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**Feature Packaging: Functional Categories in the Niuean Nominal
Phrase***

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Note: ‘g’ is pronounced as engma in Niuean, i.e. it is the symbol for a velar nasal, so first syllable of *loga* is pronounced like the word ‘long’ - the other Niuean words in the text are just pronounced as they are written.

I. Introduction

In this paper we will examine the structure of the nominal phrase in Niuean, a Polynesian language of the Tongic subgroup, paying particular attention to the grammatical or functional elements that appear in the nominal phrase. We will lay out all the elements found in the nominal phrase and discuss the relations among them.

In this study we will address in particular, the question whether there is any functional category in Niuean that can be considered to serve the function of determiner, as found in heavily-studied languages such as English and French, as exemplified in (1)

- | | | | | |
|-----|----|----------------|----|-----------------|
| (1) | a. | the dog | c. | le chien |
| | b. | a dog | d. | un chien |

In much recent theoretical work on phrasal structure, attention has turned markedly towards functional elements. A key early participant in this development was Abney (1987), who proposed that a standard nominal phrase such as “the dog” should be considered to have a structure as in (2a), not (2b).

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In languages such as English, determiners are generally (a) obligatory and (b) left-most or highest in the phrase, thus the name for nominal phrases has come to be Determiner Phrase or DP as in (2a) rather than a Noun Phrase or NP. In this way, determiners have taken on a privileged status among all of the various functional elements that appear in nominal phrases, which include case, number, quantifiers, classifiers, gender markers and so on. It is worth asking therefore, whether determiners are universal, that is, do all languages have such a category?

In languages such as English, determiners play two roles. First the determiner is the top-level, obligatory item, which serves to turn a nominal phrase into an argument, usable by syntax. And second, a determiner has a particular semantic property, in that it serves to restrict or modify in some way, the possible reference for the nominal phrase it appears with. In asking whether determiners are universal, we can ask first, whether all languages have some top-level obligatory functional head, which serves to render a nominal phrase usable by syntax, and we can also ask if such heads necessarily have the same semantic function of determination in all languages.

With this background, when we turn to the examination of the nominal system of Niuean, several questions arise, as outlined in (3).

- (3) a. What are the functional categories in the Niuean nominal phrase, and how can they best be characterized?
 b. How do they compare with categories in other languages?
 c. Is there any category or categories among them that play the same role as determiners do in languages like English and French?

In this paper we will concentrate on the first and the third of these questions.

Before laying out the nominal phrase, let us look briefly at the basic syntax of Niuean. Niuean is a Verb-initial language with an ergative-absolutive Case marking system, which is exemplified in (4) on the handout. Generally, Case markers are portmanteau items, which also encode information as to whether the noun is Proper or Common. Pronouns are classified with proper nouns. In (4a), we see an Absolutive Proper case marker, and in (4b) we see an Absolutive Common case marker. In (4c) we find an Ergative Proper case marker and in (4d) we find an Ergative Common case marker.

- (4) a. Ne tohitohi **a** **Sione**.
 Pst writing AbsP Sione
 Sione was writing.
- b. Kua egaega **e** **kau** **kauvehe**.
 Perf rosy AbsC Pl cheek
 The cheeks are rosy. (Sp.55)
- c. Ko e tele **e** **Sione** a Sefa.

Pres kick ErgP Sione AbsP Sefa
 Sione is kicking Sefa. (S.73d:29)

- d. Ne kai **he** **pusi** ia e moa.
 Pst eat ErgC cat that AbsC bird
 That cat ate the chicken, (S.73a:29)

For your reference, the system is shown in the chart in (5) for ergative and absolutive. It runs through the entire case system, as we will see shortly.

(5) Proper-Common Distinction (throughout Case system)

	Ergative	Absolutive
Proper	he	e
Common	e	a

II. The Niuean Nominal Phrase

As well as containing a Case marker inflected for the proper-common feature, the Niuean noun phrase can contain a number of other elements. These are laid out in (6). First there can be a preposition, which is somewhat outside of the nominal domain, but we include it because it has been included in previous descriptions of the phrase. An example of a goal preposition is found in (8). The preposition is followed by a Case marker, and then an Article encoding the proper-common distinction. We consider these to be separate morphemes abstractly, though as mentioned above, the phonological morphemes are often portmanteau morphemes encoding both Case and Article meanings, as seen in (7) where Locative case and Common feature appear together as *he*. For this reason, there is a dotted line between the Case and Article slots in (6). The next item is a quantificational element. A number of types of morphemes can appear here, such as those listed in (11), including a true quantifier such as *loga*, as in example (10), or the quantificational article *taha* as in (9). In addition, possessors and numerals can occur pre-nominally, in which case they appear in this slot. The next item, after the quantifier, is a number morpheme. The most typical of these is *tau*, meaning Plural, as in (7). You will note that there is a dotted line between quantifier and number slots. This is because several quantifiers bear number information, such as *taha*, which is singular, and *loga*, which is plural. The final item which appears before the noun is a classifier. An example is in (7), *atu* which signifies a row or group of islands. Other examples are *lafu* for a family group, and *na:* for a pair. Although these classifiers encode number, and can appear instead of the plural marker *tau*, (7) shows that they can also co-occur with the plural marker *tau*, hence we consider number and classifier to be separate categories, and have not placed a dotted line between the two slots in (6).

(6) Surface Order of Elements in Niuean Nominal Phrase

PREPOSITION	CASE	ARTICLE	QUANTIFIER	NUMBER	CLASSIFIER	NOUN	ADJECTIVE	NUMERAL	DEMONSTRATIVE	POSSESSOR	RELATIVE CLAUSE
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*Note: Possessors and Numerals can optionally appear in Quantifier slot

(7) he tau atu motu
 LocC Pl Class island
 “on a group of islands” (S:38:101)

(8) mai he falu a aelani
 Prep LocC some island
 “from other islands” (THK)

(9) he taha tagata ha kuki
 GenC a man GenP Cook
 “of a man of Cook’s” (THK)

(10) (e) loga e tau mena fakaaloga
 AbsC many Lig Pl thing gift
 “many gifts” (THK)

(11) **Quantifiers:** *loga* “many”, *ga:boa* “few”, *taba* “a,one”, *falu a* “some” (also, possessors and numerals can optionally occur in quantifier position, or postnominally as in (3)).

This completes our discussion of the items found in the Niuean nominal phrase preceding the noun. Following the noun phrase we find adjectives, numerals, demonstratives, possessors, and relative clauses. As noted above, numerals, and possessors can appear in the pre-nominal quantifier slot. We set aside adjectives, relative clauses and demonstratives in this paper, simply noting that demonstratives are optional and in Niuean they do not function like determiners.

The interaction between prepositions, case and the proper-common article have been noted in the literature on Niuean. For example, Seiter (1980) collapses the three into one category of Case, as shown in (12). However, in studying this paradigm, it seems clear that the data is capable of a finer morphological analysis, and I provide my analysis in (13). I will not discuss this analysis in this paper, but I provide it for reference and invite

those who are familiar with Polynesian morphology to assess it at their leisure. Of particular interest is that I separate the phonological morpheme *he* into two units, *h*, denoting Case, and *e*, denoting Common.

(12) Niuean Cases (as analyzed by Seiter 1980)

	<u>ABS</u>	<u>ERG</u>	<u>LOC</u>	<u>GOAL</u>	<u>POSS</u>
COMMON	e	he	he	ke he	he
PROPER	a	e	i	ki	ha

(13) Niuean Cases (as analyzed in this paper)

Common					
	<u>Prep</u>	<u>Case</u>	<u>Art_{pr/c}</u>	<u>Q/#/Cl</u>	<u>NP</u>
Abs			<i>e</i>	<i>taha</i>	
Erg		<i>h</i>	<i>e</i>	<i>falu a</i>	
Gen		<i>h</i>	<i>e</i>	<i>tau</i>	
Loc		<i>h</i>	<i>e</i>	<i>kau</i>	
Goal	<i>ke</i>	<i>h</i>	<i>e</i>	etc.	
Source	<i>mai</i>	<i>h</i>	<i>e</i>		
Ben	<i>ma</i>		<i>e</i>		
Comit	<i>mo</i>		<i>e</i>		
Instr	<i>aki</i>		<i>e</i>		

Proper (H=human only)					
	<u>Prep</u>	<u>Case</u>	<u>Art_{pr/c}</u>	<u>Q/#/Cl</u>	<u>NP</u>
Abs		<i>a</i>			
Erg		<i>e</i>			
Gen		<i>h</i>		<i>a</i>	
Loc		<i>i</i>		<i>a (H)</i>	
Goal	<i>ki</i>	<i>(i?)</i>		<i>a (H)</i>	
Source	<i>mai</i>	<i>(i?)</i>		<i>a (H)</i>	
Ben	<i>ma</i>				
Comit	<i>mo</i>				
Instr	<i>aki</i>			<i>a (H)</i>	

III. The Distributed Niuean Determiner

Let us now examine these morphemes to determine if any of them act like the English Determiner. The first answer to this question is that they all share some characteristics with the English determiner. First, Case in Niuean, like the Determiner in English, is virtually obligatory. Second, the Article and Quantifiers share semantic features with English determiners in that they narrow or determine the reference of the noun. Number is a feature which appears on indefinite determiners in English, and as noted

above, classifiers in Niuean also indicate number. In some sense, then, the functions of the English determiner are distributed across the Niuean functional elements.

(14)

- Case: is obligatory.
- Article: indicates uniqueness.
- Quantifier: indicates quantity, interacts with scope.
- Number: indicates number.
- Classifier: indicates number

There is only one element in Niuean, however, that shares the obligatory character of the English determiner, namely Case. Looking at the chart in (13), and assuming absolutive case to be present but null in common noun phrases, all noun phrases can be seen to include case. (There is one set of exceptions: Benefactive, Comitative and Instrumental Nominals, which include a preposition, but no case – We put these aside).

If we can make a parallel between Niuean case and the English Determiner in that each of these categories is obligatorily present in any nominal argument or adjunct in a clause, then we have determined that there is no necessary connection between being the obligatory functional head of nominal phrases and having the semantics of determination. This claim is weakened, however, by the fact that Niuean case markers, as observed above, contain a feature for proper-common in that all common case markers include the vowel *e* analysed as the common article in (13), which proper case markers fail to include. Since proper nouns are uniquely determined, and common nouns are not, we have to conclude that the obligatory item in a Niuean noun phrase, like the determiner in English, contains a feature with a value of determination. Hence, the question of whether there is some fundamental connection between the semantics of determination and the ability to take on argument status remains open.

IV. The Non-existent Niuean Determiner

We have established that each pre-nominal functional category in Niuean contains some element of meaning which can be encoded in the English determiner. However, there is an important difference between the Niuean and English determiner system. One of the key roles of the English determiner system is to encode definiteness, which can loosely be defined as indicating whether the referent of the noun is assumed to be familiar to speaker and hearer. Another semantic component tied to the indefinite determiner in English is specificity, which can loosely be defined as determining whether there is or is not a specific referent for the noun, or if the noun has a more quantificational semantics.

(15) English Determiners

- the: definite
- a: indefinite (specific or nonspecific)

When we look at the Niuean system, it appears that these elements of meaning are completely absent from the morphology of the language, and in this sense, there is no determiner in Niuean comparable to the English determiner.

Because definiteness and specificity are so central to our understanding of determiners, based on languages such as English and French, there is often a tendency to analyze other languages along these lines. Thus, Seiter (1980) presents the analysis of the key quantifiers (including the number marker *tau*) in Niuean which is given in (15) on the handout.

(16) Chart as proposed by Seiter (1980)

	-DEFINITE		+DEFINITE	
	-PLURAL	+PLURAL	-PLURAL	+PLURAL
-SPECIFIC	taha ha ∅	tau falu a	∅	tau
+SPECIFIC	taha ∅			

When we examine this system, it is clearly not a viable one. There is morphological marking of number in that only plural nominals can contain the plural morpheme *tau*, and *falu a*. But there is no real contrast in the system for definiteness, since *tau* and null can be plus or minus definite. And there is no real contrast for specificity either, since *taha*, null, *tau*, and *falu a* can all be either specific or non-specific.

That the anomaly here lies with the proposed system in (6), and not with Seiter's understanding of the individual morphemes, can be seen by the data in (17) to (24). (17) shows that a noun phrase with no quantifier or number marking can be definite, since the octopus in (17b) is clearly definite. *Tau* can also be definite, since in (18b) the group from Tonga has been introduced and is serving as the topic of the story.

(17) ∅ as definite:

- a. Ne kitia e ia e **taha feke lahi** ti oho atu a ia ke tapaki.
Pst see ErgP she AbsC **a octopus big** and jump Dir Abs she Sbjv catch
“Near the reef edge she saw **an octopus** and jumped at it to catch it.”
- b. Kua keli tuai e ia e **feke** ti mate.
Perf beat Perf ErgP she **AbsC octopus** and die
She beat **the octopus** and it died.

(18) *tau* as definite:

- a. (once upon a time a group of young Tongans came to Niue....)

- b. Ati hu:huh: ai agataha mo e pehe ai *e tau fuata* mai he motu ko Tonga
Then ask Res then and said Res **AbsC Pl group** from Loc island Pred Tonga
“So **the group from Tonga** told the reason (why they were visiting)”

At the same time, we can see that null marking and *tau* can be indefinite. In (19) a Cook Islander is introduced for the first time, hence is not definite, and in (20) *tau* appears in an existential context, hence it is clearly indefinite.

(19) Ø as indefinite:

- a. (A: (“If someone speaks English, I don’t know if they are Niuean or European.”))
- b. B: ka e iloa nakai e koe ka pehe: ko *e Atu Luga?*
But know Ques AbsP you if like Pred **AbsC Cook Islander?**
“But would you know if it was **a Cook Islander?**” (IHN)
(Languages of Manukau interview project, data courtesy of D. Starks, U. Auckland)

(20) *tau* as indefinite:

ha ha i ai *e tau vahega*
there were **AbsC Pl class**
“there were **some classes..**”

On the other side of the chart in (16), we can see that *taba* and *falu a* indeed can be specific, in examples (21) and (22), but in (23) and (24) these morphemes are used in non-specific contexts.

(21) *taba* as specific:

Ne o: a maua mo *e taba tama* ki Alofi
Pst go,Pl Abs we,Du,Ex with **AbsC a child female** GoalP Alofi
“I went with **another child** to Alofi.” (S:40:105b)

(22) *falu a* as specific:

Loga he tau tau kua mole atu, ne haha i ai *falu a fuata mai*
Many GenC Pl year Perf past Dir Pst there was **some young-people from**
i Tonga ne o: atu ai ke he motu ko Niue.
LocP Tonga Pst go,Pl Dir Res Goal Loc island Pred Niue
”Once upon a time, a long time ago, there was **a group of young Tongans**
who arrived at Niue Island.

(23) *taha* as non-specific:

Fano ki fe: *e taha tagata* ke moua taha lagomatai
Go GoalP where **AbsC a person** Sbjv get a help
“Where does **a person** go to get help?”

(24) *falu a* as non-specific:

Q: e, e fakamua, ha ha i ai e tau huhu: e mogonei, fa e huhu: e haaku ka
huhu: atu ki a ko e mogonei, a, ke lata ia ma e vagahau Niue,
fakamua, ti oti mogoia, ke ua aki, liu au mogoia ke huhu: atu e tau
huhu: e ke lata ia mo e vagahau pa:lagi, ti oti mogoia ti liu au ke huhu:
atu e tau hu:huhu: e ke lata ia mo e vagahau, ***falu a vagahau foki ka
eke kua fai.***

Q: [yes, yes firstly, there some questions here now, I have four questions
here that I will ask you now, mm, for the Niue language, firstly, and
then finished then, secondly, I will again ask these questions for the
English language, and then, I will again ask these questions for the
language, ***some other languages if there are any***] (Languages of
Manukau interview project, data courtesy of D. Starks, U. Auckland)

It is thus clear that Seiter’s understanding of the use of these morphemes is correct. We are left then, with the conclusion that definiteness and specificity are simply not the right featural dimensions along which Niuean pre-nominal morphemes are placed. In fact, definiteness and specificity appear to play no role at all in Niuean morphology, other than through the feature of proper and common, in that proper noun phrases are always fully definite and specific given that they are unique, whereas common noun phrases are not unique, but may be freely definite and specific, or not. The exact relation between the proper-common dichotomy and the definite-indefinite dichotomy remains open – the question being, is the proper-common distinction in Niuean parallel in any formal or functional way to the definite-indefinite distinction in English, or are they two completely separate featural systems?

If the Niuean functional nominal morphemes are not arranged along the lines of definiteness and specificity, what determines the use of one or another morpheme? Our hypothesis is that the relevant feature is focus. Our preliminary study of the use of the morphemes *taha*, *tau*, *falu a* and *ha*, indicates the analysis in (25).

(25)

New Hypothesis

	-PLURAL	+PLURAL
NEW/FOCUS	taha	falu a
UNMARKED	∅	tau
BACKGROUNDED	ha	
NON-REFERENTIAL	NOUN INCORPORATION	

When a new participant is introduced, and this participant is focused, *taha* and *falu a* are used, *taha* for singular and *falu a* for plural nouns. In (17a) and (22), for example, *taha* and *falu a* are used to introduce participants, the octopus and the Tongans, who go on to be highly relevant in the next sentences. In (21) and (24) these morphemes are used with a slightly different focus semantics. Here, they are not introducing new salient participants, but instead are being used to indicate contrastive focus. Note the use of the English word ‘other’ in the translations of these examples.

On the other hand, the sentences without these morphemes either introduce participants who are not contrasted or new, or who are new but not salient in the future discourse. This hypothesis has yet to be tested across large quantities of data, however.

One last point remains, which is to discuss the use of *ha* and of noun incorporation, as shown in the chart in (25). These are illustrated in (26) and (27).

- (26) Fanogonogo nakai a koe ke he **ha fakamatalaaga** he fonoaga
listen Q AbsP you Goal Loc **ha speech** Loc meeting
“Did you listen to **a speech** at the meeting?”

(27) Noun Incorporation

Takafaga **ika** tu:mau ni a ia
hunt **fish** always Emph AbsP he
“He is always fishing (=fish-hunting).” (S.184a:69)

Our hypothesis outlined in (25) is that *ba* is used for highly non-salient, backgrounded participants in the discourse, and that noun incorporation is used in a similar way. In the case of noun incorporation, however, the nominal phrase is entirely backgrounded so as to no longer constitute an argument or a participant, taking on a modification function, as discussed by many, including for example, Mithun (1984) and Massam (2001).

V. Conclusion

This paper has discussed the functional elements which appear on the left edge of the Niuean nominal phrase. The properties of these items were laid out in some detail, and we then discussed whether any of these elements could correspond to the determiner in languages such as English. It was demonstrated that in fact each of the morphemes shares some features with English determiners so that in one sense the role of determiner is distributed across the Niuean phrase. Of them all, Case, with its proper-common feature, exhibits the same obligatory nature as Determiners. On the other hand, a major role of English determiners is to encode definiteness and specificity. It was shown that these features are not relevant for the Niuean nominal system, and that instead, pre-nominal morphemes appear to indicate the focus status of the nominal phrase in which they appear.

- All Niuean pre-nominal elements share some features with Determiners
- Case (plus proper-common) is the obligatory element for Niuean arguments
- No Niuean pre-nominal element encodes definiteness or specificity
- Hypothesis: Focus is a key feature in Niuean pre-nominal morphology

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