Revisiting Samoan "specificity": An alternative semantics account

AFLA 32

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June 2, 2025

1 The problem of "specificity"

2 The Samoan article system

3 An alternative semantics analysis

4 Conclusions

1. The problem of "specificity"

2. The Samoan article system

3. An alternative semantics analysis

4. Conclusions

What is "specificity"?

- Indefiniteness vs. definiteness

    (1) I am eating the apple.
        unique and/or familiar apple

    (2) I am eating an apple.
        not unique and/or newly mentioned apple

- Specificity (SPEC) vs. non-specificity (NSPEC)
    - . . . any article contrast that's not definiteness!
    - Farkas (1994) shows there are at least three different notions
      of specificity in the literature; other definitions related to these
      three also exist (see, e.g., Ionin 2006, Diesing 1992)

Specificity as wide scope

- An indefinite taking wide scope is SPEC; an indefinite taking narrow scope is NSPEC (also *de re* vs. *de dicto*)

  (3) John wants to marry **a Norwegian**. . . .

      a. He met her last year.
         $\exists >$ want $\rightarrow$ SPEC

      b. He will move to Norway to achieve his goal.
         want $> \exists \rightarrow$ NSPEC

(Farkas 1994:121, ex. (3))

Specificity as referentiality

- E.g., Fodor & Sag 1982
- An indefinite linked to a particular referent is SPEC; an indefinite not linked to a particular referent is NSPEC (also referred to as "epistemicity")

  (4) **A student in Syntax I** cheated on the exam. . . .

  a. His name was John.
     SPKR has a specific referent in mind $\rightarrow$ SPEC

  b. We are all trying to figure out who it was.
     SPKR doesn't have a specific referent in mind $\rightarrow$ NSPEC

  (Farkas 1994:120–121, ex. (1))

Specificity as partitivity

- E.g., Enç 1991
- An indefinite that's a covert partitive is specific

  (5) **Some ghosts** live in the pantry; others live in the
  kitchen.
  possible referents limited to the (familiar) ghosts in
  the house → SPEC

  (6) There are **some ghosts** in this house.
  possible referents not limited → NSPEC

(Farkas 1994:121, ex. (2))

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The article inventory

	SPEC	NSPEC
sg	*le*	*se*
pl	Ø	*ni*

- Not a definiteness contrast: Both can be used to introduce new discourse referents

  (7) 'O **le ulugali'i**, fānau **l-a lā tama**
      PRES **SPEC couple** give.birth **SPEC-POSS 3.du child**
      'o **le teine** 'o Sina.
      PRES **SPEC girl** PRES S.

      'There was **a couple** that had **a child**, **a girl** called Sina.'

      (Mosel & Hovdhaugen 1992:259, ex. (6.37))

Mosel & Hovdhaugen's (1992) summary

- Grammar definition of *le* 'SPEC' (259):

    . . . *indicates that the noun phrase refers to one particular entity regardless of whether it is definite or indefinite.* . .

- Grammar definition of *se* 'NSPEC' (261):

    . . . *expresses the fact that the noun phrase does not refer to a particular, specified item, but to any member of the conceptual category denoted by the nucleus of the noun phrase and its adjuncts.*

- Has been used to defend certain theories of article semantics (Ionin 2006; Ionin, Ko, & Wexler 2003)

- However, new elicitations targeted at these questions can reveal greater nuance (Tryzna 2009)

Methods

- 4 native speakers of Western Samoan from Western Samoa, ages ∼35–65

- 3 lived in Western Samoa at the time of elicitation; 1 lived in California

- All reported speaking Samoan in their everyday lives (with family, friends, church, in school, and/or on the street)

- Elicitations conducted over Zoom

- Some speakers preferred using *tautala lelei*, the literary register, and some *tautala leaga*, the vernacular

Characteristics

   I Using SPEC presupposes the existence of the referent of the nominal

  II Using NSPEC introduces uncertainty

 III NSPEC can have a domain-widening interpretational effect on the nominal it modifies

 IV NSPEC is unacceptable in out-of-the-blue episodic sentences

  V NSPEC is acceptable in in episodic sentences with sufficient background context

Summary: SPEC is fairly unconstrained. NSPEC has NPI-like properties, with some complications.

(I) SPEC presupposes existence

- Mosel & Hovdhaugen (1992): Cannot occur with the predicate *leai* 'to not exist'

  (8) E   leai   { *le / se   } mea.
       NPST not.exist   SPEC   NSPEC   thing
       'There is **no thing**.'

- Can't modify any nominals which the speaker knows to not exist

  (9) #O   ai   le   tupu tama'ita'i o   Ameriki?
       PRES who   SPEC king lady   GEN America
       Intended: 'Who is **a queen of America**?'

(I) SPEC presupposes existence

    (10)   # E   sili   le   fiafia   o   **le**   **sau'ai** pe'a:
           NPST be.best SPEC happiness GEN **SPEC giant**   if
           alu i   Aikupito.
           go LOC Egypt
           Intended: '**A giant** would be happiest if he went to
           Egypt.'

    (11)   # Ou te   le'i va'ai i   **le**   **tupu tama'ita'i o**
           1.sg NPST NEG see   LOC **SPEC king lady**   **GEN**
           Kalefo:nia.
           California
           Intended: 'I haven't see **a queen of California**.'

(II) NSPEC introduces uncertainty

(12) a. Ou te iloa o **le** **maile** na aia le i'a.
1.sg NPST know PRES **SPEC dog** PST eat SPEC fish
'I know **a dog** ate the fish.'

b. Ou te iloa o **se maile** na aia le i'a.
'I know **a dog** ate the fish.'
Speaker A comment: You're like, 90% sure.
Speaker B comment: Maybe you're not sure which dog
ate the fish.

(III) NSPEC can have a domain-widening effect

(13)   Context: Tai was supposed to finish writing his essay last
night.

E   le'i tusia Tai **se   upu**!
NPST NEG write T. **NSPEC word**

'Tai didn't write **a [single] word**!'

(III) NSPEC can have a domain-widening effect

(14) E   iloa   lelei e   Simi na o:mai { Ø   / **ni**   }
     NPST know well ERG S.   PST come **SPEC.PL NSPEC.PL**
     maile i   totonu o   le fale   . . .
     dog LOC inside GEN LE house
     ae le: mautinoa po'o ai!
     but he doesn't know which ones

     'Simi knows well that **dogs** came into the house. . . but he
     doesn't know which ones!'

     SPKR comment with NSPEC: It implies that, maybe he
     doesn't have dogs! So we're not quite sure where the dog
     prints came from.

(IV) NSPEC disallowed in out-of-the-blue episodic sentences

- Where episodic sentences are simple, non-modal assertions

  (15)   * Sa fafaga e le tama **se maile**.
         PST feed ERG SPEC boy **nspec dog**
         Intended:'The boy fed **a dog**.'

- Commonly rescued by subtrigging or making the assertion into a question

  (16)   Sa fafaga e   le   tama **se   maile** { **Chihuahua**.
         PST feed   ERG SPEC boy **nspec dog   Chihuahua**
         / ? }

         'The boy fed **a Chihuahua dog**.' (a dog that was a Chihuahua) / 'Did the boy feed **a dog**?'

(V) ... but additional context can function as a repair

(17)   a.   ?? Sa fafaga e   tama:loloa **se**   malie.
           PST feed ERG man.pl   **NSPEC** shark
           Intended: 'The men fed a shark.'

    b.   Acceptable with the following context:
        The men are supposed to feed someone's shark; they
        feed *some* shark, but evidently it was the wrong shark.

- The context must introduce *alternative discourse referents*

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Not referentiality

- SPEC nominals don't have to refer to known individuals

  (18) Ou te iloa o **le maile** na aia le i'a.
       1.sg NPST know PRES **SPEC dog** PST eat SPEC fish
       . . . ae ou te le: iloa po'o ai!
       'I know **a dog** ate the fish. . . but I don't know which
       one!'

- NSPEC nominals can refer

  (19) Ae te'i,   ua   tamo'e mai **se   tama:loa**
       but suddenly PST.PERF run   to.1p **NSPEC man**
       ia: te a'u.
       to   me
       Fai mai tama:loa ua ou ma:lo: i le miliona tala!
       'But suddenly, **a man** ran up to me. The man told me
       I won a million Tala[Samoan currency]!'

Not partitivity

- If anything, NSPEC, not SPEC, receives a partitive reading

  (20)　Context: You are in the street, and a lady suddenly shouts that a man stole her bag.

  Na vala'au le　tama'ita'i ua　　gaoi e　**se**
  PST shout　SPEC lady　　PST.PERF steal ERG **NSPEC**
  tama:loa lana　atou.
  man　3sg.POSS bag

  'A lady shouted that **a man** stole her bag.'
  SPKR comment: "[SPEC means] it was a *man* who stole the bag, or a particular man. But, *e se tama:loa* is more like 'one of the men'."

Not partitivity

- Perhaps the labels should be reversed?

- However, NSPEC *expands* the range of possible referents—the opposite of what a partitive SPEC should do

  (21) Fai mai   Mikaele na ta'e   le   fa'amalama i
        say to.me M.   PST break SPEC window   by
        se   tamaititi.
        NSPEC child

        'Mikaele told me the window was broken by **a kid**.'

     a. Felicitous: Mikaele is an old man who thinks one
        of the kids in the neighborhood broke his window.

     b. Infelicitous: Mikaele thinks one of his three
        children—Soi, Mani, or Malama—broke his
        window.

Not scope

- Collins (to appear) actually argues that the distinction is one of scope

  (22) E   le'i fia   fa'alogo mai 'iai **le**
        NPST NEG want listen   DIR to.it **SPEC**
        tagata ao aitalafu.
        debt collector

        'The debt collector does not want to listen to it.' (not, 'No debt collector wants to listen to it')
        (from Consumer Credit Legal Centre NSW)

        (Collins to appear:6, ex. (13))

- SPEC takes wide scope, NSPEC narrow
- Collins's data is from corpora—there is no negative data!

Collins's (to appear) analysis

- Analysis of pseudo-incorporated nominals (predominantly)
- Tentative analysis of NSPEC:
  - Introduces a choice function that is existentially closed low

    (23) Sa le: tusi e Susana **se   pese**.
          PST NEG write ERG S.   **NSPEC song**

          'Susana was not writing **any songs**.'

    (24) $\neg\exists f : \text{CF}(f) \wedge \text{wrote}(\text{Susana}, f(\text{song}))$

    (Collins to appear:11, ex. (30a), (31a))

- Tentative analysis of SPEC nominals:
  - Introduces a choice function that is existentially closed high

    (25) Sa le: tusi e Susana **le   pese**.
          PST NEG write ERG S.   **SPEC song**

          'Susana was not writing **(a certain) song**.'

    (26) $\exists f : \text{CF}(f) \land \neg\text{wrote}(\text{Susana}, f(\text{song}))$

    (Collins to appear:11, ex. (30b), (31b))

Not scope

- SPEC can take narrow scope

    (27) So'o se   aiga lava { **le** / **se** } **tagata**
         every NSPEC family EMPH **SPEC NSPEC person**
         pisa.
         noisy
         'In every family there's **a noisy one [person]**.'
         ($\forall > $ SPEC)

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- Intuitions:

  (28) Context: You are in the street, and a lady suddenly
        shouts that a man stole her bag.
        Na vala'au le tama'ita'i ua gaoi e { **le** / **se** }
        tama:loa lana atou.
        'A lady shouted that **a man** stole her bag.'
        SPKR comment: [SPEC means] it was a *man* who stole
        the bag, or a particular man. But, *e se tama:loa* is
        more like 'one of the men'.

  - The distinction has to do with the alternatives being considered
  - SPEC-marked nominals emphasize the property
  - NSPEC-marked nominals imply the existence of other
    individuals of the same property

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- We can use a Hamblin (1973) framework (i.e., alternative semantics) to capture these intuitions
- Overview:
    - NSPEC introduces alternatives of the same property, SPEC does not
    - Out-of-the-blue episodic sentences with NSPEC are not accepted because there are no alternatives available in the conversational context

Hamblin (alternative) semantics

- Indefinites, *wh*-words as sets of alternatives

- For instance, a derivation from *Who slept?*

  (adapted from Kratzer & Shimoyama 2002)

  (29) *who* denotes the set individuals containing all humans:
        $\{\ a,\ b,\ c,\ \ldots\ \}$

  (30) *slept* denotes a singleton set whose member is the
        property 'slept':
        $\{\ \lambda x.\lambda w'.\ \text{slept}'(x)(w')\ \}$

  (31) *who slept* denotes the set of propositions:
        $\{\ a\ \text{slept},\ b\ \text{slept},\ c\ \text{slept},\ \ldots\ \}$

Proposed denotation of SPEC

- Denotation of *le malie* 'SPEC shark'

  (32) ⟦le shark⟧^{w,g} is defined only if $\exists x$ in w such that
        shark'$(x) = 1$

  (33) When defined:
        ⟦le malie⟧$^{w,g} = \{f(\lambda x.\ \text{shark}(x)\ \text{in}\ w)\}$

  - A singleton set of the choice function over the property shark'
    (type *et*), with a presupposition of existence
  - Using Reinhart's (1997) c.f., $\exists$ closure can happen at any
    point in the derivation (above or below other operators)
  - Similar to Collins's (to appear) denotation, except for $\exists$ closure
    flexibility

Proposed denotation of NSPEC

- Denotation of *se malie* 'NSPEC shark'

    (34) $[\![\text{se malie}]\!]^{w,g} = \{x \mid \text{shark}(x) \text{ in } w\}$

    - The set of all sharks in w (type e)
    - Needs to be closed by some operator ($\neg$, $\exists$, Q, etc.) later in the derivation
    - Similar to what Kratzer & Shimoyama (2002) propose for German *irgendein*, which shares properties with *se* (uncertainty, domain widening)

An additional piece: The assertoric operator

- Necessary for interpreting the sets arising from introducing alternatives

- Also proposed by Kratzer & Shimoyama (2002:10) to make sure that sets of alternatives are closed in declarative sentences without operators (i.e., episodic sentences)

- "The singleton set containing the proposition that is true in all worlds in which some proposition in α is true":

  (35) $[\![\exists\alpha_{st}]\!]^{w,g} = \{\ \lambda w'.\ \exists p\ [p \in [\![\alpha]\!]^{w,g}\ \&\ p(w') = 1]\ \}$

- However, not all episodic sentences w/ *se* alternatives are acceptable $\rightarrow$ a constraint on the assertoric operator:

  (36) *Non-trivial Alternative Generation:* There must exist discourse-available alternatives.

Deriving property (I)

I Using SPEC presupposes the existence of the referent of the nominal

- This is neatly taken care of by the presupposition on the denotation of SPEC

  (37)   # Ou te le'i va'ai i **le tupu tama'ita'i o Kalefo:nia**.

  Intended: 'I haven't see **a queen of California**.'

  a. ⟦le tupu tama'ita'i o Kalefo:nia⟧^{w,g} is defined only if $\exists x$ in w such that x is a queen of California

  b. This is not the case $\rightarrow$ infelicitous

Deriving property (III)

III NSPEC can have a domain-widening interpretational effect on the nominal it modifies

- NSPEC picks out *all* the individuals of a property in the domain

   (38)   E le'i tusia Tai **se upu**!

   'Tai didn't write **a [single] word**!'

   a. $[\![se\ upu]\!]^{w,g} = \{a, aardvark, abacus...\}$

   b. $[\![(38)]\!]^{w,g} = \{\ \lambda w'.\ \neg\exists p\ [\ p \in [\![Tai\ wrote\ 'a',\ Tai\ wrote\ 'aardvark',\ Tai\ wrote\ 'abacus'...\ ]\!]^{w,g}\ \&\,p(w') = 1\ ]\}$

   c.   "It is not the case that $\{$ Tai wrote 'a', Tai wrote 'aardvark', Tai wrote 'abacus'... $\}$"

Deriving properties (IV) and (V)

IV **NSPEC is unacceptable in out-of-the-blue episodic sentences**

V **NSPEC is acceptable in episodic sentences with sufficient background context**

- With operators such as $\neg$, Q, etc., NSPEC alternatives compose without any conditions

- Without the above operators, the assertoric operator and Non-trivial Alternative Generation are in play

- This is not affect SPEC, which composes earlier in the derivation

Deriving properties (IV) and (V)

(39) ?? Sa fafaga e tama:loloa **se malie**.

    Intended: 'The men fed **a shark**.'

  a. Out-of-the-blue: no discourse-available alternatives for
      'shark' → infelicitous

(40) Acceptable with the following context:
  The men are supposed to feed someone's shark; they feed
  some shark, but evidently it was the wrong shark.

  a. The context implicates the presence of multiple sharks,
      ∴ multiple shark alternatives

  b. $[\![\exists(39)]\!]^{w,g} = \{\lambda w'. \exists p \ [p \in [\![$the men fed shark$_1$, the
      men fed shark$_2$, the men fed shark$_3 \ldots]\!]$ & $p(w') = 1]\}$

Deriving property (II)

II Using NSPEC introduces uncertainty

- This is a *pragmatic* effect

  (41) Sa fai mai Simi na 'ai e **se maile** le i'a.

  'Simi told me **a dog** ate the fish.'

  SPKR comment: He's not sure... otherwise he would have said *le*.

  (42) Pragmatic effect: "X could have said *le*, in which case there would be no alternatives. But, X chose to introduce alternatives. ∴ X is uncertain about which dog did it."

- It also results in speakers translating *le* as 'a certain', that is, as having wide-scope

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Summary

- NSPEC represents a set of entities of the same property; SPEC represents a choice function over a property
  - NSPEC is type *e*; SPEC is type *et*
  - NSPEC introduces alternatives; SPEC does not
- This is *not* necessarily the case in other languages with specificity contrasts

Take-aways

- Explains why Collins's (to appear) data shows SPEC overwhelmingly taking wide scope
- A similar contrast can be seen in the related language Māori: Chung & Ladusaw (2004) argue that the articles *tētahi* and *he* represent composition "as individuals" vs. composition "as properties"
- "Specificity" is not a unified term, and article systems can exhibit more distinctions than the proposed binary between definiteness and specificity

To be explored

- Whether the plural versions of NSPEC and SPEC fit as neatly into this generalization
- How these alternatives are affected by focus (as Howell (2020) argues that they exist on the same plane as focus alternatives)

Fa'afetai tele lava!

Thank you very much!

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