

Pesi ja kumih?: Passives in Kristang and their implications for documentation and theory

Kristang is an endangered Portuguese creole with less than 750 speakers in Malacca and 100 in Singapore. Fieldwork data on Singapore Kristang suggests that Kristang licenses at least four different passive forms: 1. an agentless object-to-subject raising without any change in verbal morphology.

- (1) pesi ja kumih
fish PST eat

“The fish was eaten.”

2. a construction similar to (1) but with no overt raising of the object and no subject.

- (2) ja kumih pesi
PST eat fish

“The fish was eaten.”

3. an “Adversity Passive”, where passivisation using the serial verb *tokah* (“touch”) is available “to transitive verbs capable of expressing adversity and which have agent subjects and undergoer objects” (Baxter, 1988, p. 196).

- (3) pesi ja tokah kumih
fish PST touch eat

“The fish was eaten.”

4. an unproductive variant limited to the verbs *kumih* (“eat”) and *rintah* (“enter”) where when the agent is realized; both passive and active are phonologically identical (Baxter, 1988, p. 196).

- (4) pesi ja kumih gatu
fish PST eat cat

Passive reading: “The fish was eaten by the cat.”

Active reading: “The fish ate the cat.”

I postulate that these four variant forms of the passive were inherited from Kristang’s substrate, Malay, and I show that these variants could be unified under a single structure. Due to conflicting grammaticality judgements regarding the *Kumih*-Passive and the two bare passives among my collaborators, I am unable to conclude that this structure is the most accurate, as “it is difficult to represent multiple variants without indicating that one is more valued than the other” (Nagy, 2009, p. 411) and thereby privilege one group of speakers’ grammaticality judgements over the others as ‘correct’. I hypothesise that such contestation has arisen because (i) Kristang in Singapore has been reduced to a fragmented and diffuse body of less than 100 speakers, who rarely speak the language, speak it at varying levels of proficiency, and demonstrate widespread syntactic variation and “modification” (Campbell & Muntzel, 1989, p. 191), and (ii) Kristang is a contact language existing on a continuum, meaning that significant variation is to be expected (Rickford, 1976, p. 443) and indeed is “more visible” than normal (de Rooij, 1995, p. 53). Kristang’s example suggests that documentation and theory must not “rely heavily on a single highly gifted and benevolent source for the ultimate form of the grammatical description produced”, since that excludes other data and other speakers whose voices may be equally, if not more, “valid and revealing” (Dorian, 1994, pp. 632-633).

References

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