

## THE SAMOAN CONSTRUCTION OF REALITY

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

The following paper presents a short and very preliminary contrastive analysis of how simple statements about events or states of being are expressed in Samoan and English. The main difference between English and Samoan in this respect is that in English expressions referring to persons tend to occur in syntactically more prominent functions than expressions referring to objects or abstract phenomena, whereas in Samoan the expressions referring to persons are much more frequently found in syntactically subordinate functions. Therefore, English and Samoan can be characterised as person-oriented and anti-person-oriented languages respectively.

Our point of departure is the observation that somehow everything can be said in each of these two languages, but that it is almost impossible to translate from one language into the other without sacrificing some characteristics of the original or without using uncommon expressions in the translation. According to Grace (1981:177) a translation is an

expression in a second language of an idea which has been expressed in a first one. Translation...holds the idea constant without regard for different audience characteristics, and whether or not aesthetic form, sociolinguistic and expressive modulation, or content form of the original are represented accurately.

A literal translation preserves the content form of the original at the cost of the idiomaticity of the target language, whereas a free translation meets "the requirements of the idiomaticity of the target language", but "sacrifices the content form of the original" (Grace 1981:177).

These definitions suggest that the difficulties we have when translating from one language into the other result from one or more of the following factors:

- (a) different audience characteristics;
- (b) different aesthetic forms;
- (c) different sociolinguistic and expressive modulation;
- (d) different content forms.

The following analysis will concentrate on a very limited aspect of the content form, namely on certain syntactic structures and their semantic and pragmatic functions.

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## 2. SYNTACTIC ASPECTS OF THE CONTENT FORM OF UTTERANCES IN ENGLISH

Before we turn to the syntactic, semantic and pragmatic features of Samoan which are difficult to translate, I would like to include here a few preliminary reflections on what it means to say that someone makes a statement about his or her experiences or observations. A central notion in Grace's definition of translation is that of content form. The content form of an utterance is "the way in which the idea which it expresses is analyzed (construed) for expression – the way it is put into words. This construction in fact creates a model of a bit of reality (or as- if reality)" (Grace 1981:177).

In order to understand how an idea is put into words, let us consider what happens when somebody observes a certain event – a transitive action, for instance – and then expresses what has been observed in a single sentence, such as:

- (1) 'The boy hit the dog'. or
- (2) 'The dog was hit by the boy'.

By definition a transitive action involves a person or animal which consciously initiates and performs the action in question, that is, the agent. Secondly, it involves the so-called patient – a person, animal, or object in the broadest sense – which is affected by the action, and thirdly, the place, duration and point of time of the action. What the reporter of such an event has observed is multidimensional. But when he puts his observation into words, he must analyse it into its components (more exactly, into what he considers its components), then select those details he wants to express, and finally, he must arrange what he selected for expression into a linear sequential order. Any stretch of speech or writing is linear.

Usually the speaker has more than one option for arranging the expression equivalents of what he conceptualises as components of the state of affairs in question. Thus, when reporting a transitive action like hitting, a speaker of English can choose between an active and a passive sentence construction, for example between (1) 'The boy hit the dog', and (2) 'The dog was hit by the boy'. Which of these constructions he actually chooses depends on whether he wants to make a predication about the agent or the patient. The linguistic utterance not only expresses a content but puts the content into a certain form. As far as simple clauses like (1) and (2) are concerned, the speaker of English has a choice between two perspectives of presentation. He can choose either the agent or the patient as the point of departure, as the subject or grammaticalised topic.

Whenever a speaker of English makes a statement about a state of affairs and uses an independent sentence as a means of expression, he has to structure the information into a subject and a predicate. And if there is actually no entity about which a predication can be made, he will employ the pronoun 'it' as a dummy subject, for example, 'It is raining'. Since the subject is such a central category of English syntax, it seems worthwhile with regard to our contrastive analysis of English and Samoan to have a look at some of its syntactic properties (Keenan 1976):

### (a) Grammatical indispensability

All syntactically independent clauses must have a subject in English; without a subject they would be ungrammatical. One cannot say \*'Hit the dog', but rather 'The dog was hit', if one wishes to omit the agent.

### (b) Word order

The unmarked word order in declarative sentences is subject + verb (+ object).

## (c) Agreement between subject and predicate

If there is agreement in number between an argument and the predicate, it is the subject which agrees in number with the predicate and controls the agreement: 'The boy is chasing the dogs. The dogs are being chased by the boy'.

## (d) Coreferential deletion across conjunctions

If one coordinates two predications about the same subject, it is unnecessary to express the subject twice: 'The boy hit the dog and (the boy/he) ran away'. Or to put it differently, the sentence 'The boy hit the dog and ran away' can only mean that the boy ran away.

## (e) Subject = agent in active transitive clauses

The structurally simplest clause to express a transitive action is the active clause, in which the subject signifies the agent.

To conclude, in English, statements are always structured as statements about a person, an animal, an object or a phenomenon. If a person is involved in some state of affairs, it is more likely that the speaker will form the statement as predication about that person than that he will choose any other construction in which the person plays a less salient role. This is particularly true in statements about actions and mental or bodily states of being or activities. Instead of the unmarked active clause 'The boy hit the dog' the more marked passive clause 'The dog was hit by the boy' is only used if the dog is explicitly the topic of discourse. If, however, in a statement about some affectedness, the affected participant is a person and what affects him or her is something inanimate, the passive construction seems to be more likely:

- (3) 'The boy was hit by a stone'.

Another way of expressing such a state of affairs is to employ a patient-oriented active verb whose subject denotes a patient:

- (4) 'The boy suffered from a headache'.  
'The boy has got the measles'.

In other words, the English ways of expression focus on the person, if any is involved, as they assign a subject-predicate structure to the statement and select the noun phrase referring to the person for the grammatical subject. There is only one way to avoid subject-predicate constructions when making statements, and that is nominalisation. However, nominalisations are not used as syntactically independent clauses, but are embedded in other clauses where they function as complements or adverbials. Furthermore, their use is idiomatically restricted to certain, mostly formal, contexts.

### 3. BASIC CHARACTERISTICS OF SAMOAN CLAUSE STRUCTURE

In contrast to English, Samoan statements about events or states of being do not show a subject-predicate structure when they are expressed by basic verbal clauses. Samoan lacks the grammatical categories of subject and object, and does not distinguish between active and passive voice or ergative and antipassive constructions. Consider the following clauses which show how states of being and

intransitive and transitive actions are expressed in Samoan (there are lots of other types of states of affairs expressed by the same or different constructions):<sup>1</sup>

- (5) *'Ua ma'i le tama.*<sup>2</sup>  
 PERF sick ART child  
 verb phrase absolutive noun phrase  
 The child is sick.
- (6) *'Ua alu le tama.*  
 PERF go ART child  
 verb phrase absolutive noun phrase  
 The child has gone.
- (7) *Na fasi e le tama le maile.*  
 PAST hit ERG ART child ART dog  
 verb phrase ergative noun phrase absolutive noun phrase  
 The child hit the dog.

In these clauses the arguments of the verb phrase are expressed by two kinds of noun phrases. Firstly, the argument of the intransitive clauses (5) and (6) and the argument denoting the patient in (7) are expressed by unmarked noun phrases, the so-called absolutive noun phrases. Secondly, the argument denoting the agent of a transitive action as in (7) is expressed by an ergative noun phrase, that is, a noun phrase marked by the ergative preposition *e*.

Some linguists who think that every language in the world must have a subject like English describe this Samoan case-marking pattern approximately as follows: 'The subject of intransitive clauses and the object of transitive clauses are expressed by noun phrases in the absolutive case, whereas the subject of transitive clauses is expressed by a noun phrase in the ergative case' (compare Chung 1978:54f.; Cook 1988:29f.; Ochs 1988:58f.). A closer look at Samoan grammar, however, reveals that these 'subjects' lack some important subject properties apart from the fact that they – in contrast to English subjects – show distinctive codings.

If there is agreement in number between the verb and an argument, it is the absolutive noun phrase in intransitive and transitive clauses which controls agreement in number:

- (8) *'Ua ma-ma'i tamaiti.*  
 PERF PL-sick child(SP.PL)  
 verb phrase absolutive noun phrase  
 The children are sick.

<sup>1</sup>Abbreviations used are as follows: 1,2,3 – first, second, third person, ANAPH – anaphoric pronoun, ART – article (when not specified = specific singular *le*), CAUS – causative, CONJ – conjunction, DIR – directive particle, EMPH – emphatic particle, ERG – ergative (*e*), GENR – general tense-aspect-mood particle, LD – locative-directional (*i*, *'i*), NR – nominaliser, NSP – non-specific, OPT – optative (*se i*), PERF – perfect, PL – plural, POSS – possessive (*a* and *o*), PRES – presentative (*'o*), Q – question particle, SG – singular, SP – specific, TR – transitive.

<sup>2</sup>Samoan sentences which were recorded by myself are rendered in the orthography used by Milner (1966), whereas all examples taken from published texts are quoted in their original orthography, which often neglects the indication of glottal stops and vowel length.

- (9) 'Ua  $\bar{o}$ <sup>3</sup> tamaiti.  
 PERF go(PL) child(SP.PL)  
 verb phrase absolutive noun phrase  
 The children have gone.
- (10) Na fasi e tamaiti le maile.  
 PERF hit ERG child(SP.PL) ART dog  
 verb phrase ergative noun phrase absolutive noun phrase  
 The children hit the dog.
- (11) Na fa-fasi e le tama maile.  
 PAST PL-hit ERG ART child dog(SP.PL)  
 verb phrase ergative noun phrase absolutive noun phrase  
 The child hit the dogs.

These coding properties of the predicate and its arguments – that is, case marking and number agreement – argue against the claim that the ergative noun phrase functions as the subject. Furthermore, two other properties of absolutive and ergative arguments do not support this claim. As far as the so-called rule of coreferential deletion is concerned, Samoan has a very simple rule: whenever it is clear from the context which person, animal or object is involved in an action as the agent or patient, that participant does not need to be expressed:

- (12) Tū atu loa lea 'o Sina tago 'i le lupe,  
 stand DIR immediately then PRES Sina take.hold.of LD ART pigeon  
 titina, togi 'i fafo.  
 strangle throw LD outside  
 Sina stood up, took hold of the pigeon, strangled it, then threw it outside.  
 (Moyle 1981:102)

The most literal translations of 'The child hit the dog and ran away' and 'The dog was hit by the child and ran away' are, respectively:

- (13) Sā sasa e le tama le maile, ona sola ai lea 'o ia.  
 PAST hit ERG ART child ART dog CONJ run.away ANAPH that PRES 3SG  
 The child hit the dog, then he ran away.

and

- (14) Sā sasa e le tama le maile, ona sola ai lea  
 PAST hit ERG ART child ART dog CONJ run.away ANAPH that  
 le maile.  
 ART dog  
 The child hit the dog, then the dog ran away.

In (13) *sola* is combined with 'o ia which unambiguously refers to *le tama*, because 'o ia is only used to refer to human beings. Therefore, *le maile* has to be repeated in (14). In both cases *ona sola ai lea* '(and) then ran away' would not make sense, because the context provides no clue as to who ran away. Note that many informants who were asked in Samoan to combine the two clauses, *Sā sasa e le tama le maile* 'The child hit the dog' and *Sā sola le tama* 'The boy ran away' said:

<sup>3</sup>  $\bar{o}$  is the suppletive plural form of *alu* (SG) 'go'.

- (15) *Sā sola le tama ina 'ua sasa le maile.*  
 PAST run.away ART child CONJ PERF hit ART dog  
 The child ran away when he had hit the dog.

Correspondingly, *Sā sasa e le tama le maile* 'The child hit the dog' and *Sā sola le maile* 'The dog ran away' were combined as:

- (16) *Sā sola le maile ina 'ua sasa e le tama.*  
 PAST run.away ART dog CONJ PERF hit ERG ART child  
 The dog ran away when it had been hit by the child.

To conclude, the rule of coreferential deletion across conjunctions is a semantically determined rule, which argues for the absence of a grammaticalised topic and correlates with the absence of an active/passive or ergative/antipassive distinction. Moreover, in Samoan it is possible to make statements about successive intransitive and transitive actions without mentioning the agent.

- (17) [On Friday evening work was finished, the usual time for knocking off was long overdue. Overtime had to be done the whole week, and so the feeling finally arose that it was absolutely necessary to have a big party in the evening.]

*Se'i hepi tasi fo'i. 'Ua fia tau fo'i i le ua,*  
 OPT happy once again PERF want reach again LD ART neck  
*e fa'a-galo ai le tigaina.*  
 GENR CAUS-forget ANAPH ART pain

To be happy once again. To get one's fill in order to make the pain be forgotten. [This longing for freedom coincided perfectly with an invitation that had been received for just this night. The most important thing was drinking for nothing.]

*Na ona<sup>4</sup> taunu'u lava i le fale, fa'amalie tamaiti*  
 only arrive EMPH LD ART house put.at.ease child(SP.PL)

*ma le to'alu i upu, ma le polomisi e vave mai*  
 and ART wife LD word(SP.PL) with ART promise GENR soon DIR

*i le fale, nimo loa. Na fo'i i le fale, 'ua te'a le*  
 LD ART house disappear then PAST return LD ART house PERF past ART  
*tasi i le vaveao...*  
 one LD ART dawn

Came home, put the kids and wife at ease with the promise to return home soon, then disappearing. Returned home, it was already past one in the morning... (Sootaga 1981:1)

- (18) *'Ua ola le taavale ma alu ese. 'Ua tatala le faitotoa tele*  
 PERF life ART car and go away PERF open ART door big  
*ona savavali mai lea i totonu.*  
 CONJ walk(PL) DIR that LD inside  
 [The narrator who is in prison reports:]  
 The car started and went away. The big door opened. Then some people<sup>5</sup> went inside.  
 (Tuitolovaa 1983:1)

<sup>4</sup> *Na ona* has to be analysed as *na* 'only' + *ona* (CONJ) 'that'.

<sup>5</sup> Neither in the preceding nor in the following context are the people who went inside explicitly mentioned.

In Samoan the content form of statements about actions does not require the expression of the agent, whether the actions are transitive or not. In respect to the indispensability of the so-called 'subject' this would mean that subjects are dispensable if they denote the agent of an intransitive or transitive action. This would hardly make sense, as it excludes another subject property, so that in the end nothing is left but the English translations of clauses like (5)–(7), which would argue for the existence of the grammatical category of subject. However, Samoans do have the possibility of presenting a statement about a state of affairs as a predication about one of the participants. But then they cannot use the simple verbal clause, but have to use a more complex type of construction:

(19) 'O le tama na fasi-a le maile.  
 PRES ART boy PAST hit-TR ART dog  
 The boy hit the dog. / It was the boy who hit the dog.

(20) 'O le maile na fasi e le tama.  
 PRES ART dog PAST hit ERG ART boy  
 The dog was hit by the boy. / It was the dog which was hit by the boy.

The noun phrase denoting the participant about whom the predication is made is marked by 'o (the preposition signifying the presentative case) and placed at the beginning of the sentence. If this fronted noun phrase refers to the agent of a transitive action (19), the verb denoting the action is usually marked by the so-called 'mysterious transitive suffix' (Cook 1978; Mosel 1985). Compared with the basic verbal clauses, the clauses with fronted noun phrases are a marked construction (Mosel 1987).

#### 4. ANTI-PERSON-ORIENTED FORMS OF SAMOAN UTTERANCES

Examples (5)–(7) suggest that, in spite of the absence of the syntactic categories subject and object, the Samoan absolutive and ergative noun phrases correspond semantically to English subject and object noun phrases. However, they do so only to a certain degree. It is not the case that every English transitive clause would be translated by a Samoan verbal clause with an absolutive and an ergative noun phrase.

As mentioned above, English ways of expression focus on the person spoken about and tend to refer to him/her by the subject noun phrase. But in Samoan there is a clear tendency to avoid expressions which foreground the person. Consider examples (21) and (22), which illustrate the following rule: if the agent of a transitive action is the possessor of the patient, it is not expressed by an ergative noun phrase or a preverbal pronoun, but by a possessor noun phrase or possessive pronoun which syntactically functions as an attribute of the patient noun phrase (Duranti 1981:173; Duranti and Ochs 1990; Mosel 1985:102f., 1989).

(21) 'O le ā l-a-'u mea na 'ai?  
 PRES ART what ART-POSS-2SG thing PAST eat  
 Na 'ai l-a-'u fasi talo.  
 PAST eat ART-POSS-1SG piece taro  
 What did you eat? I ate a piece of taro.  
 (lit. What is your thing you ate? My piece of taro was eaten.)

- (22) *Na luelue le ulu o Iopu.*  
 PAST shake ART head POSS Iopu.  
**Iopu** shook his head. (lit. Iopu's head was shaken.) (Tauogo 1986:2)

When Samoans speak of perceptions, emotions or feelings, they prefer expressions in which the pronoun or noun phrase denoting the experiencer functions as a possessive attribute. It is either the attribute of a nominalised verbal construction denoting the experience (23), (24) or the attribute of a noun phrase referring to a body part which is somehow involved in the experience (25), (26); compare Shore 1982:172f.

- (23) *Na lagona le faanoanoa o le taule'ale'a o Lama ina ua*  
 PAST feel ART sad POSS ART untitled.man PRES Lama CONJ PERF  
*tau atu l-a-na vaa i l-a-na teine.*  
 reach DIR ART-POSS-3SG see LD ART-POSS-3SG girl  
**The untitled man** Lama felt sad when **he** caught sight of his girl.  
 (lit. The being sad of the untitled man Lama was felt when his seeing reached his girl.)  
 (*Samoa Weekly*, Sept. 1989:2)

- (24) *'Ua faanoanoa o-u lagona.*  
 PERF sad POSS-1SG feel  
**I** am sad. (lit. My feelings are sad.) (Leiataua 1986:10)

- (25) *'Ua tete l-o-ta moa.*  
 PERF tremble ART-POSS-1SG solar plexus  
**I** am scared. (lit. My solar plexus trembles.) (Milner 1966:146)

- (26) *'Ua tutū moge o l-o-na tino.*  
 PERF stand(PL) hair POSS ART-POSS-3SG body  
**He** had goose flesh. (lit. The hairs of his body stood erect.) (Milner 1966:147)

- (27) *Oo mai loa Tulua i le fale, faataga tepa ese mata*  
 come DIR then Tulua LD ART house pretend look away eye(SP.PL)  
*o le tina a o taliga la e*  
 POSS ART moth but PRES ear(SP.PL) EMPH GENRer  
*faalogologo ma maitau soo se pao.*  
 hear and notice every noise  
 When Tulua came home, the eyes of her mother pretended to look away, but her ears listened and noticed every noise. (Semau 1979:4)

Similarly, the appropriate expression to ask somebody for a favour is *E malie lou loto...* (or more politely *E malie lou finagalo...*) 'Does your heart/will agree...?', which corresponds to English 'please', but in contrast to 'please', it does not directly address the hearer:

- (28) *E malie l-o-u loto pē mafai ona ou fa'aaogā-ina*  
 GENR agree ART-POSS-2SG heart Q possible CONJ 1SG use-TR  
*l-a-u penitala.*  
 ART-POSS-2SG pencil  
 Could I, **please**, use your pencil? (lit. Does your heart/will agree, if it is possible that I use your pencil ?)



Statements about a person's age follow the same pattern. While a numeral forms the predicate, the pronoun or noun phrase referring to the person is encoded as a possessive attribute of *tausaga* 'years' which functions as the primary argument of the predicate:

- (29) *E ono tausaga o le teine.*  
 GENR six year(SP.PL) POSS ART girl  
 The girl is six years old. (lit. The years of the girl are six.)

A further feature which distinguishes Samoan from English is its extensive use of nominalisations in which a verb or a verbal noun derived by =*ga* forms the nucleus of a noun phrase. The participants in the state of affairs denoted by the verb or verbal noun take the form of attributes; in other words, they are given the form of a subordinated constituent. The following examples illustrate three typical usages of nominalisations which do not correspond to English expressions containing nominalisations. Apart from these three types of nominalisations which cannot be translated literally into English, Samoan has all usages found in English:

(a) In narrative texts, nominalisations often occur in the presentative case at the beginning of complex sentences, where they describe a certain state of affairs as the background to what the following sentence is about:

- (30) *O le tago ifo o Iopu i l-a-na afitusi*  
 PRES ART reach down POSS Iopu LD ART-POSS-3SG match  
*e tutu ai l-a-na muli-tapaa*  
 GENR light ANAPH ART-POSS-3SG end-tobacco  
*sa sei i l-o-na taliga*  
 PAST put.behind.the.ear LD ART-POSS-3SG ear  
*ae tau-valaau mai loa Maatusi...*  
 but repeatedly-call DIR then Maatusi  
 Iopu was just reaching down for his match to light his cigarette end which he had put behind his ear when Maatusi repeatedly called him... (lit. The reaching down of Iopu for his match...) (Taulogo 1986:1)

(b) Nominalised verbal clauses form exclamative nominal clauses which are a very common means of enthusiastically commenting on a certain situation (cf. Duranti and Ochs 1990):

- (31) *O le manaia ia o l-a-u moe i lena po.*  
 PRES ART nice EMPH POSS ART-POSS-1SG sleep LD that night  
 I had a wonderful sleep that night! (lit. The being nice of my sleeping in that night!)  
 (Larkin 1967:7)

(c) Verbs of motion like *alu* 'to go', *fo'i* 'to return', *sau* 'to come', and *taunu'u* 'to arrive' can be combined with nominalised verbal clauses to express the fact that somebody is going to do something or is coming from having done something:

- (32) *Sa alu loa le utu-ga-sami a le tamaitai.*  
 PAST go then ART scoop-NR-salt-water POSS ART lady  
 The girl went to get salt-water. (lit. The salt-water scooping of the lady went.)  
 (Sio 1984:13)

- (33) *'Ua sau le tā'ele= ga a le teine.*  
 PERF come ART bathing=NR POSS ART girl  
 The girl has come from having a bath.

The last kind of anti-person-oriented expressions to be mentioned here are possessive constructions. While in English possession is expressed by clauses of the type 'X has (owns, possesses) Y', in which the possessor X functions as the subject, Samoan forms possessive clauses with the existential verbs *iai* 'exist' and *leai* 'not exist, be absent', in which the possessee Y forms the primary argument of the existential predicate and the possessor X an attribute of this argument. The literal translations of the Samoan construction would be 'The Y of X exists/does not exist'. Samoan lacks verbs meaning 'to have, own, possess'.

- (34) *E iai le ilāmutu o Saētānē 'o le ve'a...*  
 GENR exist ART aunt POSS Saētānē PRES ART rail  
 Saētānē had an aunt who was a rail... (Moyle 1981:50)

- (35) *E tatau ona iai s-a-u laisene.*  
 GENR necessary CONJ exist ART(NSP.SG)-POSS-2SG licence  
 You need a licence. (lit. It is necessary that your licence exists.) (Milner 1966:95)

- (36) *E iai l-a-'u telefoni.*  
 GENR exist ART-POSS-1SG telephone  
 I have a telephone.

- (37) *E leai s-a-'u tupe.*  
 GENR not.exist ART(NSP.SG)-POSS-1SG money  
 I don't have money.

## 5. CONCLUSION

As the preceding examples illustrate, Samoan differs considerably from English in how real-world situations are put into words.

(a) In their basic forms, expressions of events or states of being in Samoan are not designed as statements of a subject-predicate structure. Instead, the event or state as such is denoted by a clause-initial verb phrase which is followed by noun phrases giving additional information about who or what was involved. This information may be missing in many contexts where, for grammatical reasons, the English translation equivalent must explicitly refer to the participants.

(b) Samoan makes extensive use of nominalisations in which, to an even greater degree than in basic verbal clauses, the expression of the situation as such forms the core of the linguistic construction, whereas all participants are denoted by optional attributes and given a subordinate status.

(c) In statements about a person's experiences, age or belongings, the person is signified by a subordinate possessor phrase and is thus, linguistically, put in the background.

The linguistic differences between Samoan and English doubtlessly correspond to cultural differences. But for the time being it is very difficult, if not impossible, to say to what degree linguistic phenomena directly reflect the sociocultural background of the speakers of either language, or whether or not a certain way of expression says anything about a person's way of thinking. It is

“impossible to draw a clear line between thinking, i.e. bringing a thought into being, and encoding the thought, i.e. putting it into words” (Grace 1987:10). Therefore, the present article does not make any statements about the interrelationship between language and culture, or language and thinking, but only seeks to show some essential differences between English and Samoan ways of expression.

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