

Clause Structure and Topicalization in Nias Language: A Typological Analysis

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Abstract—This study investigates the clause structure and topicalization strategies of Nias language (BN), an Austronesian language spoken in North Sumatra, Indonesia. Employing a qualitative descriptive approach, the research aims to portray and analyze syntactic and discourse phenomena in BN within their natural linguistic and cultural contexts. The data were collected through participant observation and naturalistic recording of spontaneous speech among native BN speakers, ensuring authenticity and contextual richness. The recordings were transcribed, translated, and analyzed to identify basic and derived clause patterns and the syntactic mechanisms used to mark topicality. Special attention was given to preverbal positioning, pronominal resumption, and left-dislocation, which reflect BN's alignment with topic-prominent languages. The findings reveal that BN, while maintaining a canonical SVO structure, frequently employs marked word orders and topic-fronting strategies to serve discourse functions. These strategies exhibit a disciplined syntactic patterning that supports flexible information structure. A typological-comparative analysis positions BN within the broader Austronesian language family, highlighting both shared features and distinctive innovations, such as possessive topicalization. The study contributes to theoretical models of clause architecture, typological profiling of Austronesian languages, and ongoing efforts in linguistic documentation and preservation of Indonesia's indigenous languages.

Index Terms—clause structure, indigenous language, Nias language, syntactic typology, topicalization

I. INTRODUCTION

The Nias language (Bahasa Nias, BN), an Austronesian language spoken predominantly on Nias Island off the western coast of Sumatra, Indonesia, exhibits distinctive linguistic features that set it apart from other languages within the Austronesian family. These unique characteristics are evident across various linguistic domains, including phonology, lexicon, morphology, and syntax (Gulö, 2014). Notably, BN demonstrates a range of uncommon morphosyntactic features, including marked absolutive alignment, complex predicate structures, and unique prefixation patterns (Brown, 2001; Crysmann, 2009; Telaumbanua & Harefa, 2023). This morphosyntactic alignment system, characterized by overtly marked absolutive case and flexible word order, contrasts with the more prevalent nominative-accusative or ergative-absolutive systems found in related languages (Crysmann, 2009). This linguistic distinctiveness makes BN a valuable subject for examining the diversity and evolution of Austronesian languages, providing insights into how languages adapt and diverge over time (Widayati, 2020).

BN is characterized by at least five major dialects: Gunung Sitoli, Northern, Central, Western, and Southern (Polili et al., 2018). Each dialect presents notable variations in pronunciation, lexicon, and syntactic structure. For instance, the expression “where are you going?” is realized as *heza möiö* in the Gunung Sitoli dialect, *haega gö möi ndra?ugo* in the Teluk Dalam dialect, and *heza möi?öwe* in the Northern dialect (Nazara, 2019). These differences are not just phonological but reflect deeper morphosyntactic distinctions, potentially influencing information structuring and discourse strategies (Hulu et al., 2023). This variation across dialects highlights the need for comprehensive analyses to understand how each variant contributes to the overall linguistic identity of BN and how these structures might relate to broader Austronesian patterns (Telaumbanua et al., 2022).

Previous linguistic studies have provided foundational insights into BN's syntactic structures. Brown (2001) offers an in-depth analysis of its morphosyntactic features, including verb-initial word order and the role of mutation in argument marking. Similarly, Gulö (2014) discusses BN's unique phonological and morphological traits, while Widayati (2020) explores the historical reconstruction of the language, emphasizing its distinctive morphological development. Recent studies have also examined specific syntactic phenomena, including causative constructions (Nazara et al., 2019), prefixation (Telaumbanua & Harefa, 2023), and comparative adjective forms (Gulo et al., 2023). Yohana and Mulyadi (2024) further examined BN's word order, emphasizing the complex interactions between syntax and information structure, a critical aspect for understanding the grammatical architecture of this language.

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Despite these contributions, significant research gaps remain concerning the interaction between clause structure and information structuring mechanisms, such as topicalization and focus marking within BN. Although scholars like Brown (2001), Himmelmann (2005), and Crysmann (2009) have touched upon aspects of BN's syntax, comprehensive analyses focusing on how BN organizes and emphasizes information through syntactic means are scarce. This gap is particularly evident when considering the language's dialectal diversity and the potential variations in information structuring strategies across different dialects (Nazara, 2019; Yohana & Mulyadi, 2024). Moreover, the influence of sociolinguistic factors, such as language contact and the pressures of language shift, on the syntactic evolution of BN remains underexplored (Polili et al., 2018; Telaumbanua et al., 2022).

This study aims to address this gap by conducting a detailed analysis of clause structures and topicalization strategies across BN's major dialects. By examining how information is organized and emphasized syntactically, this research seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of BN's linguistic architecture and its place within the broader context of Austronesian languages. Such an investigation not only enriches the descriptive linguistics of BN but also offers valuable insights into the typological diversity and syntactic phenomena present in Austronesian languages, potentially informing theories of linguistic change and variation in this major language family.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Linguistic Typology

The term 'typology' in linguistics refers to the systematic classification of languages based on their structural features and organizational principles (Artawa, 1998; Comrie, 1989; Kashyap, 2019). Linguistic typology aims to identify commonalities and differences among languages by examining their phonological, morphological, syntactic, and semantic structures. This approach contrasts with genetic classification, which groups languages based on historical and evolutionary relationships (Ersheidat & Tahir, 2020; Jufriзал, 2007; Mallinson & Blake, 1981). One of the earliest and most influential studies in this field is Joseph Greenberg's work on word order typology (Greenberg, 1963; Comrie, 1989). Greenberg's pioneering research on basic word order identified six primary sentence patterns based on the arrangement of subject (S), verb (V), and object (O) in declarative sentences: SVO, SOV, VSO, VOS, OSV, and OVS. This categorization formed the foundation for much of the subsequent work in linguistic typology (Greenberg, 1963; Dryer, 2013).

Languages vary significantly in their preferred word order. For instance, English and Indonesian primarily follow an SVO structure, while Japanese and Korean typically use SOV, and Classical Arabic and Welsh often exhibit VSO as a dominant pattern (Dryer, 2013; Polili et al., 2018). Some languages, like Latin and Russian, exhibit more flexibility, allowing for multiple word orders depending on pragmatic or stylistic considerations (Comrie, 1989; Widayati, 2020). Greenberg's typological framework also included two additional criteria: the placement of adpositions (prepositions vs. postpositions) and the relative position of attributive adjectives and nouns. This multidimensional approach enabled a more comprehensive understanding of cross-linguistic structural variation (Greenberg, 1963; Crysmann, 2009).

B. Greenberg's Typology

Greenberg's work on linguistic typology extends beyond mere word order to include broader structural relationships within languages. His 'Basic Order Typology' (Greenberg, 1963) proposed that word order patterns are not random but reflect deeper, underlying grammatical principles. These principles include the relative positioning of subjects, verbs, and objects (SVO, SOV, VSO, etc.), the use of adpositions (prepositions versus postpositions), and the positioning of attributive adjectives relative to nouns. For example, in Latin, word order is highly flexible, as shown in the following translations of the sentence 'The father loves his son':

SVO: *Pater diligit filium suum*

SOV: *Pater filium suum diligit*

VSO: *Diligit pater filium suum*

VOS: *Diligit filium suum pater*

OSV: *Filium suum pater diligit*

OVS: *Filium suum diligit pater*

In contrast, languages like English and Indonesian have more rigid word order constraints, typically following SVO for declarative sentences and VSO for questions (Gulo, 2014; Yohana & Mulyadi, 2024). This fundamental difference reflects deeper typological divides related to grammatical marking, flexibility in constituent order, and information structure (Crysmann, 2009; Hulu et al., 2023).

C. Topic Structures in Typological Studies

In addition to word order, the concept of 'topic' plays a crucial role in understanding cross-linguistic variation. A topic is generally understood as the entity about which a statement is made, serving as the starting point for a clause (Li & Thompson, 1976). Li and Thompson's typological framework categorizes languages based on their preference for subject-prominent, topic-prominent, or a mixed system. For example, English and German are typically subject-prominent, while Chinese and Japanese are considered topic-prominent due to their frequent use of topic-comment structures (Li & Thompson, 1976; Jufriзал, 2007).

Languages like Tagalog and Balinese further illustrate the complexity of topic structures, as they allow for double subject constructions where a clause can contain both a topic and a subject, each serving distinct syntactic roles (Artawa, 1998; Gundel, 1988). For instance, in Balinese, left-dislocation often involves a noun phrase followed by a pronoun that agrees with it, forming a marked construction in topic-prominent languages (Artawa, 1998). This contrasts sharply with languages like English, where such constructions are less common and typically involve marked pragmatic effects (Gundel, 1988).

This literature review provides a foundational framework for analyzing the clause structures and topicalization strategies in the Nias language, which remains underexplored despite its unique syntactic properties (Gulö, 2014; Telaumbanua et al., 2022). The current study aims to address this gap by examining whether Nias aligns more closely with subject-prominent or topic-prominent languages, contributing to broader typological insights within the Austronesian family (Nazara, 2019; Telaumbanua & Harefa, 2023).

III. METHODS

This study employed a qualitative approach a descriptive design, adhering to the principles of qualitative descriptive research as outlined by Zaim (2014). Such an approach is particularly suitable for linguistic investigations aiming to portray, elucidate, and systematically analyze language phenomena within their natural contexts. It enabled the researchers to explore clause structures and topicalization strategies in the Nias language (BN) in a detailed and context-sensitive manner. The richness of the qualitative data provided in-depth insights into the syntactic organization and discourse functions of BN, contributing to the broader understanding of clause architecture and topic management in indigenous Indonesian languages.

The data for this study consisted of naturally occurring sentences produced by native BN speakers across various social and cultural settings. The primary objective of data collection was to identify and analyze the basic and derived clause structures in BN, with particular attention to topicalization mechanisms. This aligns with best practices in linguistic documentation, which emphasize the importance of collecting spontaneous speech data to capture authentic grammatical and discourse phenomena (Himmelman, 1998).

The data collection followed several structured steps. First, the researchers engaged in participant observation and naturalistic listening to spontaneous conversations (Swain & King, 2022; Tarigan et al., 2022) among native BN speakers. These interactions were audio-recorded with informed consent and subsequently transcribed in detail to preserve both syntactic and pragmatic features. Transcription practices were guided by recommendations from recent field linguistics literature, ensuring accurate representation of linguistic data. The transcriptions were then translated into English to facilitate syntactic comparison and analysis, with an emphasis on retaining the meaning and structural integrity of the original utterances.

Following transcription and translation, the data were subjected to syntactic analysis focusing on constituent order (e.g., VSO, SVO), clause types (e.g., declarative, interrogative, imperative), and formal markers used in topicalization. This included examining how information structure is expressed—specifically, how topics are introduced, maintained, or shifted within discourse. Topicalization strategies such as preverbal positioning, cleft constructions, and pronominal referencing were closely analyzed in line with frameworks proposed in recent discourse-syntax studies (Lambrecht, 1994; Zimmermann & Onea, 2011).

Throughout the analysis, the researcher employed a typological-comparative framework to determine how the clause structure and topicalization patterns of BN align with or diverge from those observed in other Austronesian and topic-prominent languages. This involved reference to contemporary syntactic typologies and cross-linguistic databases such as the World Atlas of Language Structures (WALS) (Dryer & Haspelmath, 2013). Such comparison enabled the researchers to situate BN within broader typological paradigms and contribute to ongoing discussions on clause structure variation in Austronesian languages.

By focusing on the interaction between clause structure and topicalization, this study offers a comprehensive account of how BN organizes syntactic constituents to reflect discourse priorities. The findings are expected to contribute not only to theoretical and typological linguistics but also to language documentation efforts aimed at preserving and describing lesser-studied languages of Indonesia.

IV. RESULTS

A. Clause Structures in Nias Language

The results reveal that Nias language (BN) predominantly follows a Subject-Verb-Object (SVO) word order, aligning it with a significant portion of the world's languages, including English and Indonesian. However, BN's clause structures exhibit notable flexibility, allowing various word orders to accommodate different pragmatic and discourse functions. This flexibility reflects a broader linguistic phenomenon known as syntactic typology, which classifies languages based on their preferred clause structures and the degree to which they permit variation. This analysis will consider BN's core clause patterns through the lens of typological theory, including basic word order, constituent order variation, and information structure. The examples in (1) – (3) illustrate the SVO pattern in BN.

- (1) *Ya`odo mombaso mbuku*

- 1SG read book
I read a book
- (2) *Ya'ia manura zura*
3SG write letter
He wrote a letter
- (3) *Ya'ira momaikö gitar*
3PL play guitar
They played a guitar

In each case in (1) – (3), the subject precedes the verb and the direct object follows, forming a syntactically and semantically transparent clause structure. This SVO configuration is widely attested cross-linguistically and is typically associated with efficient processing and clarity of interpretation. The subject functions as the agent or experiencer, the verb encodes the predicative action, and the object serves as the patient or theme—a division that aligns closely with the thematic role hierarchy and supports straightforward argument mapping. The linearity of the SVO structure facilitates incremental parsing, allowing listeners or readers to interpret the clause progressively, as information is received. This structure minimizes cognitive load by presenting constituents in a predictable and hierarchically coherent order. It is particularly effective in unmarked, declarative contexts, where the communicative goal is to relay factual information or describe events without special emphasis or topical restructuring.

Moreover, the preference for SVO word order in BN supports what syntactic typologists describe as a basic constituent order, forming the grammatical foundation upon which more complex or pragmatically marked structures (e.g., SVA, ASV, SVOA) may be constructed. As such, SVO serves not only as the default clause structure but also as a baseline against which marked syntactic variations can be analyzed in terms of discourse functions such as topicalization, focus, or foregrounding.

The second structure is Subject-Verb-Adjunct (SVA) pattern, which extends the basic SVO pattern by incorporating an adverbial element, typically expressing time, location, or manner. The adjunct, while not a core argument of the verb, provides essential circumstantial information that enhances the meaning of the utterance. This pattern reflects a common feature of SVO languages, which often allow for the flexible integration of non-core constituents without disturbing the core grammatical relations. The examples in (4) – (6) illustrate the SVA pattern in BN.

- (4) *Ya'ia mörö menewi.*
3SG sleep last night
He slept last night.
- (5) *Ya'ia mohalöwö tolu ngaluo.*
3SG work three day
He has been working for three days.
- (6) *Ama gu maoso sihulöwongi.*
father 1SG-POS get up morning
My father gets up in the morning.

This pattern maintains the primary S-V structure while introducing a temporal, locative, or manner adjunct, allowing for more nuanced meaning. In typological terms, this is a post-verbal adjunct placement, reflecting a preference for maintaining core argument structure (S and V) before adding peripheral information. This pattern aligns well with the principle of end-weight, where longer or more complex constituents follow simpler ones, enhancing sentence processing.

The third clause structure in BN is Adverbial-Subject-Verb (ASV). In this less common but highly expressive structure, the sentence begins with an adverbial element, shifting focus to the temporal or spatial context before introducing the main action. This is a hallmark of languages that permit preverbal adjuncts, often used to foreground contextual information, as shown in (7) – (9).

- (7) *Mege bazibongi ya'ia mörö ba lö fangifi.*
DEM night 3SG sleep PREP dream
Last night he slept soundly.
- (8) *Mege sihulöwongi ya'ira mofanö.*
DEM morning 3PL depart
This morning they departed.
- (9) *Ba harimbale ina gu mowöli.*
Prep market mother 1SG-POS shop
At the market my mother did shopping.

In each case in (7) – (9), the adverbial phrases (*mege bazibongi*, *mege sihulöwongi*, *ba harimbale*) are placed at the beginning of the sentence, setting the temporal or locational scene. This initial placement of non-core elements reflects a strategy of topicalization, wherein the speaker marks certain contextual elements as thematically prominent. Rather than simply modifying the verb, these adverbials anchor the listener in a particular time or place, guiding interpretation of the ensuing action.

This structure aligns with principles from information structure and thematic hierarchy, whereby known or contextually relevant information (e.g., time or setting) precedes new or more dynamic elements (such as the main event). By foregrounding these elements, the ASV construction enhances narrative coherence and facilitates cognitive processing by providing a framework within which the action is interpreted. Furthermore, the use of ASV in BN reflects a discourse-oriented syntax, where the ordering of constituents is sensitive to communicative goals. It is particularly suited to narrative and descriptive discourse, where the establishment of temporal and spatial settings is critical for coherence and listener engagement.

The fourth clause structure in BN is Subject-Verb-Object-Adjunct (SVOA). This pattern represents an expanded variant of the basic SVO structure, incorporating a final adverbial element—typically expressing location, time, or manner—to provide additional contextual information. Crucially, this expansion does not interfere with the sentence's core argument structure; rather, it enriches it by situating the action within a broader spatial or temporal frame. The examples in (10) – (12) demonstrate the SVOA construction in BN.

(10) *Ya'ia mombaso mbuku ba naha mbuku.*
3SG read book PREP place book

He read a book in the library.

(11) *Ya'ia mowöli diwo ba harimbale.*
3SG buy vegetable PREP market

She bought vegetables at the market.

(12) *Ya'odo manura zura mege bazibongi.*
1SG write letter DEM night

I wrote a letter last night.

In each case in (10) – (12), the sentence begins with the core SVO elements—subject (*ya'ia*, *ya'odo*), verb (*mombaso*, *mowöli*, *manura*), and object (*mbuku*, *diwo*, *zura*)—followed by an adjunct that adds situational detail (*ba naha mbuku*, *ba harimbale*, *mege bazibongi*). This syntactic structure enables greater descriptive depth while maintaining clarity and cohesion. The SVOA structure exemplifies the syntactic flexibility of SVO-dominant languages like BN, allowing the integration of peripheral elements (adjuncts) without altering the core propositional content. This capacity for syntactic elaboration supports richer and more contextually grounded communication, making it particularly useful in both spoken and written discourse. It also reflects a broader linguistic tendency to present the main action first before elaborating on its circumstances—thus aiding in incremental information processing by the listener or reader.

The fifth clause structure in BN is Adjunct-Subject-Verb-Object (ASVO). While structurally similar to the ASV pattern, ASVO is comparatively less frequent but notably more expressive. This configuration foregrounds the adverbial or adjunct element—typically indicating time, place, or manner—by positioning it at the beginning of the sentence. This fronting serves to highlight the situational context before introducing the subject, verb, and object, thereby setting the stage for the subsequent action. The examples in (13) – (15) illustrate the ASVO pattern in BN.

(13) *Menewi ya'ia mowöli mbuku.*
yesterday 3SG buy book

Yesterday he bought a book.

(14) *Mahemolu ama gu mofanö ba gödo.*
tomorrow father 3SG-POS go PREP office

Tomorrow my father will go to the office.

(15) *Mege sihulöwongi ya'ira famai bola.*
DEM morning 3PL play football

This morning they played football.

In these instances, the temporal adjuncts *menewi* ('yesterday'), *mahemolu* ('tomorrow'), and *mege sihulöwongi* ('this morning') are placed at the forefront, thereby emphasizing the temporal setting of the actions described. This syntactic choice is particularly salient in narrative discourse, where situating the event in time or space is essential to guiding the listener or reader's interpretation. By foregrounding the adjunct, this pattern de-centers the actor and temporarily diverts attention from the action itself, allowing the narrative setting to take precedence. This feature makes ASVO especially effective for storytelling and descriptive passages, where contextual grounding is crucial. It reflects the language's pragmatic sensitivity to discourse structure, prioritizing scene-setting as a means of enhancing coherence and listener engagement.

The final clause structure in BN is Verb-Subject (VS) pattern. Unlike the more canonical Subject-Verb-Object (SVO) patterns discussed earlier, the VS construction in BN exhibits an inverted constituent order, where the verb precedes the subject. This structure typically appears in intransitive clauses, particularly when no direct object is present. The VS pattern often serves stylistic or discourse-related functions, such as: (i) highlighting the action or event before identifying the actor; (ii) creating a more formal or literary tone, especially in written or narrative texts; and (iii) signaling a thematic shift or introducing new information into the discourse. The examples in (16) – (18) illustrate the VS pattern in BN.

(16) *Fagoi ndaono da'ö.*
run child DEM

The child ran.
 (17) *Mofanö ya'ia.*
 go 3SG
 He went.

(18) *Tohare dome.*
 arrive guest
 The guest arrived

The examples in (16) – (18) illustrate the Verb–Subject (VS) word order pattern in BN, which contrasts with the more common Subject–Verb–Object (SVO) structure found in basic declarative sentences. In these examples, the verb precedes the subject in intransitive clauses where no direct object is present. This inversion serves several discourse and pragmatic functions. By placing the verb first, the construction foregrounds the action or event, thereby emphasizing what is happening before identifying the actor. This can be especially effective in narrative contexts, where sequencing of events and highlighting actions play a central role. Additionally, the VS order often signals a thematic or informational shift, introducing new or less topical subjects after the verb to manage the flow of information strategically. Stylistically, this pattern may convey a more formal, literary, or poetic tone, commonly found in storytelling or ceremonial language. From a syntactic perspective, the VS construction maintains grammatical well-formedness despite deviating from the canonical SVO order. Such flexibility reflects BN's allowance for word order variation motivated by pragmatic needs, a phenomenon widely observed in many SVO languages. The VS pattern thus enriches the language's expressive capacity by enabling speakers to manipulate focus and information structure according to contextual demands.

B. Topicalization in Nias Language

Using Artawa's (1998) framework for analyzing left-dislocation, topicalization, and fronting in BN is intended to determine whether BN exhibits subject-prominence, topic-prominence, or an alternative syntactic alignment. The framework provides a systematic means of distinguishing between marked and unmarked clause structures based on pragmatic and syntactic features. Consider the examples of left-dislocation in BN in (19) – (21).

(19) *Gawe Loli, soia ba nomo.*
 Grandmother loli 3SG PREP house
 Grandmother Loli, she is at home.

(20) *Si Anggiat, ya'ia mowöli laza.*
 ART anggiat 3SG buy field
 Anggiat, he bought the field.

(21) *Manandösa ba gambe da'ö, ya'ia agaekhu tou ba danö.*
 DEF DEM gambier DEM 3SG fall under PREP ground
 About the gambier, it fell to the ground.

In these examples, the fronted noun phrases (NPs) are definite and referential, serving to establish or highlight a topical element at the beginning of the sentence. The fronted NP may appear as a bare noun (19), be introduced by the article *si* (20), or be part of a prepositional phrase marked by the pronoun *ya'ia* (21). Each of these initial NPs is followed by a complete clause in which the subject pronoun (*soia/yaia/ya'ia*) resumes reference to the fronted NP. This structure represents a classic case of left-dislocation, where a noun phrase is preposed to sentence-initial position and is co-referential with a pronominal subject in the clause. The function of this construction is largely pragmatic, serving to foreground or topicalize a referent that is subsequently elaborated within the clause. This type of structure also contributes to discourse cohesion by clarifying the referent early in the utterance, thereby guiding listener interpretation.

BN also allows left-dislocation to express a possessor–possessed (possessor–possessum) relationship between the dislocated NP and the subject of the subsequent clause. This is illustrated in examples (22) and (23).

(22) *Laza da'ö, oya wakhe nia.*
 field DEM many rice 3SG-POS
 The field, its rice is abundant.

(23) *Nomo da'ö, alawa nawu nia.*
 house DEM high kitchen 3SG-POS
 The house, its kitchen is high.

In these examples, the dislocated NPs (*laza da'ö* 'the field' and *nomo da'ö* 'the house') function as possessors, while the subjects of the following clauses (*oya wakhe* 'the rice' and *alawa nawu* 'the kitchen') represent the possessed items. The third-person possessive pronoun *nia* clearly establishes the possessive link between the fronted NP and the subject of the clause. Notably, although these are nonverbal clauses, the same structural pattern extends to verbal clauses, as demonstrated in examples (24) and (25).

(24) *Sibaya Dora, ono alawe khönia sinangea mangowalu.*
 uncle dora child female 3SG-POS will marry
 Uncle Dora, his daughter will get married.

(25) *Niha si kayo da'ö, ono nia mowöli honda.*
 person ART rich DEM child 3SG-POS buy motorcycle

That rich man, his child bought a motorbike.

In (24), the clause is intransitive, with the verb *mangowalu* ('get married') describing the action of the possessed subject *ono alawe khönia* (his daughter). In (25), the clause is transitive, with the possessed subject (his child) performing the action of buying (*mowöli*) a motorbike. In both cases, the dislocated NP (*Sibaya Dora* and *Niha si kayo da'ö*) serves as the possessor, and the subject of the clause co-refers to a possessum marked by the possessive pronoun *khönia* and *nia*. These constructions demonstrate that BN left-dislocation is not limited to topic-fronting of core arguments, but also allows for the foregrounding of possessive relations, thus contributing to discourse cohesion and referential tracking. The recurrence of this pattern in both nonverbal and verbal clauses further attests to its syntactic productivity and pragmatic utility in BN.

Crucially, BN maintains a clear distinction between core arguments and oblique elements. Core arguments—such as subjects and objects—are syntactically unmarked and participate in topicalization. Oblique elements, on the other hand, are marked by prepositions and, although they may appear in the clause-initial position, their fronting does not constitute topicalization in the strict sense. Consider the examples in (26) and (27).

(26) *Mondino nagole ina ba nomo zibaya.*

meat cook mother PREP house uncle

Mother cooked meat at uncle's house.

(27) *Ba nomo zibaya mondino nagole ina.*

PREP house uncle meat cook mother

At uncle's house mother cooked meat.

In (27), the prepositional phrase *ba nomo zibaya* ('at uncle's house') is fronted, likely for reasons of emphasis, contrast, or information structuring. However, since it is an oblique element—marked by the preposition *ba* and not functioning as a core grammatical argument—its fronting does not qualify as topicalization in the strict syntactic sense. Rather, it represents a case of discourse-driven fronting, serving pragmatic rather than syntactic purposes. This analysis underscores the syntactic rigidity of topicalization in BN, i.e., only core arguments may undergo this process, whereas oblique constituents, despite their flexibility in word order, remain outside the domain of true topicalization.

True topicalization in BN involves the fronting of a core argument, typically the object or patient, to the clause-initial position for purposes of discourse prominence. This syntactic operation is illustrated in examples (28a–b) and (29a–b).

(28)a. *Mombaso zura ama.*

read letter father

Father read the letter

b. *Zura ama mombaso.*

letter father read

The letter father read.

(29)a. *Mananö nawugale ninalawe.*

plant pumpkin aunt

Aunt planted pumpkins

b. *Nawugale ninalawe mananö.*

pumpkin aunt plant

Pumpkins aunt planted

In the (b) examples of both sets, the object noun phrases (*zura* 'letter' and *nawugale* 'pumpkins') are fronted, signaling a topicalized construction. Notably, the nasal prefix on the verb (*mombaso*, *mananö*) is retained, indicating that the clause remains active and that topicalization does not alter the verb's morphology or the grammatical voice. Despite being grammatically well-formed, these topicalized constructions are considered marked, or non-basic, in BN. They deviate from the default subject–predicate word order and are typically employed for pragmatic functions such as focus, contrast, or discourse continuity. As such, topicalization in BN is a syntactically permissible but pragmatically motivated structure, reflecting the language's flexibility in managing information structure without compromising its core grammatical alignment.

V. DISCUSSION

The clause structure of BN exhibits a sophisticated interplay between syntactic configurations and discourse-driven motivations. While BN predominantly adheres to a Subject-Verb-Object (SVO) word order, as confirmed by numerous data analyzed in this study, the language also demonstrates considerable structural flexibility. This observation supports the typological claims made by Comrie (1989), Dryer (2013), and Assaiqeli et al. (2021), who argue that although SVO is among the most prevalent constituent orders globally, many languages—particularly within the Austronesian family—employ alternative orders to fulfill pragmatic functions.

BN's dominant SVO structure aligns it with typologically similar languages such as English, Indonesian, and Tagalog, which also prefer SVO in unmarked declarative constructions. This syntactic default appears to enhance processing efficiency, echoing findings in psycholinguistic research (Engelhardt et al., 2023; Hawkins, 2004), where SVO structures are noted to reduce cognitive load and facilitate faster parsing during comprehension. In BN, such constructions often encode straightforward assertions, making them optimal for default discourse contexts.

Beyond this unmarked pattern, BN permits extended clause structures such as SVA and SVOA, where adjuncts—typically denoting temporal or locational information—are placed after verbs. These patterns align with Cinque's (1999) adverbial hierarchy and reflect a broader typological tendency to observe the principle of end-weight, where longer or less central constituents are positioned later in the clause for ease of processing. Such post-verbal adjunct placement suggests that BN adheres not only to grammatical preferences but also to principles of communicative efficiency and cognitive accessibility.

Marked constructions such as ASV and ASVO reflect BN's strategic capacity to reorder constituents in response to contextual and pragmatic demands. These structures, wherein non-core elements like temporal or locative phrases are fronted, function to establish the thematic framework of an utterance. This aligns with Halliday and Matthiessen's (2014) systemic functional theory of thematic structure, where initial positioning signals the speaker's intended point of departure. BN's use of these marked patterns also resonates with findings from Gundel (1988), Lambrecht (1994), and Bondarenko (2021), who argue that fronting mechanisms serve to foreground specific information, guide listener attention, and establish discourse coherence.

The presence of verb-subject (VS) constructions in BN is particularly noteworthy in narrative contexts. These inversions often occur with intransitive verbs and are employed to highlight the action or introduce new discourse referents, mirroring similar structures in Irish (Masia, 2024). Rizzi's (1997) framework on the left periphery of the clause provides further insight into this phenomenon, positing that such constructions can be motivated by focus-related operations. In BN, VS patterns appear to fulfill similar discourse functions, underscoring the language's flexible syntax in service of narrative salience and stylistic variation.

Topicalization in BN further demonstrates the language's pragmatic sophistication. Using Artawa's (1998) framework, the study reveals that BN, while predominantly subject-prominent, allows for left-dislocation to foreground topical elements. This strategy, wherein a definite referential noun phrase is fronted and then resumed via a co-referential pronoun, reflects a syntactically marked but pragmatically motivated structure. Such constructions are attested in typologically similar languages, including Balinese (Artawa, 1998), Minangkabau (Cumming, 1991; Jufrizal, 2007), and topic-prominent languages such as Japanese and Korean (Li & Thompson, 1976). BN thus joins a typological spectrum of languages that flexibly exploit constituent order to reflect discourse roles such as topic and focus.

In addition, BN employs left-dislocation to express possessor–possesum relations, a feature shared with other Austronesian languages like Tagalog and Chamorro (Kroeger, 1993). These constructions enhance referential continuity and discourse cohesion, particularly in extended narrative discourse. However, a crucial syntactic distinction arises: while core arguments can be both fronted and resumed pronominally, oblique elements—such as peripheral locatives or instrumentals—may be fronted but lack resumptive pronouns, signaling that such fronting is primarily discourse-driven rather than a product of syntactic topicalization (Cruschina, 2021).

Thus, these findings underscore BN's intricate balance between structural regularity and functional adaptability. While SVO serves as the unmarked default, the language accommodates a range of constituent order variations—such as ASV, SVOA, VS, and topicalized constructions—to manage information structure, highlight thematic elements, and enhance discourse flow. This syntactic flexibility situates BN within a typological continuum where pragmatic motivations interact dynamically with grammatical constraints. As such, BN exemplifies how Austronesian languages deploy constituent order not merely as a grammatical requirement, but as a communicative strategy responsive to narrative, thematic, and cognitive considerations.

VI. CONCLUSION

The analysis of clause structure and topicalization in BN reveals a nuanced interaction between typological regularity and pragmatic adaptability. While BN predominantly adheres to the canonical Subject-Verb-Object (SVO) order, it exhibits notable syntactic flexibility through marked constructions such as SVA, ASV, SVOA, ASVO, and VS. These alternative structures are not random deviations but pragmatically motivated strategies that reflect thematic emphasis, narrative framing, and discourse organization. Topicalization in BN, primarily realized through left-dislocation with pronominal resumption, underscores the language's alignment with topic-prominent systems while retaining a degree of syntactic constraint. This mechanism allows BN speakers to manage information flow effectively, foregrounding referential or thematic constituents without compromising grammatical coherence.

When viewed in a broader typological context, BN shares key structural features with related Austronesian languages such as Indonesian, Balinese, and Minangkabau, particularly in its basic word order and use of adjuncts. At the same time, it demonstrates distinct pragmatic elaborations, such as possessor topicalization and narrative inversion, that enhance referential cohesion and contextual framing. These findings not only refine the typological profile of BN but also contribute to our broader understanding of how Austronesian languages mediate between structural templates and functional demands.

The current study has highlighted the complex yet systematic nature of clause structure and topicalization strategies in Bahasa Nias, revealing a syntax that is both typologically grounded and pragmatically responsive. Future studies should incorporate a wider range of dialects within the Nias language, such as the South, Central, and North dialectal varieties. Given that dialectal variation can influence syntactic preferences and pragmatic strategies, comparative

analyses across dialects may uncover subtle but significant grammatical and discourse-level distinctions that are not captured in studies of a single variety. Given the close relationship between syntax, discourse, and prosody, further research could investigate how intonation and stress patterns interact with topicalization and focus marking in BN. A prosodic analysis would help determine whether certain marked structures are accompanied by prosodic cues that guide listener interpretation and highlight thematic elements.

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