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 N⁰ is preceded by markers of outer and inner aspect (Macdonald 2014), which in turn are 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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Tongan</th>
<th>Niuean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>case marker</td>
<td>determiner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>case marker</td>
<td>quantifier</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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 in 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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Proper/Pronominal</th>
<th>Niuean</th>
<th>Tongan</th>
<th>absolutive (+article)</th>
<th>ergative (+article)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Common</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Niuean</td>
<td>e</td>
<td>‘e he</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tongan</td>
<td>‘a</td>
<td>‘ae</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: The table shows the case marker + article correspondences in Niuean and Tongan.
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 D⁰. In Niuean, they may be either full pronouns or proper nouns, and they are followed by a linking particle, a. 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).

(1) ... haaku a fale ... ha’aku helé
ISG-GEN LNK house SPEC+EX.SG knife-DEF
‘...my house’ ‘...my knife/the knife which is mine’

(2) ... fale haaku ... ha’aku hele
house ISG-GEN NONSPEC+1EX.SG knife
‘...my house/a house of mine’ ‘...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 D⁰ remained, and its specifier became host to other phrasal modifiers, such as numerals and quantifiers. 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 D⁰, despite the fact that it now hosts a semantically vacuous linker and not a determiner, retains a trace of D⁰ 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 D⁰ as the locus of semantic features and/or syntactic categories (Lyons 1999, Abney 1987, Ghomeshi et al. 2009), since in Tongan, D⁰ houses determiners which mark specificity, and in Niuean, linkers, which are semantically and categorically null but tied to definiteness through their specifiers.

References

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.

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 D⁰ which indicates the (non-)specificity of the possessum. Post-nominal possessors do not reflect the (non-)specificity of the possessum.