

# Essential Features of Predication in English and Niuean\*

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## 0. Introduction

In this paper we compare predication in two typologically diverse languages, English and Niuean. In spite of the different characters of predication in the two languages, we provide a unified definition of this grammatical phenomenon which involves obligatory checking of a privileged feature in each language. We show that in English, [D] is the feature of predication, whereas in Niuean, the privileged feature is [T]. Our analysis will account for many facts, principal among which is the word order differences. These word order differences are illustrated in (1) and (2). While English exhibits SVO word order, Niuean word order is strictly VSO.

(1) English (SVO)  
Pat ate the apple.

(2) Niuean (VSO)  
Ne tala aga e ia e tala ke he tagata  
Pst tellDir3p ErgPropArt heAbsArt story to Loc man  
"He told the story to the man."

Since the topic of our paper is predication, we begin by distinguishing two common definitions of syntactic predication, thematic and grammatical predication. Thematic, or T-predication, is the relation between an element with a theta role to assign and the argument to which it is assigned. This relation is developed by Williams (1980, 1983, 1994), among others. Grammatical predication, or G-predication, developed principally by Rothstein (1995a,b), is a grammatical phenomenon, whereby a projection has an open place which must be satisfied in the syntactic component. An important distinction between the two notions is that the second allows for expletives to serve as subjects of predication. In this paper we focus on G-predication.

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- (3) Thematic (T-) Predication: a predicate is a theta assigning element.

Grammatical (G-) Predication: a predicate is a projection with an open place which must be satisfied in the syntactic component.

### 1. [D] as the feature of G-predication in English

Within the Minimalist Program, as outlined in Chomsky (1995), G-predication can be developed into a case of feature checking. A strong non-interpretable categorial feature [D] attracts a like-categorized element to its checking domain, so as to be overtly checked. Alternatively, an expletive is merged to check this feature. In clauses with TP, the relevant [D] feature is located on T, as in the main and embedded clauses in (4a). In small clauses, the [D] feature is found on the verbal or adjectival head. This is evidenced in unaccusative small clauses such as (4b), where the base generated object appears to the left of the small clause predicate, attracted there in order to check the [D] on the small clause predicate head.

- (4) a. I consider it to be unlikely that you will win.  
b. They made me<sub>i</sub> arrive t<sub>i</sub> late.

We can thus see that English strong [D] is equivalent to the notion of open place in the definition of G-predication above. We conclude from this that strong [D] is the feature of predication in English.

### 2. [D] is not a feature of predication in Niuean

We now turn to Niuean, a Polynesian language spoken in New Zealand and on the island-nation of Niue. This language clearly has no [D] feature in T. This is seen by the VSO word order, which is extremely rigid in all clause types, and which is felt by native speakers to characterize the language. The example showing word order is in (2). Note from the glosses that Niuean exhibits ergative/absolutive case marking.

Since there is no [D] feature in T in Niuean, there is no distinguished grammatical subject at this level of the clause. We will now argue that there is no grammatical subject at all in the language.

It has long been a matter of debate whether Polynesian languages have grammatical subjects, and if so, which argument is to be considered the subject, with linguists taking every possible position on the issue. Biggs (1974) argues that the absolutive argument is in all cases the subject, since it is the one without which there is no sentence. Chung (1978) argues that the ergative is the subject of the transitive, whereas the absolutive is the subject of the intransitive, based on control and binding facts in a variety of Polynesian languages. Seiter (1980) argues this position specifically for Niuean. Krupa (1982) also discusses this issue, citing Pizzini (1971) as considering that Samoan, unlike English, has no grammatical subject. With respect to Niuean, we consider that the debate arises because there is no single identifiable subject in Niuean that is, there is no grammatical element which adjoins to check a privileged strong [D] feature in T.

In spite of the fact that there is no EPP [D] feature in Niuean, there is a position in the clause to which the intransitive argument moves from its base-generated theta position, contra Woolford (1991).

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The evidence that the absolutive argument externalizes overtly comes from raising. Niuean is well known to exhibit raising to subject from both subject and object position. This has been analyzed by Seiter (1980) and by Massam (1985,1995). Right now, we focus only on the fact that the raised element is clearly within the upper clause, as is seen in the examples in (5b) where the raised element is to the left of the embedded subjunctive complementizer, and in (5c), where it is to the left of a matrix prepositional phrase. (5a) shows an embedded clause with no raising. We note that in Niuean, tough verbs behave identically to raising verbs in all relevant respects.

(5) **Raising to subject (there is a nonthematic "subject" position)**

- a. To maeke [ke lagomatai he ekekafo e tama e ]  
 Fut possible Sbjctv help ErgArt doctor AbsArt child this  
 "The doctor could help this child" (It is possible for the doctor to help this child)
- b. To maeke **e ekekafo<sub>i</sub>** [ke lagomatai **ec<sub>i</sub>** e tama e ]  
 Fut possible **AbsArt doctor** Sbjctv help AbsArt child this  
 "The doctor could help this child." (The doctor is possible for to help this child)
- c. Kua mukamuka e moa **ki a au** [ ke kai lima **ec<sub>i</sub>** ]  
 Perf easy AbsArt chicken **to Pers me** [ Sbjctv eat-hand ]  
 "Chicken is easy for me to eat with the hands."

Given any version of the Theta Criterion, the raised element cannot be in a Spec of  $v^{max}$  in the matrix clause since there will be no such  $v^{max}$ , as there will be no interpretation available for an external theta role. There must therefore be some other grammatical position to which the element is raising.

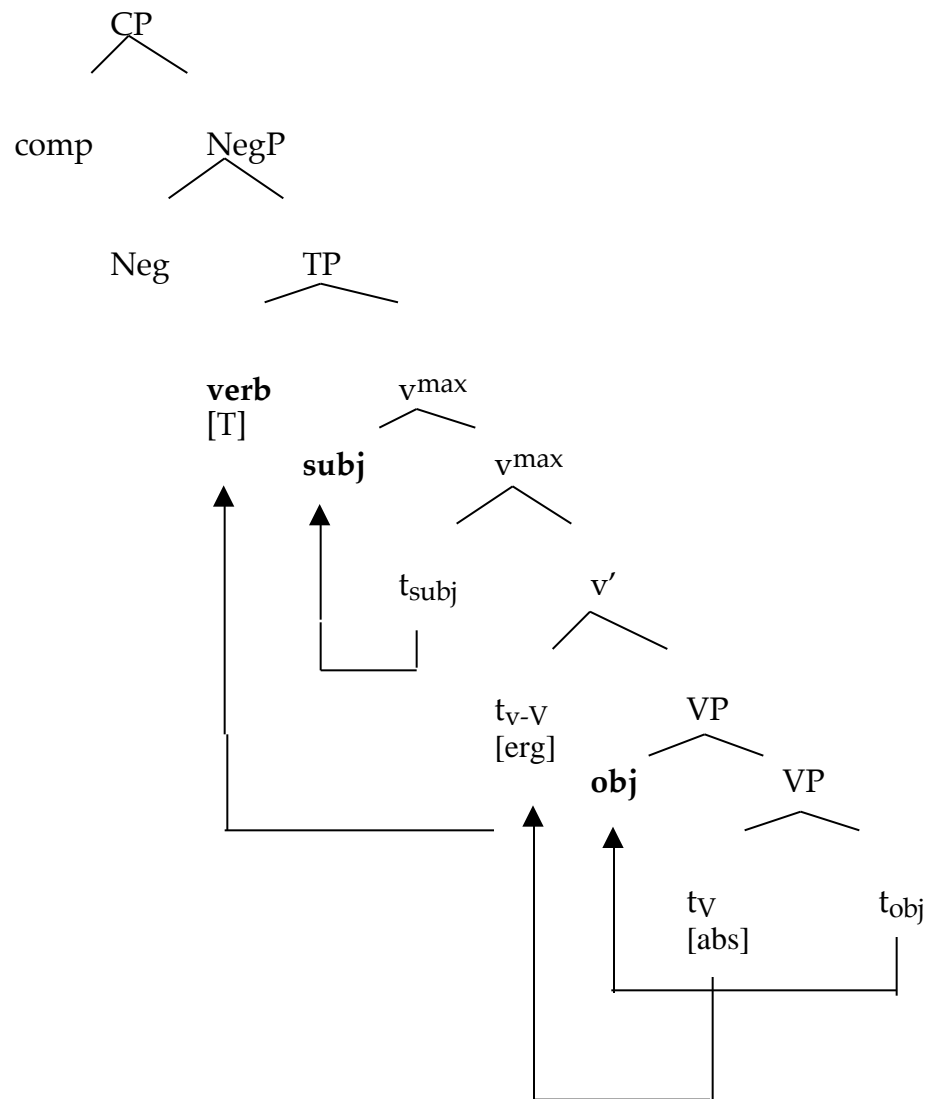
The fact that the subject appears in a non-thematic position should not be viewed, however, as subject externalization in the usual EPP sense. This is seen first by the fact that objects also overtly appear in nonthematic specifier positions in Niuean. Niuean exhibits nonvacuous raising to object, as shown in (6). (6a) shows an example without raising, and (6b) the same sentence where the lower subject now appears in the upper clause. Here too, the raised object is to the left of the embedded subjunctive complementizer, hence it is arguably within the matrix VP.

(6) **Non-vacuous Raising to object (there is a nonthematic "object" position)**

- a. To nakai toka e au [ ke kai he pusi e ika]  
 Fut not let ErgPropArt I Sbj eat ErgArt cat AbsArt fish  
 "I won't let that the cat eat the fish."
- b. To nakai toka e au **e pusi** [ ke kai **ec<sub>i</sub>** e ika]  
 Fut not let ErgArt I **Abs cat** Sbjctv eat AbsArt fish  
 "I won't let the cat eat the fish."

Massam (1996) argues that the Niuean V fronts to T to check inflectional features, in spite of the fact that morphological tense is realized in COMP. (cf. Steuart (1996) who also presents a verb fronting analysis for Niuean.) We follow this here, hence we adopt the structure in (7) for Niuean.

## (7) The Niuean transitive clause



In the structure in (7) the thematic subject and object adjoin to their respective heads where they check ergative case, associated with the light verb, and absolutive case, associated with V. This analysis allows an explanation for the fact that ergative case is assigned only to subjects of transitive verbs whereas all verbs assign absolutive case. An intransitive tree simply lacks  $v^{\max}$ . We note, but do not pursue here, that this structure assumes that there is no unergative/unaccusative distinction in Niuean, but rather, that D-structure reflects transitivity.

Since both thematic subject and object overtly move in Niuean, and assuming that only strong categorial features attract, there must be a strong [D] feature in the light verb and in V. Neither of these is equivalent to an EPP [D], however, since neither ergative nor absolutive can be distinguished as a grammatical subject, as we will now argue.

First, familiar S/O asymmetries are not found in Niuean. Operations such as raising, quantifier float, discourse governed null arguments, and trace/resumptive

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strategies apply equally to both subjects and objects. Most of the few asymmetries that do hold, such as the possibility to form idioms and the ability to incorporate, clearly target specific thematic relations and may in fact be lexical.

Second, there are no expletives in the language, thus the absolutive position is not realized unless a thematic argument is raised to it.

Third, there are no small clauses. This means that having a subject is not sufficient to define a clause. All clauses, matrix and embedded, must have TP.

Fourth, to the extent that we might identify a grammatical subject, it is variable, and is not associated with a unified position. What Seiter calls the grammatical subject is the ergative NP in the transitive clause, and the absolutive in the intransitive clause. He gives two main arguments for this, possessive raising and control. We will examine only control here, as it is the more easily understood of the two processes.

Unlike raising, which applies to subjects and objects, control can only target subjects, according to Seiter. Control is seen in (8). In (8a) we see that the ergative NP is null. In (8b) we see an absolutive subject targeted. In (8c), we see that an absolutive object argument does not delete under control, but must appear as a pronominal. It is clear from this that control does not target a single position, but rather that it applies only to the highest available argument in the clause, whether it be ergative or absolutive. The facts are not clarified by reference to an EPP subject position.

(8) **Control**

- a. Kua lali a au<sub>i</sub> [ ke ta eci e faloku ]  
Perf try AbsPropArt I Sbj play AbsArt flute  
"I have tried (PRO) to play the flute."
- b. Kua lali a ia<sub>i</sub> [ke vagahau eci ]  
Perf try AbsPropArt he Sbjnctv talk  
"He is trying (PRO) to talk."
- c. Kua lali lahi [ e kapitiga haau ]<sub>i</sub> [ ke sake e au a ia<sub>i</sub> ]  
Perf try really AbsArt friend your Sbjnctv sack ErgPropArt I AbsArt him  
"Your friend is really trying to get me to sack him."

We have sketched out some aspects of Niuean grammar in order to show that there is no evidence for a distinguished grammatical subject position in this language. Within our assumptions, the conclusion is that [D] is not the feature of predication in this language.

### 3. Niuean has predicates, which manifest [T].

If Niuean has no [D], and if in English, the presence of [D] defines a grammatical predicate, does Niuean therefore lack grammatical predication? Our claim is that it does not, although the realization of predication in Niuean differs from that in English. We will now discuss Niuean, seeking to unify the two languages in the conclusion.

Niuean is a strict VSO language. However, to describe Niuean as VSO or as V-fronting is to obscure the facts, since the fronted element is not in all cases a verb. (The implications of this were brought to our attention by Carnie (1995)). In (9) we show

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examples of predicate nominals. (9a) shows an indefinite predicate, and (9b), a definite one. The predicate nominal consists of the preposition *ko*, a common article, and the predicate nominal itself. The important point is that the *ko e NP* complex is in the same morphological slot in the verbal complex as the verb is in a regular verbal sentence. This is seen by looking at the schema in (10), which shows that the verb appears after an auxiliary, and before the aspectual adverbs. In (9c) we see the *ko e NP* complex after an auxiliary, in (9d) after a Negative element. In (9e) we see *ko e NP* appearing before a question particle, and in (9f) before an aspectual adverb. It can also appear before emphatics.

- (9)
- a. **Ko e kamuta** a au  
 "ko" Art carpenter AbsPropArt I  
 "I am a carpenter"
- b. **Ko Pule** e faiaoga  
 "ko" Pule AbsArt teacher  
 "The teacher is Pule"
- c. **Liga ko e uga** a ia koo  
 Likely "ko" Art crab AbsArt at there  
 "That there is probably a coconut crab."
- d. **Ai ko e faiaoga** a Pule  
 not "ko" Art teacher AbsPropArt Pule  
 "Pule's not the teacher."
- e. **Ko koe nakai** a ia ma Haliua?  
 "ko" you Q AbsArt that Voc Haliua  
 "Is that you, Haliua?"
- f. **Ko e tau kamuta fakamua** a lautolu  
 "ko" Abs Pl carpenter before Abs they  
 "The were carpenters before this."

(10)

COMP /TNS	NEG	AUX	VERB+ arg-clitics	ASP -ADV	EMPH	PERF	QUES
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**Arg Clitics:** *aki* -incorporated Prep, *oti* - floated quantifier "all", *ai* - temporal/locative clitic. (cf. Chapin, 1974 and Massam and Roberge, to appear, Seiter, 1980)

**Aspectual Adverbs:** *tuumau* "always", *hololoa* "frequently", *agaia* "still", *fakamua* "before"

**Emphatic Particles:** *noa* "only", *nii* "indeed", *foki* "also", *laa (ia)* "just", *koa* "indeed"

As well as predicate nominals, we also find predicate locatives in the V slot, where *ko* is replaced by *haa*. An example is given in (11), but we will discuss only predicate nominals in this paper.

- (11) Haa he fale gagao a ia  
 "haa" in house sick AbsPropArt she  
 "She is in the hospital."

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Since the fronting is so robust in the language, the fronted elements must form a natural class. Following traditional grammatical usage, both within Niuean grammar and more generally, we will refer to the fronted element as a predicate, defending and defining this use below.

It can be seen that the *ko e NP* complex is maximal, by looking at (12) where the fronted predicate nominal is a derived noun, and the NP means "the child's pushing the rock".

- (12) [Ko e poka-aga he tama e maka] [ati matakutaku ai e kulii]  
"ko" Art push-ing GenArt child AbsArt rock [reason<sub>i</sub> fear pron<sub>i</sub> AbsArt dog ]  
"The reason the dog was afraid was the child's pushing the rock."

Two questions arise. The first is the question asked by Carnie (1995), which is how is it that a maximal projection can appear in the same slot as a head? (cf. also Speas (1990) and Ghomeshi (1996)) The second is what triggers movement such that either a verb, or an entire predicate nominal will be the element that fronts? We will address these questions in turn.

The first question can be settled easily in Niuean, since if the predicates are moving to check a feature in T, they can do this by adjoining to a specifier position as efficiently as by adjoining to the head. There are no obstacles to making this claim, unlike in Irish, since no complementizer lowering occurs in Niuean, and there is no WH movement.<sup>1</sup> The specifier position is freely available, even if Niuean is a single specifier language, since there is no [D] feature in T, hence no DP in Spec of TP. We thus claim that if the predicate is an X<sup>0</sup>, it will adjoin to T, but if it is an XP, it will move to specifier of TP. This means that, contra Chomsky (1995), VSO languages can have a specifier of TP, but this specifier is not filled with a DP subject, but rather is available for an XP predicate.

We now turn to the second question, which is why do predicate nominals undergo verb movement in Niuean? One obvious solution is to consider *ko* to be a form of copular verb. There are two problems with this. First, if *ko* is a verb, then it is strange that it is the only verb in the language that fronts along with its complement. Second, and more important, is that *ko* appears in a wide variety of contexts in Niuean, and in most of them it is clearly not functioning as a verb. Some of these contexts are listed in (13). *Ko* appears on the second member of conjuncts, in titles as seen in (13a), on deverbal nouns in the progressive aspect as seen in (13b), with topics, with clefts, on appositional NPs as seen in (13c), and on citation form NPs.

Given the desirability of a unified account of *ko*, we consider it a preposition, following Clark (1976), although perhaps case marker is a more appropriate term. As for its meaning or function, it appears to be a preposition which occurs on NPs which are not in a thematic relation with a verb or an event. It is thus, in a sense, a default preposition or case marker. If *ko* is a preposition then there is no copular verb in Niuean and also no inflected auxiliaries, hence the predicate nominals themselves act as verbs for verb fronting.

- (13) **Other NPs with *ko*:** topics, appositional NPs, conjunctions, titles, noun phrases in isolation, deverbal nouns in progressive aspect.

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<sup>1</sup>Though, see Legate (1996) for a re-analysis of the Irish facts and counter-arguments to Carnie's (1995) proposal.

- a. Ko e Pusi "The Cat" (title)
- b. **Ko e kumi agaia** au he tama haau  
 Pres Art seek still I at child your  
 "I'm still looking for your child"
- c. Hifo a ia ke he maaga ia ko Alofi  
 go AbsArt he to Art village that "ko" Alofi  
 "He goes down to that village Alofi."

We see that the fronted element is not always a V, nor is it always an  $X^0$ . It is, however, always a T- predicate, hence the traditional description in Polynesian grammar. Being a T-predicate, however, should not make the constituent move. What motivates the obligatory movement? In the case of verbs, Massam (1996) argues that the movement of V is to TP and it occurs in order for abstract inflectional tense features to be checked. Since the predicate nominal PPs are moving to the same string position, we conclude that they too are checking [T]. We note several points here with reference to claims made in Chomsky (1995). First, if only categorial features attract, then [T] is a categorial feature. Second, if only non-interpretable features attract, then [T] must be a feature on tense, and not the actual tense itself. It thus fulfills the function of the [V] feature posited to trigger verb movement in other languages, but it cannot be [V], since not only verbs move.<sup>2</sup> An interesting consequence of this analysis is that it constitutes a challenge to the often unstated assumption that a verbal feature will attract a head and a nominal feature will attract a maximal projection.

We summarize this section. Niuean sentences have an obligatorily strong Tense feature which attracts the minimal T-predicate. This might be a V or an extended nominal phrase. Checking consists either of head adjunction to T or of movement to specifier of TP, depending on whether the predicate is  $X^0$  or XP.

#### 4. Conclusion: English and Niuean predication unified.

We now turn to the definition of G-predicate given in (3). We have presented the idea that G-predication is actually the grammatical process of checking a privileged feature. In English, the feature is [D], and in Niuean, it is [T]. In both cases, an element is extracted from the complete functional complex area to check this feature, thus establishing the clausal nature of the structure. In English clausehood is defined by the subject predicate relation, and in Niuean, by the predicate/arguments relation. We thus propose a new definition of predicate, informally stated in (14).

- (14) G-Predication: G-Predication is the relation between a head containing a privileged strong feature and the element (argument or predicate) which checks that feature by move or (expletive-) merge.

With this definition we can see the parallels between English and Niuean. We see that the traditional notion of G-predication must be expanded if VSO languages like Niuean are to be considered to instantiate G-predication.

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<sup>2</sup>These delicate issues suggest that perhaps the relevant feature is [Pred], and the phrasal projection is a PredP, as in Bowers (1993).



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Our conclusion is as follows. Languages differ with respect to which of the two basic inflectional features is essential in all clauses. English clauses require [D], but not [T], thus tenseless small clauses and expletives appear, but there are no clauses without a grammatical subject. Niuean clauses on the other hand, require [T], but not [D], hence there are no grammatical subjects, expletives, or small clauses, and all clauses require TP and predicate fronting. In Niuean, V-fronting satisfies EPP. It can be seen therefore that the strict EPP nature of English is mirrored by the strict VSO nature of Niuean, and that the two are reflections of the essential predication feature of each language.

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