The verbal prefix *meN* and the unergative/unaccusative distinction in Malay

**Issue**: The restriction on A-bar movement across *meN*- in Malay is a well-known fact (Saddy 1991; Soh 1998; Cole and Hermon 1998). Recent studies have pointed out that *meN*- also restricts A-movement (Cole and Hermon 1998; Nomoto 2008). (1), involving an unaccusative verb, however, appears to present a problem to this claim.

(1)  

\[ \text{Harga elektrik} \text{ turun/} \text{ ME}n-(t)urun. \]  

'The electricity price fell/is falling.'

Assuming the Unaccusative Hypothesis (Perlmutter 1978), *harga elektrik* ‘electricity price’ originates in an object position and undergoes A-movement to a subject position, crossing *meN*-. Yet, (1) is grammatical.

**Proposal**: We argue that (1) does not involve movement across *meN-* because while the bare verb (*turun* ‘fall’) is unaccusative, the corresponding *meN*- form (*men-(t)urun* ‘*meN*-fall’) is unergative.

**Evidence**:

(I) The sole argument of an unaccusative verb may appear post-verbally, unlike that of an unergative verb. *Men-(t)urun* ‘*meN*-fall’ behaves like the unergative *(me-)*nyanyi ‘sing’, and unlike the unaccusative *turun* ‘fall’.

(2)  

\[ \text{Kalau } \{ \text{harga minyak} \text{ tidak turun/} \text{ tidak turun harga minyak} \}, \text{ kita akan bankrup.} \]  

'If the oil price doesn’t fall, we’ll go bankrupt.'

(3)  

\[ \text{Kalau } \{ \text{harga minyak} \text{ tidak men-(t)urun/} \text{ *tidak men-(t)urun harga minyak} \}, \text{ kita akan bankrup.} \]  

'If the oil price doesn’t fall, we’ll go bankrupt.'

(4)  

\[ \text{Kalau } \{ \text{anak (me-)*nyanyi/} \text{ *(me-)*nyanyi anak} \} \text{ dalam kereta api, ibu bapa-nya harus menegur-nya.} \]  

'If a child sings in the train, his/her parents should reprimand him/her.'

(II) Causativization with *-kan* is possible for unaccusatives, but not for unergatives (Vamarasi 1999). Our hypothesis predicts [*turun* + *-kan*] to be a possible causative, but not [*men-(t)urun* + *-kan*]. While *men-(t)urun-kan* ‘lower’ exists as a causative, we argue that it is a result of the prefixation of *meN*- to *turun-kan*, rather than the suffixation of *-kan* to *men-(t)urun*, based on the fact that the existence of a *meN*-X-kan causative verb entails that of a *X-kan* form, but not a *meN*-X form. Thus, for *meny-(s)ampai-kan* ‘convey’ (< *sampai* ‘reach’), only *sampai-kan* is found, but not *meny-(s)ampai.

**Implications**: Our analysis enables us to maintain the generalization that A-movement across *meN*- is prohibited without having to assume two distinct *meN*-'s, one for transitive verbs and another for intransitive verbs. It associates the occurrence of *meN*- with the existence of an external argument, lending support to previous analyses of *meN*- that relate it to the external argument (e.g., Gil 2002), rather than the internal argument (e.g., Fortin, in press). Because the unergative/unaccusative distinction is not always determined by a (verb) root but may be determined by the prefix *meN*- in the functional domain (i.e., *v*), our analysis supports specifying the unergative/unaccusative distinction through syntactic structure (e.g., Borer 2005), rather than lexical encoding (e.g., Levin and Rappaport Hovav 1995).