive rules. Speaker agreement was interpreted as support for the attested form, not as proof that the morphological process generalises to other verbs.

Sentence-Level Verification Protocol

A subsequent elicitation stage should place every target verb in minimally contrasting active and passive clauses. For each root, speakers should first produce an ordinary Agent-Verb-Patient clause in a controlled event description. They should then describe the same event with the patient as the discourse topic, first omitting the agent and then overtly expressing it. Follow-up judgements should test whether each clause is acceptable, whether its meaning changes, which participant is understood as the subject or topic, and whether an overt agent requires a preposition, particle, or special position. Short picture sequences and narrative retellings should supplement translation prompts so that passive forms occur in information structures that naturally motivate agent defocusing.

The expanded lexical sample should include several transitive roots for every attested initial consonant and should balance the following vowel. Particular priority should be given to /b/, /n/, /w/, and /j/, where the current analysis rests on ambiguous or single-item evidence, as well as to consonant classes absent from the present sample. Including phonologically matched roots will help distinguish consonant-conditioned allomorphy from vowel-conditioned alternation and lexical exceptions. Record tokens, phonetically transcribe them, and check them across speakers in both elicited and discourse contexts.

RESULTS

All three informants supplied the same passive-associated form for each of the 15 roots in Table 1. The table reports only the observed formal correspondence and a cautious descriptive analysis.

Table 1 Root and Passive-Associated Forms in the Elicited Dataset

Root	Meaning	Elicited form	Observed change	Provisional analysis
/benuk/	kill	/binuk/	Initial /e/ changes to /i/	Unresolved vowel alternation or reduced morphology
/dulor/	let or allow	/denulor/	/en/ follows initial /d/	Apparent -en- infixation
/gal/	strike or beat	/gigal/	/gi-/ precedes the intact root	Initial-consonant copying with /i/

/dʒuang/	give or pass	/dʒenuang/	/en/ follows initial /dʒ/	Apparent -en- infixation
/kər/	dig	/kikər/	/ki-/ precedes the intact root	Initial-consonant copying with /i/
/libo/	chase	/nelibo/	/ne-/ precedes the intact root	ne- prefixation
/moi/	cuddle	/nemoi/	/ne-/ precedes the intact root	ne- prefixation
/neŋ/	stretch	/nineŋ/	/ni-/ precedes the root	Ambiguous ni- prefix or copying
/peʁ/	beat	/pipeʁ/	/pi-/ precedes the intact root	Initial-consonant copying with /i/
/kabei/	scratch	/neʁabei/	/ne-/ precedes the intact root	ne- prefixation
/seloh/	change	/seneloh/	/en/ follows initial /s/	Apparent -en- infixation
/temuk/	bathe	/tenemuk/	/en/ follows initial /t/	Apparent -en- infixation
/wak/	chase	/nuwak/	/nu-/ precedes the intact root	nV- prefixation
/jeŋ/	circle around	/nijeŋ/	/ni-/ precedes the intact root	nV- prefixation
/ŋem/	pop or feed	/ŋiŋem/	/ŋi-/ precedes the intact root	Initial-consonant copying with /i/

Note. I1, I2, and I3 reported all forms. Hyphens in the analysis are morphological interpretations rather than pauses in pronunciation.

DISCUSSION

Apparent Initial-Consonant Copying with i

Four roots show a sequence consisting of a copy of the root-initial consonant followed by /i/: /gal/ to /gi-gal/, /kər/ to /ki-kər/, /peʁ/ to /pi-peʁ/, and /ŋem/ to /ŋi-ŋem/. The surface generalisation can be represented as C1VC... to C1i-C1VC.... Because the roots remain intact after the added sequence, prefixal partial reduplication is a plausible descriptive account. Its status as a productive passive marker must be tested with additional roots from each consonant class and in full clauses.

Apparent en Infixation

Roots beginning with /d/, /dʒ/, /s/, and /t/ show /en/ after the initial consonant: /d-en-ulor/, /dʒ-en-uang/, /s-en-eloh/, and /t-en-emuk/. The common position supports a provisional -en- infix analysis. An Austronesian -in- comparison is relevant, but the available forms do not establish whether /en/ is an underlying Matu-Daro morpheme, a phonologically conditioned reflex, or the result of another historical process. Alternations should therefore be tested across matched roots with different first vowels and supported by acoustic evidence where vowel quality is uncertain.

ne and nV Prefixation

The forms /ne-libo/, /ne-moi/, and /ne-kabei/ preserve the root and add /ne-/ before it, providing the clearest evidence for straightforward prefixation in the sample. The forms /nu-wak/ and /ni-jeŋ/ similarly contain an initial nasal-plus-vowel sequence, but the vowel differs. These may be allomorphs of a broader nV- prefix; alternatively, /ni-/ in /ni-jeŋ/ may have a different analysis. Because each nV- form is represented by only one root, conditioning by the initial consonant or root vowel cannot yet be separated from lexical idiosyncrasy.

The Anomalous benuk to binuk Alternation

The change /benuk/ to /binuk/ does not display an overt segmental prefix or the full -en- sequence found elsewhere. Labelling it vowel harmony would be premature because only the first vowel changes and no broader harmony pattern has been demonstrated. At least three analyses remain possible: a morphologically conditioned /e/ to /i/ alternation; a reduced or fused reflex of infixal material; or a lexicalised passive form. Evidence from additional /b/-initial verbs, especially roots with contrasting first vowels, is essential. Slow and normal-rate recordings may also reveal segments or timing differences obscured in broad transcription.

Syntactic Status and Agent Defocusing

The forms in Table 1 were elicited as passive equivalents, but the dataset does not include paired clauses showing an agent, verb, and patient. It is therefore not yet possible to demonstrate patient promotion, agent demotion, changes in word order, or optional agent expression. The morphological patterns are best described as passive-associated forms pending syntactic verification. Sentence-level elicitation should compare active Agent-Verb-Patient clauses with patient-oriented clauses in which the agent is omitted or overtly expressed. If these forms consistently occur when the patient is foregrounded and the agent is defocused, the morphological analysis can be securely connected to grammatical voice and discourse function.

LIMITATIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

The study is limited by a small lexical sample, three speakers, and the absence of sentence-level and natural-discourse data. Several consonant classes are represented by a single item, while others are absent. The present distribution therefore cannot show whether the four proposed patterns are productive, lexically restricted, phonologically conditioned, or partly overlapping. Broad phoneme comparisons with English and Malay do not resolve this question and have consequently been removed from the analysis.

Future research should use a balanced elicitation matrix containing multiple transitive roots within every relevant consonant class and contrasting first-vowel environments. Each verb should be tested in active and patient-oriented clauses, with animate and inanimate participants where semantically natural. Tasks should include controlled picture descriptions, acceptability judgements, agent-omission contrasts, overt-agent variants, and short narratives. Comparing forms across more speakers, age groups, and localities in Matu and Daro would also help distinguish stable grammatical patterns from individual or local variation. This design would establish the productivity and predictive limits of Ci- formation, -en- infixation, ne- prefixation, nV- allomorphy, and the /benuk-/ /binuk/ alternation.

CONCLUSION

The 15 elicited pairs reveal recurrent formal differences between Matu-Daro transitive roots and forms supplied with passive meanings. The strongest surface generalisations are apparent initial-consonant copying with /i/, apparent -en- infixation, and ne- prefixation; two nV- forms suggest possible allomorphy, whereas /benuk/ to /binuk/ remains unresolved. These patterns show that a single invariant passive marker does not adequately describe the present sample, but one cannot establish their conditioning and productivity from one or a few roots per class.

The revision also clarifies the study's evidential boundary. Word-level elicitation provides a morphological baseline, not a complete demonstration of syntactic passive voice. Full Agent-Verb-Patient contrasts and discourse-based tasks are needed to test patient prominence and agent defocusing. With a larger, phonologically balanced lexical sample and sentence-level evidence, future work can determine whether the proposed patterns represent productive morphology, conditioned allomorphy, reduplicative processes, historical infixation, or lexical exceptions. The current analysis thus contributes a focused starting point for documenting Matu-Daro morphology while defining the evidence needed for a robust account of its voice system.

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