

# A typology of applicative and applicative-like constructions in Western Austronesian languages

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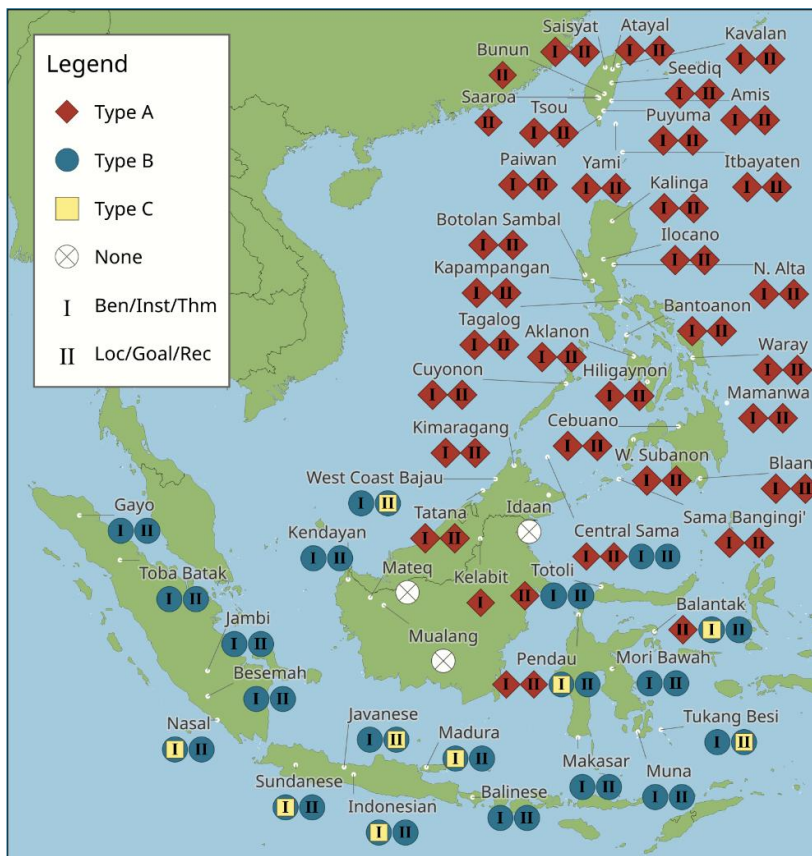
This study examines the typology of a cline of applicative-like constructions in the western Austronesian languages of maritime Southeast Asia. Like canonical applicatives in other language families, these function to modulate the status of peripheral participants in a clause, and are signaled by verbal morphology. Based on original and published data in a sample of 55 languages, we identify three types of constructions (Table 1).

Table 1: Three types of applicative-like constructions in western Austronesian languages

Type	Criterion	Languages
<b>A ‘Topic-promoting applicative’</b>	Verbal morphology flags a peripheral role to receive special prominence (topic) in the clause. The corresponding phrase is accessible to certain focus operations and interclausal relations, but may lack behavioral properties of other non-A core arguments. Type A constructions generally belong to a paradigm of symmetrical voice alternations that also target non-peripheral roles, i.e. Actor Voice (AV), and Patient Voice (PV).	Pyuyma, Hiligaynon
<b>B Syntactic (canonical applicative)</b>	Verbal morphology signals the promotion of a peripheral role to a core argument. The applied phrase shows coding and behavioral properties shared by other non-A core arguments. The base P argument may be coded as oblique or core. This construction represents a canonical applicative as it adds a new argument.	West Coast Bajau, Balinese
<b>C Semantic applicative</b>	Verbal morphology signals the promotion of a peripheral role in semantic argument structure, as evident from tests for semantic entailments and pragmatic inference. However, the phrase retains oblique coding. This construction is distinguished from Type B in that syntactic argument structure is unchanged.	Sundanese, Nasal, Balantak

An applicative is a morphologically-marked clausal construction allowing the coding of a thematically peripheral role as a core argument (Peterson 2007; Foley 2007). Western Austronesian languages exhibit a variety of constructions that increase the prominence of peripheral roles in relation to a predicate. Among the most distinctive of these are Locative Voice (LV) and Circumstantial Voice (CV) in the Philippine-type languages of Taiwan and the Philippines, in which the selected role receives pragmatic prominence, and access to relativization, among other structural relations. Furthermore, western Indonesian languages are also known for applicatives targeting the same peripheral roles (Himmelmann 2005).<sup>1</sup> However, in some of these constructions—which might be considered ‘applicative-like’ rather than canonical applicatives—the phrase expressing the peripheral role appears to be a syntactic oblique rather than a core argument on the basis of its coding and/or behavioral properties (i.e. Types A and C in Table 1).

<sup>1</sup> While the Type A constructions have been described by various authors as *applicatives* (e.g. Mithun 1994), *symmetrical voice* alternations (e.g. Riesberg 2014), or *topic-marking* (e.g. Chen 2025), we outline specific, observable properties of syntactic coding, syntactic behavior, and semantic meaning that identify and differentiate Type A constructions, independently of these labels.



Map 1: Distribution of applicatives and applicative-like constructions in the sample

Map 1 shows the distribution of the three types in languages of the sample. The constructions are predominantly divided across two forms of verbal morphology, each targeting one of two sets of roles (I: beneficiary, instrument, and/or transported theme; II: location, time, goal, and/or recipient). Within these sets, languages of the sample show: i) Type A only, ii) Type A + B, iii) Type B only, or iv) a combination including Type B + C using the same form of verbal morphology, with Type C often restricted to dative roles. We further discuss etymological evidence indicating that these three types of constructions are diachronically related, including reflexes of the Proto Austronesian suffixes \*-an (LV indicative), \*-i (LV imperative), and \*-an (CV imperative), and other replacement forms.

These data highlight the western Austronesian region as a hotspot for applicative and applicative-like constructions showing rich variation that is still understudied. While similar constructions are found in other language families (e.g. Salishan: Gerds 1988; Otomongean: Hernández-Green 2016, Abkhaz-Adyge: O’herin 2001), insights from Austronesian show that canonical applicative constructions can evolve from and develop into constructions with similar functions but diverse syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic properties.

- (1) **Type A, ‘Topic-promoting’ applicative [LV]** [Puyuma]
 

Ku=beray-ay      i              Isaw   dra      paysu.  
 1S.GEN=give-LV   PN.PIVOT   I.        ID.ACC   money  
 ‘I gave *Isaw* money.’ (primary data)
- (2) **Type A, ‘Topic-promoting’ applicative [CV]** [Puyuma]
 

Ku=beray-anay   kan      Isaw   na              paysu.  
 1S.GEN=give-CV   PN.ACC   I.        DEF.PIVOT   money  
 ‘I gave *Isaw* *the* money.’ (primary data)
- (3) **Philippine-type Actor Voice [AV]** [Puyuma]
 

Beray=ku              kan      Isaw   dra      paysu.  
 give.AV=1S.PIVOT   PN.ACC   I.        ID.ACC   money  
 ‘I gave *Isaw* *the* money.’ (primary data)

- (4) **Philippine-type Patient Voice [PV]** [Puyuma]  
 Ku=trakaw-aw na paysu.  
 1S.GEN=steal-PV DEF.PIVOT money  
 ‘I stole *the money*.’ (primary data)
- (5) **Type B, Syntactic applicative** [West Coast Bajau]  
 Aku meli-an Pirik telumpa’ e.  
 1S.II AV.buy-APPL P. shoe DEM  
 ‘I will buy Pirik shoes.’ (Miller 2007:281)
- (6) **Type B, Syntactic applicative** [Balinese]  
 Tiang meli-in toko ento buku.  
 1S AV.buy-APPL shop DIST book  
 ‘I bought the book in that shop.’ (Artawa 1998:55)
- (7) **Type C, Semantic applicative** [Balantak]  
 Ni-taring-kon-mo a gala-ni Goris.  
 PV.R-cook-APPL-PFV ART vegetables-3S.PN G.  
 ‘*The vegetables* have been cooked for Goris.’ (van den Berg & Busenitz 2012:100)
- (8) **Type C, Semantic applicative** [Nasal]  
 Azma nyanik-kun buwak gin anak=nyo.  
 A. AV.make-APPL snack for child=3  
 ‘Azma made snacks for her child.’ (McDonnell & Truong 2024:984)

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