

# NOMINAL POSSESSIVE CLASSIFICATION IN TONGAN

MELENAITE TAUMOEFOLAU

## 1. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 PREVIOUS WORK

A great deal of work has been done on A and O possession in the various Polynesian languages.<sup>1</sup> As is now well known, possessive pronouns and possessive prepositions in most Polynesian languages come in two forms. For example, to express the meaning of 'my' in Tongan, either one of the two forms *'eku* or *hoku* is used. 'His' is expressed by either *'ene* or *hono*, and 'your' by either *ho'o* or *ho*. The meaning of the possessive preposition 'of' can be expressed by either 'a' or 'o'. The first of these pairs of possessives, *'eku* 'my', *'ene* 'his', *ho'o* 'your' and 'a' 'of', belong to the possessive category called A and the second, *hoku* 'my', *hono* 'his', *ho* 'your' and 'o' 'of', belong to the possessive category called O. This division of possessives into the two categories of A and O permeates the entire possessive system of Tongan, as is the case also with most other Polynesian languages.

I think it would be true to say that the theory that has gained the most general acceptance as to the meaning of A and O is that developed by Biggs (1969) for Maori, namely that A has the meaning of possessor controlled or dominant possession and O, non-possessor controlled or subordinate possession. C.M. Churchward (1953) gives a similar theory for Tongan although he uses different terms to describe the categories of possession. He calls A-possessed nominalisations that correspond to the subject of a sentence 'subjective' and O-possessed nominalisations that correspond to the object 'objective'. Thus, in the following sentence the derived nominalisation *'ene langa* 'his-A building' takes A class because the possessive corresponds to the subject (agent in my view) *Sione*, while the nominalisation *hono langa* 'its-O being built' takes O class because the possessive corresponds to the object *fale* 'house':

*Na'e langa 'e Sione 'a e fale.*  
PAST build ERGATIVE Sione ABSOLUTIVE ARTICLE house  
Sione built the house.

Churchward makes no attempt to explain the semantics of those usages of A and O but, by using the same names ('subjective' for A and 'objective' for O) to refer to possessions in which the possessives do not correspond to any subject or object of the verb, he implies that there is a semantic connection between the use of A and O with nominalisations and their use with concrete nouns. He maintains (1953:81) that when A and O are used with 'other nouns'

<sup>1</sup> This is an expanded version of the paper delivered at FICOL, Port Vila, July 1993. I want to thank my teacher, Ross Clark, for comments and discussions while both versions of the paper were being prepared.

(i.e. concrete or common) in usages in which the possessive hardly corresponds to either the subject or object of a verb, A (i.e. the subjective possessive) is used when, if I am the possessor, "I am active, influential, or formative etc. towards the thing mentioned" but O is used when "the thing mentioned is active, influential or formative etc. towards me". This is very similar to the dominant/subordinate explanation of Biggs (1969) for Maori as well as the control theory of Wilson (1982) for Hawaiian, a theory that was also postulated to be true for other Polynesian languages.

In his review of Churchward's *Tongan grammar*, Milner (1954:63) expresses dissatisfaction with Churchward's account of the functions of the two categories of possession and concludes that "the problem of nominal classification in Tongan remains unsolved". Milner's main criticism is that Churchward's interpretation of the two possessive categories does not explain very many uses of the possessives, 'as with some kinship terms. For example, the use of O with the relationships wife, son and daughter would imply that a man would be subservient to them while the use of A would imply that his mother, father and sister's son would be subservient to him. This, Milner points out, contradicts what is known of Tongan culture.

Another problematic area that might be added which the control versus non-control explanation would hardly explain is the possession of statives in Tongan which can be possessed with both A and O. Consider, for instance, '*ene 'ita* '(A category) the fact that he was angry' and '*hono 'ita* '(O category) his anger' or '*ene mamahi* '(A category) the fact that he was sad' and '*hono mamahi* '(O category) his sadness'. It is difficult to see how control, or the lack of it, may differentiate between the two uses, even if the control refers to the initiation of the possessive relationship, as advocated by Wilson (1982).

The partly grammatical and partly notional account that Churchward gives means that he has not attempted to establish explicitly a relationship between the use of the possessives with referential nouns and their use with nominalisations (but compare Pawley and Sayaba (1990) for the use of the possessives in Wayan). Yet, by retaining the names 'subjective' for A and 'objective' for O to cover use with nominalisations and use with concrete nouns he is implying that there is a common motivation between the two uses. Most accounts of the possessives have tended to concentrate on the possession of concrete nouns while setting aside problems of possessed nominalisations as separate. Such accounts include Elbert (1957), Mulloy and Rapu (1977), Wilson (1982) and, more recently, Hohepa (1993).

Wilson (1982) contains a detailed investigation of A and O as they are used with referential nouns, but he implies that A and O have the same functions when they occur with 'verbs' in nominalisations since he says (p.16) that: "The controller...is the noun phrase that causes or instigates the relationship (usually possessive, but the relationship between an agent and a verb is also one of control)...Actors, agents, and instruments are controllers". However, Wilson does not discuss this further and, on the possession of nominalisations, directs the reader to Chung (1973) who holds that the use of A and O in nominalisations in Tongan, as is the case in Maori, is motivated purely on a syntactic basis. Clark (1981) believes that the choice of A and O in nominalisations in Polynesian languages mirrors the semantic contrast between A and O. This view is taken for granted by Biggs (n.d.), who makes the point that to account for the meaning of A and O, their uses with statives and intransitive verbs have also to be explained. In a similar vein I suggest that A and O maintain the same basic meaning across both concrete nouns and nominalisations.

Elbert (1957) calls O possession 'partitive' and A 'agentive', a view that is basically in agreement with my interpretation of the two categories. Our treatments, however, differ in detail and in scope; whereas he confines his interpretation to the possession of referential nouns, I am concerned with the application of the possessives in the entire range of nominals.

## 1.2 AIMS AND METHODOLOGY

My task here is to characterise the semantic basis of the opposition between A and O. My method in trying to come to terms with the semantics of A and O was to list all possible occurrences of A and O that I knew of. I got some of these usages from previous works by linguists on A and O, from other native-speaking Tongans, and from usages I made up myself. My examples included the possession of all kinds of nominals. Using all kinds of nominals means not separating the possession of nominalisations from the possession of concrete nouns. I wanted to investigate the possession of all nominal types in order to be thorough. My aim was to examine all these usages to see if there was a distinction between A and O; if there was, what was it?

I should say at once that what I investigated were forms rather than members of semantic domains. This means that when I looked at the possession of a word like *fa'ē* 'mother', it was not simply its sense of 'mother' whose possession interested me, but also its sense of the nominalisation 'being a mother'. I was more interested in comparing the possession of *fa'ē* 'mother' and that of *fa'ē* 'being a mother' than in comparing the possession of *fa'ē* 'mother' and that of *foha* 'son', which are members of the semantic domain of kinship. My insistence on using forms rather than semantic domains was because I am inclined to think that Tongan is a language in which the great bulk of content words or bases are indifferent between nominal and verbal use, with or without affixation. And for some time I have had a nagging suspicion that A and O had something to do with these verbal and nominal uses of a form. So instead of grouping words into semantic domains and expecting members to be possessed in the same way, the kind of presupposition that leads to the notion of 'exceptions', I merely investigated each form for what it was worth. Every single form that I investigated could be possessed with both A and O to designate different possessive relationships.

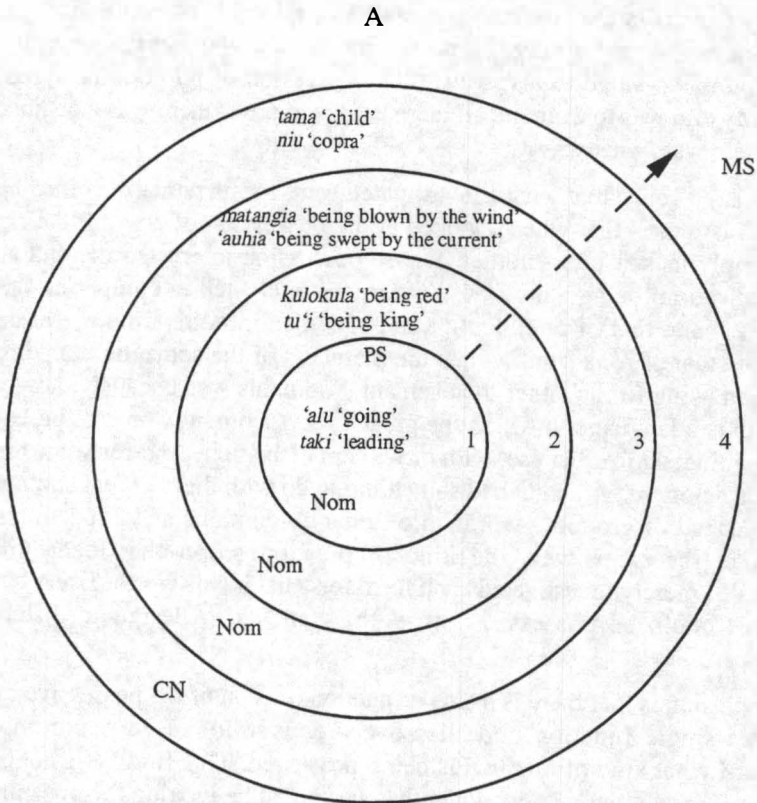
My conclusion is that there is a single function of each of the possessive categories A and O, and this single function underlies every conventionalised occurrence of A and O regardless of what kind of nominal is being possessed. This finding is not compatible with the notion of 'exceptions'. I now doubt that we should be looking for 'meanings' of A and O relationships. 'Meaning' implies something specific, and it is not possible to explicate a specific meaning of such broad, semantically abstract categories as A and O. It would be more fruitful to think of A and O as having grammatical functions instead, or grammatical meaning as opposed to lexical meaning. We could say that while A and O have functions or grammatical meanings, the nominals they modify have lexical meanings.

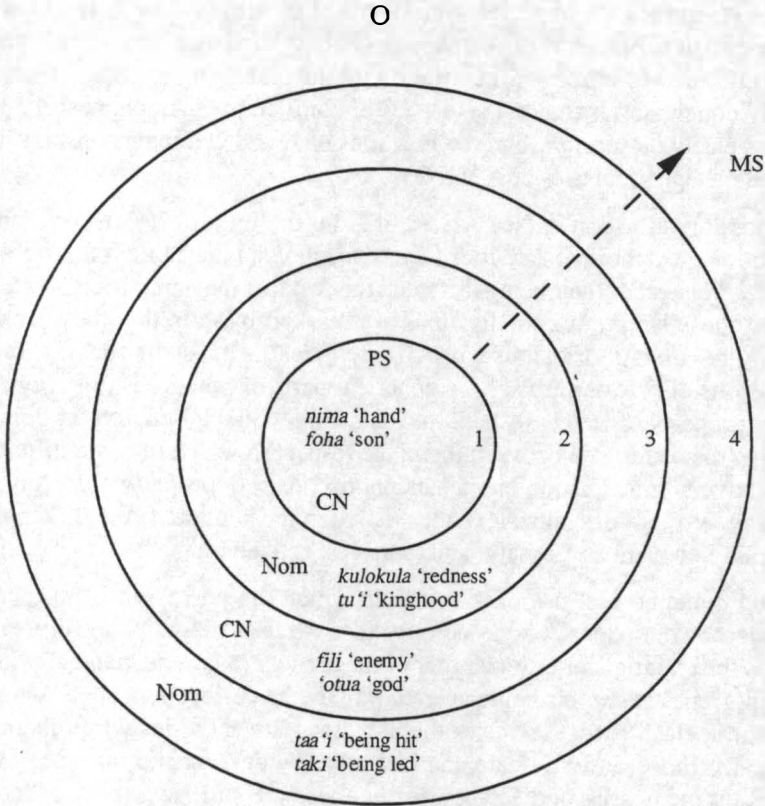
## 2. THE METAPHORS: THEIR FUNCTIONS AND DISTRIBUTION

After examining my data I came to the conclusion that A and O in Tongan are two great grammaticalised metaphors for perceiving every 'thing' in the real world. The function of the A metaphor, on the one hand, is to mark the possession as an 'activity', even if it is not a

literal activity, and the possessor as a 'doer', even if he/she/it is not a literal doer. I call this a verbal function since 'activity' presupposes verbality. The function of the O metaphor, on the other hand, is to mark the possession as a 'part' or 'property', even if it is not a literal part or property, and the possessor as a 'whole' or 'totality' even if he/she/it is not a literal 'whole'. I call this a nominal function since 'part' or 'property' presupposes nominality. A is a metaphor of agentivity and appropriate for activity-based relationships while O is a metaphor of constitution and appropriate for property-based relationships. Ultimately, Tongan uses A and O to distinguish between what you actually 'carry out' and what merely characterises you.

2.1 PROTOTYPICAL USE OF A AND O





KEY

- |    |                         |     |                 |
|----|-------------------------|-----|-----------------|
| PS | Prototypical situation  | Nom | Nominalisations |
| MS | Metaphorical situations | CN  | Concrete nouns  |

FIGURE: A AND O POSSESSION IN TONGAN

Since A and O are metaphors, they have prototypical applications as well as metaphorical extensions. The prototypical use of A (see Area 1 of A in the figure) is when it marks nominalisations that represent literal activities of a literal doer (e.g. *'ene taki* 'his leading'), where a syntactic Agent possesses a nominalised transitive verb, and *'ene 'alu* 'his going', where a syntactic Subject possesses a nominalised dynamic intransitive verb. These are prototypically 'verbal' relationships. I now believe that the use of A with concrete nouns (see Area 4 of A in the figure) is an extension of this prototypical 'verbal' use. The prototypical use of O (see Area 1 of O in the figure) is when it marks literal part-whole relationships (e.g. *hono nima* 'his hand', *hono foha* 'his son, literally tuber'). These are prototypically 'nominal' relationships. I now believe that the use of O with nominalised transitive verbs (see Area 4 of O in the figure) is an extension of this prototypical 'nominal' use.

2.2 METAPHORICAL USES OF A AND O

As grammaticalised metaphors, A and O apply generally across all nominals, so the fit is sometimes not as perfect as it is in prototypical situations (see Area 1 of A and O in the



figure). The reason for the imperfect fit (illustrated in Areas 2-4 of A and O in the figure) is that the grammatical functions of A (marking 'activity' and therefore verbal) and O (marking 'property' and therefore nominal) conflict with the lexical meanings of the nominals they modify. My conclusion is that in these areas of conflict, the metaphors still apply, although they are less easily discernible, and the functions of A and O remain constant. The following are the three metaphorical uses of A and O:

1. One metaphorical use of A (see Area 2 of A in the figure) is to mark nominalisations of stative verbs as metaphorical activities (e.g. *'ene kulokula* 'its being red', *'ene tu 'i* 'his being king', *'enafaikehekehé* 'their being different, the fact that they are different'). I argue that the reason why these stative nominalisations are marked by A is that they are metaphorised activities. One metaphorical use of O (see Area 2 of O in the figure) is to mark nominalisations of stative verbs as metaphorical parts or properties (e.g. *hono kulokula* 'its redness, its property of redness', *hono tu 'i* 'his kingship, his property of being king', *hona faikehekehé* 'the difference between them, the respect in which they are different'). Here, O turns the stative nominalisation into a metaphorised part or property of the possessor. Forms like *kulokula* 'red' are of course lexically stative in meaning, but A and O transcend lexical meaning and view them as 'activity' and 'part' respectively.

2. A second metaphorical use of A is one in which the possessed is an 'activity' but the possessor is not the 'doer' of the activity (see Area 3 of A in the figure). Instead, the possessor is the experiencer or undergoer of the activity (e.g. *'ene matangia* 'its being blown by the wind', *'ene 'auhia* 'his being swept away by the current'). In such A-marked cases of possession, the clash is that lexically the possessed are activities with inherent agents, but grammatically those activities are marked as activities carried out (i.e. experienced or undergone) by the possessor. Metaphorically, these are still 'activities' of the possessor. A second metaphorical use of O is when it does mark an object, person or place as a 'part' or 'property' (see Area 3 of O in the figure) but that object, person or place is not a literal part or property of the possessor (e.g. *hoku fili* 'my enemy', *hoku 'Otua* 'my God', *hoku tu 'i* 'my king', *hoku mali* 'my spouse', *hoku tuonga'ane* 'my brother, female speaking'). What appears to be an imperfect fit here is in fact the use of the O metaphor to designate a metaphorical partitiveness. The relationship between one and one's enemy, for instance, constitutes a kind of partnership in which one member complements the other. An enemy must be an enemy to someone, even if that someone is oneself. In this sense, such relationships are metaphorically partitive. By complementing the possessor, the possessed thereby counts as 'property' or 'part' of the possessor in a figurative sense.

3. The third metaphorical application of A is its use with concrete nouns (see Area 4 of A in the figure), that is, when a real world object is viewed as an 'activity' as in *'ene tama* 'her child' and *'ene niu* 'his copra, his young coconut trees'. Object concept words like *tama* and *niu* are viewed as 'activities' that their possessors or 'doers' 'action' in some way. The reason why it is hard to conceive of the object as an 'activity' is that the nominal lexical meaning of a word like *tama* 'child' clashes with the verbal grammatical meaning of the A metaphor. The fact remains, however, that the function of the metaphor remains constant – it marks the possessed as an 'activity' that is 'actioned' by the possessor. The third metaphorical application of O is when a literal activity is viewed as a 'part' or 'property' of a possessor (see Area 4 of O in the figure), as in *hono taa 'i* 'her being hit' and *hono taki* 'her being led'. The possessed here are nominalisations that are possessed by syntactic objects. They take O because they constitute, characterise, and identify the possessor in the same way that a literal body part such as *nima* 'hand' may constitute, characterise and identify him/her.

What makes this application of O difficult to discern is the clash between the verbal lexical meaning of the nominalisation and the nominal grammatical meaning of the O metaphor, but the function of O essentially remains the same.

### 2.3 THE ACTIVITY/PART DISTINCTION IN METAPHORICAL SITUATIONS

Sometimes in metaphorical situations it is not easy to see how a relationship is partitive or agentive. I want to illustrate how, for instance, possessive relationships with the surroundings and the natural environment can be partitive and therefore take O. *Hoku tafa 'aki* 'my-O side' refers to both a literal body part and the space at my side. With the second meaning, the partitiveness is metaphorical. This is also the case with *hota vaha 'a* 'our-O space-between-us'. Although this space is not an actual part of us, by using O possession we speak of it as though it were. Similarly, *hoku kolo* 'my-O village' and *hoku fonua* 'my-O country' are parts of me in a figurative way. This is the case also with *hoku kelekele* 'my-O land', *tahi 'o Tonga* 'Tonga's-O sea area', *hoku 'akau* 'my-O trees', *hoku niu* 'my-O coconut trees', *hoku vai* 'my-O pool' and, by analogy perhaps, *hoku inu* 'my-O drink'. All these are cases of metaphorical partitiveness in which the possessions are viewed as extensions of the 'person' of the possessor.

We can contrast these O-marked metaphorical parts or properties with their A-marked activity counterparts. When the exact same referential nouns above select A, it is then that they are viewed as metaphorical activities. Thus: '*eku kolo* 'my-A village' might be said by an officer of the Statistics Department in reference to a village whose population he is going to count; '*eku kelekele* 'my-A soil' may be said by a scientist to refer to his test tube of sample clay with which he is experimenting; '*eku 'akau* 'my-A plants' may be said by a gardener to refer to the plants he is cultivating; '*eku niu* 'my-A coconut trees / copra' may be said by a man to refer to the young coconut trees that he is taking care of or to the copra that he is processing; '*eku vai* 'my-A medicine' may be said by a doctor to refer to the medicine he is prescribing or by a patient to the medicine he is taking; '*eku inu* 'my-A drink' may be said by a girl to refer to the jug of lemon drink she has made. There are probably thousands of real-world situations in which possession is modifiable by A, the only requirement being that there be some criterial activity upon which the possession is founded. And apart from these A-marked cases of possession, the exact same referential nouns can also be used as nominalisations (e.g. '*ene kelekele* 'its-A being earth-filled', which may be said of a place, as opposed to '*ene makamaka* 'its-A being rocky'). All such nominalisations are also A-marked, being states (except in the case of *inu* 'drink' which will be A-possessed anyway as a literal activity of a literal doer) and, therefore, metaphorised activities. My objection to the control theory is that control is too specific; 'control' is only a subset of 'activity'.

### 2.4 DISTRIBUTION OF A AND O

Milner (1954:63) levels a second major criticism at Churchward's treatment of A and O in Tongan by saying that Churchward has not been able to resolve the fact that "very many words only take one form of the possessive pronouns to the exclusion of the other, irrespective of context". In defence of Churchward's analysis which seems to regard A and O as equally versatile, I want to argue that, contrary to Milner's assertion, all Tongan forms that are content words are modifiable by both A and O to give different possessive relationships. In addition, the context in which a form is possessed is all-important. If the

context is about a partitive relationship, O is selected, if agentive, A. From this rule there is no deviation. When a form or word in Tongan is possessed, it is capable of being viewed either as an 'activity', thus requiring A, or as a 'property', thus requiring O.

Take, for example, the word *foha* 'son, tuber'. When it is used as a concrete noun and possessed by a man, as in *hono foha* 'his-O son', O class is selected because O marks a partitive relationship, the son being the father's 'tuber', an extension, though metaphorical, of his person. But when the word is used as an 'intransitive nominalisation', as in *foha 'a e ma'alá* 'productivity of-A the yam garden' or *'ene fohá* 'its-A productivity', A class is selected because A designates an agentive relationship in which the garden (*ma'alá*) 'carries out' the 'activity' of producing tubers. Most accounts of A and O tend to regard a word like *foha* as a concrete noun and possessed only with O class to the exclusion of A class. What should be remembered is that content words in Tongan are multifunctional so that 'concrete nouns' are never exclusively concrete nouns. A concrete noun form is also a 'verbal noun', after Churchward, that is, an intransitive nominalisation. If, as in the case of *foha*, a word is O-possessed as a concrete noun, it is also A-possessed in its intransitive nominalisation sense. It should also be noted that a 'concrete noun' is always capable of being possessed by both A and O depending on the context in which it is used. For example, with the word *foha* 'son, tuber', O is used to designate the partitive kinship relationship with the father as possessor, but in a context such as the distribution of the tubers of some plant (e.g. *sī* (*Cordyline terminalis*), yam or cassava), one may speak of A-possessed *foha*, as in *Ko hai na'a ne to'o 'eku fo'i fohá?* 'Who took my-A tuber?' designating an agentive relationship rather than partitive. With the word *fa'ē* 'mother', A is used in *'ene fa'ē* 'her-A mother' designating an agentive possessive relationship but O is used in *hono fa'ē* 'its-O mother', as in *fa'ē'o e ta'ú* 'mother of-O the year' designating a partitive possessive relationship.

The word '*alu* 'going' is often regarded as an intransitive nominalisation. As an intransitive nominalisation it is A-possessed, (e.g. *'ene 'alu* 'his-A going'), since we are talking about an action here that someone is performing, hence the use of the A metaphor. But the form '*alu* also has the meaning of 'journey, excursion, trip, or tour', a sense that is arguably not a nominalisation at all, except in the superficial sense of lexical nominalisation, but a referential noun designating an event. This sense of '*alu* is compatible with O possession if the possession conveyed is a partitive one, as in *ko e 'alu fakalata taha 'o e fa'ahita 'ú* 'the most enjoyable trip/tour of-O the season' or *ko hono 'alu fakalata tahá* 'its-O most enjoyable trip/tour'. Similarly, we may speak of A-possessed *mohe* 'sleeping' in *'ene mohe* 'his-A sleeping' since the possessor/agent is carrying out the act of sleeping, but *mohe* will select O possession if it is viewed as property in a partitive relationship, as in *mohe 'o e maté* 'the sleep of-O death', referring to the sleeplike quality of death (taken from a hymn). We may also speak of A-possessed *mole* 'being lost' in *'ene mole* 'his-A being lost' since he is 'carrying out' or experiencing the 'act' of being lost, but we may also view *mole* as partitive of something else and thus use O possession, as in *mole 'o e pa'angá* 'debit of-O the account' or *hono mole* 'its debit/loss'. The word *tupu* 'growing' may be A-possessed in *'ene tupu* 'his-A growing/growth' to suit the agentive relationship, but O is used for a partitive relationship in *hono tupu* 'its-O interest/profit' as in *tupu 'o e pa'angá* 'interest of-O the principal/account'. All nominals that are usually referred to as 'intransitive nominalisations' behave in much the same way as the examples given above when they are possessed and thus take both A and O according to the appropriate context.

The significance of the multifunctionality of forms in Tongan should be recognised. Whereas in English we would probably use totally different words for the second senses of



the examples above, Tongan uses the same forms without morphological marking. I believe that the multifunctionality of Tongan has tended not to be fully appreciated, and this has led to a rather restricted view of words, in turn giving rise to a restricted view of A/O distribution. A word tends to be understood as exclusively a 'verb' or 'noun'. For example, words such as *lele* 'running' and *tangi* 'crying' are often understood only as 'intransitive nominalisations', being 'verbs'. And since as 'intransitive nominalisations' these words take only A possession, it is often assumed that they (words such as *lele* and *tangi*) can only take A but not O possession. The danger here is that the other senses of *lele* and *tangi* – those senses that permit of O possession – tend to be ignored or forgotten.

The argument presented here is that *lele* and *tangi*, like other content words in Tongan, are best regarded as multifunctional forms. Each form is able to occur in both A-induced and O-induced contexts. To illustrate, in contexts in which *lele* is possessed as an 'activity' that is carried out by a (usually human) possessor, as in *'ene lele* 'his-A running', whatever the grammatical label of *lele*, A is selected. In contexts in which it is possessed as a 'part' or 'property' of a (usually inanimate) possessor, as in *hono lele mālie tahá* 'its-O most spectacular race/track event', again regardless of the grammatical label of the word, O is selected. Thus, it is not that a word is an 'intransitive nominalisation' that it selects A but that as an intransitive nominalisation a word is in an A-induced context, being viewed as an 'activity'. And since words like *lele* are not exclusively 'intransitive nominalisations', they may enter, as referential nouns, into possessive relationships that are partitive and thus call for O.

Multifunctionality is a property of the language that should be heeded because it would have both methodological and terminological implications for the grammatical analysis of Tongan. It is based on the importance of multifunctionality in Tongan that I think the semantic domain approach is inappropriate for the study of possession because by putting words into semantic domains (or 'noun classes') we thereby ignore their multifunctionality and forget that they may take the alternative form of possession.

## 2.5 DISTRIBUTION ACCORDING TO FREQUENCY OF USE

All forms in Tongan, then, potentially take both A and O, but there is a difference in their frequency of use. For example, *hono tama* 'its-O child', as in *tama 'o e fonuá* 'child of-O the land' is much less frequently used than *'ene tama* 'her-A child'. This does not mean that *hono tama* is not possible. Rather, the need for the context that calls for its use is rarer, possibly much rarer, than the need for the context in which A is required, as in *'ene tama* 'her-A child'. There is a difference in the distribution of A and O here, but it is a difference in use, not grammar. *Hono tama* is just as 'grammatical' as *'ene tama*, but *'ene tama* is more frequently used than *hono tama*. If this distinction between grammar and use or between what is 'grammatical' and what is simply 'more frequently used' is not made, then there is a risk that only what is 'frequently used' would be thought to be 'grammatical', with the result that what is less frequently used but 'grammatical', such as *hono tama*, would tend to be overlooked. This is probably another factor that has led to the claim that many words take only one possessive category. What Churchward (1953) does is concentrate on what is commonly used, which was probably all that Churchward had access to, not having been a native speaker. But for each example of a form that Churchward gives there is, in fact, a corresponding use of the other possessive class that he does not mention. If we dismantle his

semantic domains and examine how each form is possessed, we will see that there are really no 'exceptions', and A and O are equally applicable to all the forms he discusses.

### 3. THE RULE

However the rule is to be enunciated for Tongan, it should say that in the figure, Areas 1, 2 and 3 of A are predictably A and Areas 1, 2 and 4 of O are predictably O. The unpredictable areas are Area 4 in A and Area 3 in O. It should be understood, however, that unpredictability here is not due to exceptional circumstances requiring any new rules but rather to the accident of A/O choice since it is in this area that A and O are potentially equally applicable. This area, collectively Area 4 of A and Area 3 of O, consists of concrete things as the possessed, and A and O are potentially equally applicable if the possessor is human, or non-human but personified. An inanimate possessor will uncontroversially select O because, as is the nature of things in the real world, an inanimate possessor, unless it is personified, is not naturally 'agentive' towards concrete possessions, not being volitional or active, but can only be 'characterised' by them.<sup>2</sup>

Given human or personified possessors, these concrete possessions could conceivably be viewed as 'parts' or 'properties', thus attracting O, but could also conceivably be viewed as 'activities', thus attracting A. They could potentially select O if, for instance, they make up points in a network or members of a set or partnership in which the possessor is a focal point, but they could select A if, despite satisfying the foregoing requirements for O, they display some salient instrumental value or are activity-oriented in some way. I think this is the reason why, given a human or personified possessor, we find both A and O in the possession of such 'things' as tools, extended family members, and forms of transport.

In novel situations where a (concrete) thing is being possessed for the first time by a human/personified possessor, both A and O are potentially possible. Whichever of A and O the native speaker selects, the rule will have allowed it because there is no 'wrong' choice. Thus, in Tongan, I have heard either A or O for 'table', 'watch', and 'cup', holding the personified possessor constant. What should be noted is that in cases like these, 'correctness' is determined retrospectively by the superimposed process of conventionalisation. It is not that a choice was inherently correct. Sometimes, as for the possession of 'cup', both A and O have been conventionalised, and thus both made 'correct'. With more 'permanent' relationships such as kinship relationships, a single choice will have long been conventionalised. Thus, Maori uses O for 'mother', 'father' and 'grandparent' whereas Tongan uses A, and we need not conclude that there are exceptions or aberrant usages here or that the rules are necessarily different.

The rule of 'activity' and 'part' is probably embedded in the native speaker's competence. The fact that in novel possessive situations there is probably more agreement than disagreement on a category is to be expected, given native speakers' ability to draw analogies with known situations. The bulk of Tongan native speakers will probably speak of an A-possessed 'camel', given a human possessor, by analogy with the possession of other

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<sup>2</sup> In a Maori Studies departmental seminar, University of Auckland, in June 1993 Biggs gives the following as one of six factors that must be accounted for by any rules covering the A/O distinction: "An inanimate possessor may only possess [objects/concrete possessions] with O...This may be a fancy...If a fact it is important".

animals in Tongan, but it is conceivable that a Maori speaker would select O for 'camel' by analogy with Maori O category 'horse'. But drawing such analogies is still in keeping with the rule, and it seems to me that ultimately the choice is always between whether the new possession is more activity-oriented or partitive-oriented.

My conclusion is that one general rule rather than several 'smaller' rules more faithfully reflects the facts of Tongan. Such a rule, I think, better represents the native speaker's competence. However, having one rule instead of several may not be very helpful to the language instructor whose students must learn the language consciously. Nor will the implications of one general rule necessarily enchant the lexicographer.

#### 4. SUMMARY

The main ideas of this paper have been:

1. What appear to be quite disparate uses of each of A and O are really metaphorical extensions of only one basic, prototypical function the specification of which, therefore, requires only one rule. For A, the function is to mark a possessive relationship as one of agentivity in which the possessor 'carries out' the possessed. For O, the function is to mark a possessive relationship as one of partitiveness in which the possessed 'characterises' the possessor. It is the singleness of this function (hence rule) that accounts for the great regularity and consistency with which A and O occur.

2. In possessive relationships where the possessor is human (or personified) and the possessed is a concrete noun, both A and O, being *views* of agentivity and partitiveness rather than objective, real-world categories, are potentially equally applicable. This is because a human possessor, unlike an inanimate one, is capable not only of being constituted or identified or characterised by the possessed but also of being agentive towards it. Thus, with a human possessor, the relationship with the possessed would just as appropriately be viewed as 'agentive' as 'partitive'. Either choice will be in keeping with the rule. It will be seen, then, that unpredictability in these cases has nothing to do with the rule and therefore does not invalidate it. But even this unpredictability does not upset too much the uniformity with which A and O are used because of two factors: (a) in novel situations native speakers tend to draw analogies with known possessions and, more often than not, make the same choice; (b) the first incidental choice, which would be that of most people, given factor one above, is soon conventionalised and made to become the 'correct' choice.

3. The distribution of A and O in Tongan can be systematised as follows: any form that is a content word can be possessed by both A and O depending on whether the relationship is viewed as agentive or as partitive.

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