

A SCHEME FOR DESCRIBING SAMOAN GRAMMAR

(Revised text of a paper read on September 28, 1961).

A. Pawley

For linguists interested in the Pacific area, one of the more significant events of 1961 was the publication of a scientific description of an Eastern Polynesian language, New Zealand Maori (Biggs 1961). Of particular interest is the author's statement of Maori grammar, which is formulated in the idiom of modern American linguistics, and which uses a scheme of analysis not previously applied to a Polynesian language. In a recent article, the same writer suggests that other languages in the Polynesian family share with Maori the same features which make it unrewarding to describe Maori grammar in the customary manner of Polynesian grammatical texts (Biggs 1960: 376).

Comparisons of vocabulary and grammar led Elbert to set up an Eastern and a Western subgroup within Polynesia (Elbert 1953). He places Maori in the Eastern, and Samoan in the Western, subgroup. Sharing around 40 to 50% of cognates in a basic word-list of 215 forms¹, the two languages have probably been separated for upwards of 2000 years.

Recent study of Samoan at Auckland has offered an opportunity to see if the key features of Dr Biggs' grammatical scheme for Maori - notably what he calls 'morphology-syntax' analysis - can be validly and profitably applied in part or whole to a language belonging to a different subgroup of the Polynesian family.

Dr Biggs' scheme is not a tool for comparing languages. It was designed to facilitate his statement of Maori grammar as an independent system. This review of Samoan grammar is comparative insofar as it considers how far the operational concepts used in describing the Maori grammatical system can also be used for the Samoan system, but it is primarily intended to be an outline of a scheme for dealing with Samoan grammar independently.

Customarily, that part of grammar which receives most attention from linguists is morphology. Morphology involves the identification of the minimal grammatical units of a language, and the exhaustive statement of their distribution. The description of morpheme distribution is usually the more difficult task. Normally, it is achieved by (1) defining some unit within which morphemes can combine in short sequences, (2) stating the arrangements of morphemes within this unit that are considered grammatical.

Because the unit defined for the purpose of stating morpheme distribution has so often been the word, morphology has come to mean the isolating of morphemes and the description of their arrangements within the words of a language. Where morphemes belong to different

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words in an utterance, their relationships are generally treated under the heading of syntax. Such syntactical relationships are presumed to be on a different level, and to be subject to a different set of rules, from those between morphemes belonging to the same word.

It is probably true that all languages have definable units which possess characteristics generally agreed to typify 'words'². But it does not follow that it is always useful to consider the words of a language as constituent parts in the structural analysis of that language. A more economical statement may sometimes be made by ignoring words, and substituting some other unit.

The usual approach to morphology, in terms of words, is reasonably satisfactory for a language like English. This point can be made by a simple example. First, consider a word such as 'reformers'. The relationship of the four morphemes of 're-form-er-s' show clear patterns. The order of morphemes is quite fixed. It is ungrammatical to combine them in any other way - for instance, as **formersre*, or as **reserform*. Moreover, no morpheme can recur within the word. Thirdly, other classes of morphemes stand in patterned relationships with those of 'reformers'. The element *-form-* can be replaced in the sequence by certain other morphemes, (such as *-move-*, giving *removers*). A tense inflection such as (*-ed*) cannot co-occur with either the agent marker (*-er*), or the plural marker (*-s*) of *reformers*, but it can occur with the first part of the sequence (*reform-*) to give *reformed*, and so on.

On the other hand these rules do not necessarily apply to the different words of a sentence and 'the reformers reformed reformable reforms', is perfectly grammatical. It is likely that a description of English grammar will need to distinguish at least two levels and two types of combinatorial units. The maximum unit of morphology, the word, may be viewed as the minimum unit of syntax.

Samoan words, like Maori words, are of a different order from those of English. Samoan is an 'isolating', 'analytic', or 'non-inflecting' language, in that its words are usually of a single morpheme only. Only about one word in six contains more than one morpheme. Thus, a description of morpheme distribution confined to the words of Samoan would say very little about the grammar, the vast bulk of which would be relegated to the level of syntax.

The evidence indicates that there are at least two units larger than the word, and yet smaller than the sentence, that operate in Samoan grammar. There are grounds for distinguishing still another unit in addition to these. It is suggested that to include the word on the same level as the other units would make the statement of the syntax

2. Common definitions of the 'word' include 'what is written between spaces', 'minimum unit an informant will offer in isolation', 'the minimal syntactic unit'.

very complex, and would scarcely reflect the structure of the language. For the latter reason it is felt that it is not desirable to include words (as normally defined) as units at any level in Samoan grammar.

Dr Biggs operates with only one unit between morpheme and sentence for Maori. The analysis of morpheme distribution is called 'morphology-syntax', and it is made within a unit larger than the word - the 'contour word' - which is ultimately defined in terms of morpheme relationships. Significantly, the initial isolation of 'contour words' is achieved through their correspondence with phonological units - 'contour spans' - in slow [Maori] speech. The contour span is bounded by junctures, and in slow speech typically extends over short sequences of morphemes only.

A correspondence of a similar nature exists in Samoan. No understanding of the language is needed for one to notice that in slow speech Samoans segment their utterances by pausing frequently. Given some familiarity with the morphemes of Samoan and the arrangements they occur in, it is possible to predict the positions of these pauses at any given rate of speech. (The term 'juncture' will henceforth be used instead of 'pause' because it more accurately describes the relevant phonetic features).

The minimal phonological unit defined by juncture may be called the 'minimal juncture segment', or 'minimal contour span'. (Minimal because juncture cannot occur within the segment). The corresponding grammatical unit may be called the 'phrase'. The following utterance, transcribed from a tape-recording, contains four minimal juncture segments, and four phrases.

| 'ia-'ee-savali-pěa ||-i-φ-o-na-ăla ||-e-tŭsa- ||-ma-l-o-na-finagalo X|.

Hyphens mark morpheme boundaries, and | || | and |X| mark kinds of junctures. The constituent phrases contain from two to five morphemes.

A longer stretch of speech than this was analysed in terms of the concepts just discussed. The total utterance comprised 92 grammatical phrases. 82 of the phrases were bounded by juncture on both flanks; i.e. at 90 percent of potential juncture points, juncture actually occurred. The exceptions were where the speech rate was perceptibly faster than the overall average rate. The rate of speech was 115 words per minute, or 318 syllables or vowels per minute, which is rather slower than that of most conversational utterances, but about average for careful or formal speech. Phrases contained from one to nine morphemes, with an average of 3.5.

When considered within the framework of the phrase morphemes may be divided into two main groups, on the basis of several contrastive features. These contrastive features include:

- (1) size and shape of morphemes
- (2) order of occurrence in the phrase
- (3) frequency of occurrence
- (4) kinds of meaning assignable

The terms *bases* and *particles*, already applied to Fijian by Milner 1958, and to Maori by Biggs, can be adopted for these two classes of morphemes. Not all bases are opposed to all particles on all five counts. It may be generalized that:

- (a) particles are never longer than two syllables, while bases, in at least one of their allomorphs, are never less than two syllables. The shapes |C|, |V|, and |CV| are confined to particles.
- (b) particles occur at the peripheries of phrases, while bases are usually flanked by particles.
- (c) Individual particles recur much more often in speech than do individual bases.
- (d) particles have grammatical meanings, often difficult to determine, while bases generally have lexical meanings.
- (e) Most bases but no particles can occur alone in a phrase.

Like the Maori contour word, the Samoan phrase may be said, structurally, to contain three slots or parts, and they can be given the names used for the Maori slots: preposed, nucleus, and postposed.

Certain particles occur preposed to the nucleus, certain particles occur postposed to it, bases occur in the nucleus slot. The nucleus slot is filled in all phrases, the preposed slot is filled in most phrases, the postposed slot is filled in a minority of phrases.

The particles are a small class. Preposed particles number about 65, and postposed particles about 25, making only 90 in all. On the other hand bases are very numerous, their total running into many thousands. (Maori particles are even fewer than Samoan. Dr Biggs lists about 50). Bases may be defined as a class by listing all morphemes that are not bases, since they are few.

Besides bases and particles there is a third main class of morphemes, interjections, which do not enter into combination with other morphemes, and are thus ignored in a distributional statement.

The order of morphemes within phrases is rigidly fixed; morphemes (with a few exceptions), cannot recur within a phrase; many morphemes are mutually exclusive of each other within phrases. But these characteristics do not extend to the supraphrase level. The phrase, in fact, rather resembles the English word in many of its features, and the distinction between rules operating at the word level and rules operating at the sentence level in English can be made in Samoan between phrases and larger units. Consider the sentence:

e alu gei le kamaaloa i le fale

This sentence is composed of three phrases, beginning with the verbal particle (*e*), the definite article (*le*), and the transitive particle (*i*), respectively. The rules of order and recurrence within phrases that have just been mentioned are operative for each phrase of the sentence quoted. But, moving up to the sentence level, the rules are no longer valid. The 'same' utterance is often spoken with the order of phrases altered to

e alu gei i le fale le kamaaloa.

Morpheme order within the phrases remains constant, but overall order is changed owing to the change in phrase order. Morphemes recur; (there is only a single morpheme between the two occurrences of *le*).

A simple grammatical definition may be given for the phrase, hinging mainly on the fact that the preposed and postposed particles are classes which do not overlap. Any morpheme preceding a preposed morpheme must belong to a preceding phrase, unless it is a preposed morpheme itself. This accounts for most phrases, although an exhaustive definition requires the introduction of other criteria.

The details of morpheme distribution may be stated in two alternative ways. One method is to classify particles on the basis of mutual exclusiveness, and privileges of substitution, to classify bases largely on the relationships they have with particle classes, and to describe the arrangements such classes may form in phrases. This is approximately the method used by Dr Biggs with Maori.

A second method is to class certain short sequences of morphemes and single morphemes into slots (using the same kinds of classificatory criteria as in the first method), and to state first the arrangements within the slot classes, and then the arrangements of these latter units within phrases. The boundaries of these slots are definable in terms of the morphemes flanking them.

The second method means another level is added to the grammatical analysis but this is balanced by the brevity and simplicity of the combinatorial statements which can then be made at each level. Judgment must be made in terms of what the structural analysis will gain from one method as against the other.

The morphemic material contained within the sub-phrase combinatorial units does not correspond to what Samoans would regard as words.

Though many phrases contain only one morpheme in each of the preposed, nucleus, and postposed slots (e.g. *saa malaga age*), and sometimes only a nuclear morpheme (e.g. *sau*), some phrases are much more complex in structure. For example the following phrases of nine and ten morphemes are given (hyphens marking morpheme boundaries):

ma-'o-l-aa-kaa-kou-koe-malaga-l-
 ma-'o-le-'aa-malaga-aku-ai-pea-lava
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It is in the description of complex phrases such as these that it is difficult to use the first method for stating morpheme distribution.

Leaving morphology and moving up to the level of syntax description, reference may be made to an unpublished paper by Dr Biggs on Maori syntax (Biggs N.D.). He states Maori syntax in terms of sentences defined by juncture, and made up of sequences of contour words (also called 'phrases' by him). Phrases are largely defined in terms of their initial morphemes - verbal phrases being those which begin with verbal particles, and so on. There are less than 20 phrase types in all. A distinction is drawn between two types of sentences, dependent and independent.

In describing Samoan syntax I think it is useful to distinguish between clauses and complex sentences. A clause is the minimal segment compulsorily bounded by juncture in Samoan speech. It includes sentences, both dependent and independent, which contain only one clause. A complex sentence contains two or more clauses separated by nonfinal juncture, and is bounded by final juncture.

Clauses and simple sentences can be described in terms of constituent phrases, which in turn are classed mainly according to their initial morphemes. Complex sentences can be described in terms of their constituent clauses, and the latter are classifiable according to their initial phrases.

To summarize, we have briefly discussed the selection and definition of combinatorial units in a scheme for describing Samoan grammar, together with criteria for classifying units, and methods for stating their distribution in Samoan utterances. The descriptive scheme has been considered in the light of the analysis of New Zealand Maori made by Dr Biggs. Samoan grammar, in some respects, is slightly more complex than Maori, and certain structural distinctions have been drawn for Samoan which are not present in the analysis of Maori. However, it is considered that the two languages possess essential identities in structure which make it profitable to transfer the key operational concepts used in stating Maori grammar, to description of Samoan.

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