

On the approximate parity of Niuean arguments: a case study in copy-raising

Massam (2001a) points out that familiar notions of subject and predicate from languages like English are not immediately applicable in Niuean. The ergative case system means that agentive subjects do not receive uniform case marking, and the basic VSO word order entails that the traditional predicate (the verb and its complement) is not a continuous constituent on the surface. Moreover, Massam (2001b et seq.) has argued convincingly that the EPP in Niuean attracts an argument-evacuated VP (or some projection embedding it) rather than an argument DP, leaving both arguments inside the extended verbal projection, in multiple specifiers of vP. Niuean thus lacks familiar external arguments altogether.

(1) Proposed transitive clause structure:

- a. [TP [VP V <Theme>] T [vP Agent_{Erg} [vP Theme_{Abs} [v' v <VP>]]]]

In this paper, I propose to identify the typologically unusual behavior of Niuean raising with this lack of argument externalization.

Like its English namesake, Niuean raising features a non-thematic subject position that may be filled with an argument displaced from the complement clause to the raising verb. Notoriously absent, however, are the archetypal characteristics associated with true raising: there is no absence of case in the clause originating the displaced argument; displacement may target object position in certain cases; and most saliently, subjects *and objects* are equally licensed to participate.

(2) Subject-subject raising

- a. To maeke ke lagomatai he ekekafo a Sione.
 FUT possible SBJ help ERG doctor ABS Sione
 “It’s possible the doctor can help Sione”
- b. To maeke e ekekafo ke lagomatai a Sione.
 FUT possible ABS doctor SBJ help ABS Sione
 “The doctor can help Sione”

Traditional analyses have posited ad hoc multiple-case checking paradigms (Bejar & Massam 1998), but such accounts do not go much beyond stipulating language specific machinery that can derive the data. Most importantly, these accounts do little to explain why Niuean differs from English, nor do they offer insight into other oddities of the construction, such as its subsumption of argument (but not adjunct) tough movement (TM), which is formally indistinguishable from raising.

I argue that the data may be derived without recourse to language specific mechanisms under the hypothesis that both arguments, as specifiers of vP internal specifiers, are equally accessible to higher Agree probes. I will first identify Niuean raising as copy-raising (CR), then show how the puzzling behavior falls out by adopting the equal accessibility of arguments alongside Rezac’s (2006) account of CR. Unification of CR and TM is a fundamental feature of Rezac’s approach, so that this data is explained as well. Ultimately, the differences between English and Niuean raising are reduced to the independently motivated lack of an external argument. I briefly discuss some problematic data from binding and argue that these operations in Niuean are sensitive more to argument structure than syntactic structure.