LING 185
The Syntax of Austronesian Languages

Preliminary syllabus
The goal of this class is to provide an introduction into comparative Austronesian syntax by discussing the most pertinent issues of Austronesian languages that have posed challenge to current syntactic theory and suggesting further readings and topics for discussion.

The choice of the Austronesian language family as the focus of this class is not accidental. The Austronesian language family—roughly 1,200 genetically related languages dispersed over an area encompassing Madagascar, Taiwan, Southeast Asia, and islands of the Pacific—is often called the largest language family in the world. But it has been relatively little studied. Sophisticated research on the grammar of Austronesian languages did not really begin until the 1930's and 1940's (fueled, in part, by military interest in the Pacific region). Although there was a surge of interest in Austronesian in the 1970's and—even more dramatically—in the 1990's, the number of theoretical linguists working on these languages has remained small. Nonetheless, Austronesian languages have a significant contribution to make to linguistic theory, given the number of typologically unusual properties they exhibit (including the less common and poorly understood verb-first word order, ergativity, and wh-agreement). If these languages were as well-understood as, say, the Romance languages are today, syntactic theory could well be dramatically different.

The following list illustrates just some of the intriguing features whose theoretical significance—already evident—will surely deepen when they are investigated from a comparative perspective:

- Many Austronesian languages exhibit the uncommon word orders verb-subject-object (VSO) or verb-object-subject (VOS). These word orders pose an apparent challenge to theories of word order in which universally, all sentences have the underlying word order SVO. Some Austronesian languages have both VOS and VSO, thus raising the question of which order is more basic. It is not clear what determines the choice between VSO and VOS across Austronesian languages or within individual languages.

- Austronesian languages also display an unusual ordering within the verb phrase (the "middlefield"): objects apparently shift rightward than leftward, and adverbs show an ordering that is the mirror image of that found in better-studied languages.

- Many Austronesian languages, especially those spoken in the western branches of the family, have complex verbal voicing systems. Voice morphology indicates the grammatical relation of the 'subject', a syntactically and pragmatically privileged constituent which has been variously analyzed as a structural subject, an absolutive argument (in an ergative system), or a topic. The grammatical status of the 'subject' and the treatment of the voicing system remain highly controversial and call for more investigation, especially from the comparative perspective.

- Many Austronesian languages impose unusually stringent syntactic constraints on the constituent that can be questioned, focused ("emphasized"), or topicalized (presented as background information); in these languages, the only constituent eligible for these processes is the 'subject'. The nature of this restriction is not well understood and poses significant challenges to existing theories of movement. It is also mysterious why the restriction is so resilient within this language family.

A focused, structured discussion of a subset of these topics, in which class participants are encouraged to compare evidence from several Austronesian languages, will serve two immediate goals: it will contribute to a better understanding of Austronesian grammar and it will bear on current issues in syntactic theory, which are often framed in terms of material from a limited set of languages related to English.

Preliminary syllabus

Class number	Date	Topic	Readings
1	9/9	Introduction: languages and their history	Blust 2009; Bellwood, Fox, Tryon 1995: ch. 1 (The Austronesians in history) and ch. 1 (Origins and dispersals)—they have two chapters numbered 1; here's the link: http://epress.anu.edu.au/austronesians/austronesians/mobile_devices/index.html
2	9/16	Introduction: structural issues	Chung & Polinsky 2009; Gaertner et al 2008
3	9/23	Word order—deriving verb-initiality	Chung 2006, 2007, Massam 2005
4	9/30	Word order—deriving verb-initiality; SVO	
5	10/7	Existential constructions	Sabbagh 2009, Keenan 2009
6	10/14	Comparatives: Presentation by Hazel Pearson	TBA
7	10/21	Voice	Cole et al. 2007
8	10/28	Ergativity	Aldridge 2008, Chung 2006
9	11/4	Extraction and subject only restriction	Chung 1998, ch. 3; Pearson 2005; Rackowski and Richards 2005
10	11/11	Extraction and subject	

		only restriction	
11	11/18	Adjuncts: placement, extraction, categorial status of adverbs	Selected chapters from Gaertner et al. eds. 2008; Rackowski and Travis 2001
12	12/2	Noun phrase	Kroeger 1998
13	Exam week	Concluding class: The syntactic design of a typical Austronesian language	Presentations—each person will select their own area of interest and work on the design in that area