Microparametric Variation in the Tongic DP: The Lingering Determiner Effect

Catherine Macdonald and Diane Massam, University of Toronto

We undertake a comparison between the nominal syntax of Niuean and Tongan. These two languages constitute the Tongic subgroup of the Polynesian family (Pawley 1966) and as such provide a perfect venue for the study of microparametric variation (Clark 1976, Otsuka 2006).

There are many commonalities and a number of striking differences between the nominal domains of the two languages. In both, a left peripheral case marker is obligatory, and N^0 is preceded by markers of outer and inner aspect (Macdonald 2014), which are in turn preceded by a number marker. Whereas the relative order of these elements is fixed and consistent between the two languages, there is considerable variation, both intra- and cross-linguistically, in the ordering of post-nominal modifiers, including adjectives, demonstratives, and relative clauses. Another striking difference, addressed below, can be seen in the position just to the right of the case marker. In Table 1, we give a schematic illustration of the spell-out order of elements within Tongan and Niuean nominal phrases.

Table 1: Order of elements in Tongan and Niuean nominals, left to right

	case marker	determiner / quantifier numeral possessor singular marker	#	outer aspect	inner aspect	N^0	adjective / demonstrative	possessor numeral relative clause definite accent / demonstrative	possessor	relative clause numeral	universal quantifier
Tongan	case marker	determiner	#	outer aspect	inner aspect	N^0	adjective demonstrative	possessor numeral relative clause definite accent			universal quantifier
Niuean	case marker	quantifier numeral possessor singular marker	#	outer aspect	inner aspect	N^0	adjective numeral	demonstrative	possessor	relative clause numeral	

After an overview, we focus on the second position in the chart. In Tongan, this is the locus of determiners; in Niuean, which lacks overt determiners, a number of other projections can be found here, including certain quantifiers (with meanings *many, some*) and the singular marker *taha*, as well as preposed numerals, and possessors. We hypothesize that this difference results from the reanalysis of proto-Tongic determiners as case markers in Niuean (*cf.* Clark 1976).

When Niuean diverged from Tongan, the case markers *a* (ABSOLUTIVE) and *e* (ERGATIVE), cognate with Tongan *'a* and *'e* respectively, were retained with proper nouns and pronouns – which in both languages do not co-occur with determiners. With common nouns, the absolutive case marker + article combination *'ae i*n Tongan was reanalyzed as *e* in Niuean, and the ergative case marker +article combination *'e he* in Tongan was reanalyzed as *he* in Niuean (Clark 1976:49). We propose that this morpho-phonological change precipitated a semantic and syntactic one: The semantics of specificity, associated with the article *he* in Tongan, was lost in Niuean, resulting in case-marked nominals that can be read as either specific or nonspecific (Gorrie *et al*. 2010). The resulting correspondences are shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Case marker + article correspondences in Niuean and Tongan

		absolutive (+article)	ergative (+article)
Proper/Pronominal	Niuean	*a*	*e*
	Tongan	*'a*	*'e*
Common	Niuean	*e*	*he*
	Tongan	*'ae*	*'e he*

In both Tongan and Niuean, possessors are merged in the post-nominal domain but can optionally be fronted, subject to certain restrictions. In Tongan, fronted possessors are obligatorily pronominal, derived via cliticization to D^0. In Niuean, they may be either full pronouns or proper nouns, and they are followed by a linking particle, *a*.[1] Moreover, whereas the presence of a fronted possessor in Niuean introduces a definiteness effect (1), this is not the case in Tongan. Rather, the specificity of the head nominal depends on the determiner – *he* (SPECIFIC) or *ha* (NONSPECIFIC) – to which the possessor is cliticized (2).[2]

(1) *… haaku   a   fale*
    1SG-GEN LNK house
    '…my house'

    … fale   haaku
    house 1SG-GEN
    '…my house/a house of mine'

(2) *… he'eku   helé*
    SPEC+EX.SG knife-DEF
    '…my knife/the knife which is mine'

    …ha'aku   hele
    NONSPEC+1EX.SG knife
    '…my knife/one of my knives'

We propose that once the determiner was lost in Niuean, fronted possessors could no longer be derived via cliticization and were reanalyzed as phrasal elements. This accounts for the allowability of non-pronominal nouns as fronted possessors in [Spec, DP]. Thus, while the morphological determiners were lost, the position of D^0 remained, and its specifier became host to other phrasal modifiers, such as numerals and quantifers. Like fronted possessors, each of these requires a linker, and, interestingly, most of them introduce (in)definiteness (*i.e.* old/new information) effects. Whereas fronted possessors force a definite interpretation, *taha* 'one' and *falu* 'some' force an indefinite one. Thus, the syntactic position D^0, despite the fact that it now hosts a semantically vacuous linker and not a determiner, retains a trace of D^0 semantics as the locus of (potential) definiteness, but necessarily in conjunction with material in its specifier.

This analysis points to the possibility that a language might lose a category yet retain the structural position that it appeared in and, furthermore, that the position may retain a connection with its semantic function. This raises questions about the cross-linguistic nature of D^0 as the locus of semantic features and/or syntactic categories (Lyons 1999, Abney 1987, Ghomeshi *et al.* 2009), since in Tongan, D^0 houses determiners which mark specificity, and in Niuean, linkers, which are semantically and categorically null but tied to definiteness through their specifiers.

References

Abney, S., 1987. *The English Noun Phrase in its Sentential Aspect*. PhD Dissertation, MIT.
Clark, R., 1976. *Aspects of Proto-Polynesian Syntax*. Auckland: Linguistic Society of New Zealand.
Ghomeshi, J., I. Paul, and M. Wiltschko, 2009. *Determiners: Universals and Variation*. Amsterdam: Benjamins.
Gorrie, C., A. Kellner, and D. Massam, 2010. Determiners in Niuean: Everywhere and Nowhere. *AJL* 30.3:349-365.
Lyons, C., 1999. *Definiteness*. Cambridge: CUP.
Macdonald, C., 2014. *Functional Projections and Non-Local Relations in Tongan Nominal Phrases*. PhD dissertation, U of T.
Otsuka, Y., 2006. Niuean and Eastern Polynesian: A View from Syntax. *OL* 45.2:429-456.
Pawley, A., 1966. Polynesian languages: a subgrouping based upon shared innovations. *JPS* 75:39-64.

---

[1] A reviewer notes that this linker is partially homophonous with one of the two Tongan possessive particles, *'a*. Whether this homophony is significant is not known.

[2] Tongan also has a series of post-nominal possessive pronouns. These co-occur with either a pre-nominal determiner (*ha* or *he*) or a co-referential pre-nominal possessive pronoun (a doubled clitic) in D^0 which indicates the (non-)specificity of the possessum. Post-nominal possessors do not reflect the (non-)specificity of the possessum.