

Tongan Noun Incorporation: Words and Phrases

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Analyses of Tongan noun incorporation in the general typological surveys of noun incorporation (Mithun 1984, Gerdts 1998) have argued that this Tongan construction involves syntactic juxtaposition of a verb and a single noun. Given data as such in (1), this would seem to be correct, since ordinary transitive sentences like (1a) contrast with sentences with incorporation, like (1b), in that the latter lacks all pronominal function words and the verb and noun seem to appear as words placed immediately next to each other.

- (1) a. Na'e inu 'a e kavá 'e Sione
PAST drank ABS DET kava ERG (name)
'Sione drank the kava' (Churchward 1953:76)
- b. Na'e **inu kava** 'a Sione.
PAST drink kava ABS (name)
'Sione drank kava.' (Churchward 1953:76)

However, in this paper, I offer evidence that this view is inaccurate. First, following recent work on other Polynesian languages (Massam 2001 for Niuean, Chung & Ladusaw 2003 for Māori), Tongan noun incorporation is not restricted to just single nouns, but the incorporated noun can appear with elements found in canonical nominal phrases. A few examples of this are given in (2).

- (2) a. Na'e **tā kītā fo'ou** 'a Sione
PAST hit guitar new ABS (name)
'Sione played a new guitar.'
- b. Na'e **fakama'a sea 'i fale** 'a Sione
PAST clean chair in house ABS (name)
'Sione cleaned chairs in the house.'

However, the kinds of nominal phrasal elements permitted in this construction is, to a degree, restricted, as no expression of case, determiners, or certain kinds of relative clauses is allowed.

Interestingly, even though there is possibility for phrasal incorporated expressions, the noun must still be strictly adjacent to verb. This is shown in (3), where the pronominal adjective *ki'i* is ungrammatical in incorporation in (3a), but the equivalent postnominal adjective *iiki* is grammatical in (3b).

- (3) a. *Na'e **tō ki'i manioke** 'a Sione.
PAST plant small cassava ABS (name)
Intended: 'Sione planted a small amount of cassava.'
- b. Na'e **tō manioke iiki** 'a Sione.
PAST plant cassava small ABS (name)
'Sione planted a small amount of cassava.'

Further evidence from the morphology suggests that the verb and noun form a single lexical unit, since they can be nominalized together, as shown in (4).

- (4) inu-kava-‘anga
drink-kava-NOM
‘place to drink kava’

This suggests that the adjacency is not syntactic, but rather morphological, thus explaining the ungrammaticality of (3a).

With this array of data, there seems to be conflicting evidence for wordhood and phrasality in the Tongan Noun Incorporation construction. How might this conflict be resolved? The answer I’d like to propose is that the incorporating verbs, i.e. the verb + noun words, are morphologically (lexically) licensed, while the nominal modifiers next to the incorporating verbs are syntactically licensed. Furthermore, I propose that the incorporating verbs are, in some sense, of a mixed category – words that have both verbal properties (positioning, ability to have nominal arguments), and nominal properties (ability to appear with certain modifiers). I will discuss two possible implementations of these ideas: a tree-based one, following Wescoat 2002, where the incorporating verb is simultaneously linked to both a verb node and noun node in the syntax, and a dependency-based one, following Malouf 1999, which incorporating verbs are a special kind of verb with both verbal and nominal valency potentials.

References

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