

THE SAMOAN CONNECTION
OR
VERB AND NOUN PHRASE RELATIONS IN A POLYNESIAN LANGUAGE

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INTRODUCTION

The question of the role of the nominal particles in Samoan has been discussed frequently since Churchward's innovative study in 1926. In that work Churchward differed with earlier missionary and trader interpretations of the verb phrase and associated subject noun phrase as being marked active or passive (instead considering them transitive and intransitive), but most subsequent studies have continued to follow the active/passive dichotomy. Regardless of which interpretation is used, however, the nominal particles have required a certain amount of imaginative definition. It is the purpose of this study to examine previous descriptions of these particles, and to suggest that a focus-type analysis is not only possible for a Polynesian language, but may result in a model of greater explanatory power.

- (1) na mana'o le tinā 'i lāna tama.
tense want the mother part. her child
- (2) na nana'o-m-ia le tama e lona tinā.
tense want sfx. the child part. her mother

Both (1) and (2) may be translated '*The mother wanted her child*', or '*The child was wanted by her mother*' (Milner 1962:152). The traditional interpretation is to assign the active translation to (1) and the passive to (2). This results in the identification of the particle 'i as a marker for the direct object noun phrase, and the e as the preposition 'by'. In addition, the verbal suffix in (2) was considered to mark the passive form of the verb. With the examination of more sentences, however, the above description has had to be modified ad

infinitum to account for the variability in the particles' distribution and interpretation.

George Milner has questioned the descriptive adequacy of the above model in articles pointing out their three major flaws (Milner 1962, 1974). For example, sentences with passive suffixes such as (2) may be made 'passive in form, but active in meaning' by preposing the pronoun (as in (2a)). The pronoun loses its nominal particle in the process and superficially resembles an active sentence in which a pronoun has also been preposed (1a).

(1a) na ia mana'o 'i lona tama.
t pn want part. her child

(2a) na ia mana'o-m-ia le tama.
t pn want sfx. the child

Additionally, in some sentences the passive actor is not marked by the particle *e*, but is instead introduced like the object of an active sentence.

(3) 'ua ia lavea i lona uso.
t pn hurt part. her sibling
'She is hurt by her sibling.'

Thirdly, there are sentences which are described as passive although their verbs are not marked by a passive suffix.

(4) na fasi le tama e lona tinā.¹
t beat the child part. her mother
'The child was beaten by her mother.'

In an attempt to eliminate some of the inconsistencies in previous descriptions of Samoan syntax, Milner suggested that it was aspect and not voice which was marked by the verbal suffix. Further, he divided the sentences into two basic types: Objective and Ergative.

Objective sentences are described as those in which: (1) the unmarked NP is identified as the actor and is the subject of a focused verb, (2) the NP introduced by the particle *i* is identified as the goal or object NP, and (3) the unsuffixed verb is in the imperfective aspect which stresses the action or process itself. The ergative construction is said to be characterised by (1) the unmarked NP being the object or goal rather than the actor, (2) the particle *e* marking the non-subject actor NP, and (3) the verbal suffix placing the whole in the perfective aspect stressing the totality of the action (Milner 1974).

This description has much to recommend it, and is, I believe, quite accurate in its assessment of the unmarked NP as the one in focus, and that the particle *e* introduces a non-focal actor NP. The question of the verbal suffixes and their relationship to the nominal particles,

however, may be masked by their consideration as aspectual alone. Milner's work on these various aspects of the Samoan syntactic system has laid the groundwork for this attempt to view it in a Focus framework. It is believed that by examining verbal suffixes and nominal particles as part of an integrated syntactic system, the Focus System, the inconsistencies in earlier analyses may be reduced.

ANALYSIS

The term focus, as used here, is a sentence level, overt marking system whereby the predicate undergoes derivational affixation to specify one of a restricted number of possible semantic aspects of the happening (typically: actor/agent, goal/object, temporal/spatial specificity, or instrument/motivation). Strictly speaking, focus is neither topicalisation nor emphasis, but an equational relationship between the verb phrase and one of its associated noun phrases. NP's may be thought of as topicalised or emphasised through such devices as preposing, whether or not the sentence contains an NP which is equated with the verb. Conversely, if the in-focus noun phrase does occur it need not necessarily be the NP marked for emphasis by some other device.

To apply a focus analysis I begin, as have others, with the assumption that there are two types of sentences in Samoan: those with suffixed verbs, and those without. I borrow the suggestion that the in-focus NP is unmarked, and that the un-focused actor NP is marked by the particle *e*. This analysis differs in its consideration of the verbal suffix as an integral part of the Focus System, whatever its aspectual implications, and does not consider the particle *i* to mark the object or goal NP, but rather any non-focal, non-actor noun phrase. These assumptions may be represented by the following schema:

Nominal Particle	Abbreviation	Description
'o	CM=	Equational construction marker, marks the focused NP when preposed, and is the appositional marker between two noun phrases.
e	CM≠A	Non-equational actor construction marker, marks the non-focal actor.
i, 'i	CM≠	Non-equational construction marker, marks non-focal, non-actor noun phrases.

With the above assumptions, let us examine the sentence below.

- (5) na tā-ia le tama e le toea'ina 'i le lā'au.
 t hit-AF the child CM≠A the old man CM≠ the stick
 'The old man hit the child with the stick' OR 'The child was hit by the old man with the stick' OR 'The child was hit with the stick by the old man.'

In (5) the verbal suffix² indicates that the sentence is non-actor focus (-AF), '*the child*' is unmarked, and so equated with the verb as the focal NP, '*the old man*' is the non-focal actor, and '*the stick*' is both non-focal and non-actor. Activity and passivity in the Indo-European sense must be left to the Indoeuropean speaker to interpret, since syntactically the pertinent information is only that '*the child*' = '*the hit*'. In fact, it may be found through further investigation that '*the old man*' is no more a part of the kernel of sentence (5) than '*the stick*', both NP's being of a commentary nature.

It should also be noted that the problem of glossing the prepositions is a moot one, as the English equivalent must be matched to the environment rather than to a particular particle. This obviates the multiple, homophonous elements required by earlier models.

The two sentence types under consideration here are, therefore, actor-focus (+AF) and non-actor focus (-AF). The nominal particles simply identify a noun phrase as +focus or -focus and +actor or -actor.

To return to the so-called 'passive form, but active meaning' sentences such as (2a), it may be noted that from a basic sentence type of (1) or (2) it is the actor which is pronominalised and preposed in (1a) and (2a) regardless of the focus. This is true for the class of unsuffixed 'passive' verbs such as *fasi* in (4) as well. As Milner (1962:154) pointed out *na ia fasi* is not a transformation of *na fasi le tama* ('*The child was beaten*'), but of *na fasi e le tama* ('*The child beat something*') as one would expect if pronominalisation and preposition is restricted to the actor NP.

Concerning the sentences in which the verb is not suffixed, although they are presumably non-actor focus, the evidence is inconclusive. At this stage of the analysis the meaning of too few of these sentences is known with enough certainty to posit a strongly supported argument. It may be temporarily sufficient to posit a class of verbs which are inherently non-actor oriented, and consequently require no suffix. A more important and revealing question, however, is raised by sentences of the type shown in example (3) in which the actor is not marked with the non-focal *e* but with *i*. This rather puzzling event is clarified if the researcher does not see 'actor' through his own Indoeuropean lenses, but is willing to allow the semantic category of the NP to be defined by the Samoan syntax. Obviously, in examples such as (3) the non-focal NP under examination is placed in the same category as the 'instrument' in (5), the 'referent' in (6), and the 'direct object' in (1). It has not been placed with the non-focal actors in the same examples.