

Distinct marking of common and proper nouns in Oceanic (and beyond):

Synchronic variation in form and function and historical implications

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Distinct forms of the so-called articles for common nouns (CN) and proper nouns (PN) are found in a number of Oceanic languages. For Proto-Oceanic, Lynch et al. (2011: 71) reconstruct

**a/*na* as the common and **i/*e* as the proprial article. The modern reflexes of these forms – *la* (CN) and *e* (PN) – can be seen in example (1) from Nakanai. The Polynesian subgroup of Oceanic has innovated a different form for the common article, which is reconstructed as **te* (Crowley 1985: 149–150). As the Rapa Nui example (2) illustrates, the reflex of this form (*te*) contrasts with a proprial marker *a*, though the two markers do not share exactly the same distribution (Kieviet 2017: 276). Interestingly, a similar system of distinct markers for CN and PN is found in very distantly related Tagalog (3). While the topic (or pivot) of a clause is marked with either *ang* (CN, a) or *si* (PN, b), non-topical core arguments are marked with *ng* (CN, c) or *ni* (PN, d) respectively. These markers do not appear to be cognate with the Oceanic or the Polynesian markers. However, since special markers for common and proper nouns are rare crosslinguistically (Handschuh 2017), the possibility that a formal distinction between markers for CNs and PNs was already found in Proto-Austronesian is very likely.

(1) **Nakanai** (Johnston 1980: 40, 39)

- | | |
|---|---|
| a. La viso barautu-au
CN knife cut-1SG.PATIENT
'The knife cut me.' | b. E Baba bili(-a) la bolo
PN Baba kill-3SG.PATIENT CN pig
'Baba killed the pig.' |
|---|---|

(2) **Rapa Nui** (Kieviet 2017: 237, 277)

- a. **Te** haŋa rahi pa he manu era he paloma ...
CN love much like PRED bird DISTAL PRED dove
'Great love is like a dove ...'
- b. He ki **a** Kaiŋa ki **a** Makita ki **a** Roke'aua ...
ASPECT say PN Kaiŋa to PN Makita to PN Roke'aua
'Kaiŋa said to Makita and Rok'aua ...'

(3) **Tagalog** (Central Philippine; Schachter & Otanes 1982: 80, 74)

- a. b<um>ili ng bigas **ang** babae
<AGENTFOC>buy NONTOP rice TOP woman
'The woman bought some rice.'
- b. b<um>ili ng bigas **si** Rosa
<AGENTFOC>buy NONTOP rice TOP R.
'Rosa bought some rice.'
- c. g<in>awa **ng** modista ang baro
<PATIENTFOC>make NONTOP dressmaker TOP dress
'The dressmaker made the dress.'
- d. g<in>awa **ni** Maria ang baro
<PATIENTFOC>make NONTOP M. TOP dress
'Maria made the dress.'

Though this system of distinctly marking CN and PN seems to be a robust feature in Oceanic, the markers have been lost or fossilized in a number of languages (Crowley 1985, Lynch 2001,

Pearce 2007). In other languages, the contrast appears to have been reanalyzed as a distinction between highly animate noun (the former PN marker) and less-/ inanimate nouns (the former CN marker), as for instance in Nakanai and Bola (Crowley 1985:171-172). In Teop (Mosel & Spriggs 2000) and the closely related Taiof (Lynch et al. 2011: 429), fully-fledged gender systems have arisen out of the distinction of proper and common nouns. Both languages actually exhibit a three way distinction that can be traced back to the three term demonstrative system reconstructed for Propto-Oceanic (Ross 1988: 100). The proximal and medial demonstratives in this proposal correspond to the PN and CN articles reconstructed by Crowley (1985) and Lynch et al. (2011: 71), while the distal form **o/*no* is not mentioned by the latter proposals. Corbett (2005: 127) notes the absence of gender in the 21 Austronesian languages in his sample (though he mentions Teop as having gender in the text). However, the distinct forms of the articles for CN and PN should qualify as instances of a gender system, which is commonly defined as the grouping of nouns into distinct classes through agreement (cf. Hockett 1958, Corbett 1991). In fact, Crowley (1985: 167, 171) already refers to some of the languages he investigates as having a “two-way noun class system”, though a noun-class/gender analysis of the relevant languages has not been widely accepted.

In this paper, I will present a synchronic overview over the forms and functions of the common and proprial article in the Oceanic languages and other branches of Austronesian. Particular focus will be put on the question whether this system can be analyzed as an instance of gender marking (beyond the languages in which the existence of gender is generally accepted, such as Teop and Taiof).

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