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Some academic books read like a culmination of decades of research, while other books make new and fresh proposals. This volume by Diane Massam fulfills both of these roles simultaneously. On the empirical side, we see the sum total of a life’s work in documenting the morphosyntax of an endangered language. Yet at the same time, the analyses are novel, often radical departures from M’s prior work in this domain. The primary themes of this volume involve the representation of arguments, the derivation of predicate-initial syntax, and the relationship between verbal and nominal syntax.

This volume is part of a series of books on endangered languages, with the focus here being the analysis of Niuean, an endangered Polynesian language with speaker communities living primarily in Niue and New Zealand. While the books in this series are not intended to be grammars, M offers the reader a comprehensive view of Niuean morphosyntax. The data are clearly presented, representing both corpus and elicited data, and reflect a long-standing research interest in the language. Each chapter includes detailed descriptions of language properties, including extensive data sets on tense-mood-aspect markers, voice particles, arguments, predicate types, the fine-grained structure of nominals, and many others. While the presentation of the data ultimately serves the analysis, this book will be an invaluable resource for morphosyntactic data on Niuean and a rich source of data for theorizing about the key properties of Niuean grammar, including isolating morphology, verb- or predicate-initial word order, and ergative/absolutive alignment.
M situates her analysis within the framework of minimalism. Niuean is a language that, superficially, alternates between VSO and VOS word orders. Finding an explanatory account of the derivation of these word orders from a common underlying structure has been a long-standing research question within generative grammar (see e.g. Emonds 1980, Chung 2005, Clemens & Polinsky 2017). Breaking from her earlier work on Niuean, M makes a number of new and interrelated proposals. For example, observing the complete lack of phi-feature agreement in Niuean, M argues that Niuean does not have an inflectional phrase (IP) domain, contrary to her own prior work on the main-clause syntax of this language (see especially Massam 2001). With the abandonment of an IP, M takes the isolating and analytic properties of Niuean at face value. Moreover, with no IP domain, M seeks to explain the lack of relationship between inflection and verb, the optionality of tense marking, and the absence of nominative case.

The consequences of omitting IP from the structural analysis of Niuean are the focus of Chs. 2 and 3, along with issues of the main-clause syntax. A central issue in Ch. 2 is establishing the predicate-initial property of Niuean, which M substantiates via discussion of a number of predicate types as well as nominalizations. Modifiers are taken to be merged into the specifiers of various aspect heads in the order of their scope-taking properties; this order then inverts via roll-up movement, an analysis M extends to the nominal domain in later chapters. Ch. 3 considers arguments and continues the discussion of voice morphology from the prior chapter. The illustration of tense, aspect, and mood particles, along with the realization of voice, is comprehensive.

The main concern in Ch. 3 is the derivation of verbal sentences; while M maintains that Niuean is predicate-initial in all cases, this is where the analysis of VSO and VOS is addressed. Lack of an IP head also entails a reanalysis of M’s (2001) VP-remnant movement analysis of VSO, which depends on VP-remnant movement to IP, driven by an EPP feature. M maintains, as with prior work, that Niuean is fundamentally predicate-initial on the surface but, following Kayne (1994), has an underlying structure in which the verb and object form a constituent separately from the subject. In order to derive VSO on the surface, M proposes ‘high argument merge’, an analysis in which case phrase (KP) arguments—an ergative-marked S and absolutive-marked O for the VSO order—merge (not move) into the specifier position of dedicated case heads, above the verbal complex (which includes PredP, vP, and VP). These case heads are similar to the AgrS and AgrO projections of earlier generative analyses, situated above the verbal complex. With the arguments merged ‘high’ in this way, PredP moves directly into the specifier of finite phrase (FP), the lowest projection of an expanded CP. As such, there is no DP movement in this analysis, obviating both theoretical and empirical issues that have been raised with respect to M’s (2001) analysis of VP-remnant movement. Further, the ergative-marked argument, as the specifier to the highest case-marking head, has the properties of an applicative argument, following observations made in the descriptive literature on Niuean (Sperlich 1997).

Given the above analysis of VSO (which should now be understood as predicate-subject-object), the alternate VOS word order becomes the issue. To account for this, M proposes an NP (not KP or DP) argument that merges as the complement of V for all verbal sentences (even intransitives, in which case this NP is null). In the VOS order, M maintains the basic outlines of her earlier pseudo-noun-incorporation (PNI) analysis, in which an NP (not case-marked) is the complement of the verb and, as such, raises along with the predicate. In order to accommodate this view to the analysis of VSO and underlying VO word order, M follows Pérez-Leroux et al. (2018) in claiming that all transitive as well as intransitive verbs take an NP complement, which happens to be null in many instances. When this NP is overt, it raises with the predicate, deriving the VOS order; semantically, it will generally be treated as an indefinite. Intransitives, strictly speaking, do not exist, as a null NP complement is still required, typically taking a generic reading. However, when a KP direct object argument is merged above the predicate, the null NP complement of V is still there, but is linked to the direct object KP through feature percolation. From this perspective, all of the elements of the VOS order are present also in the VSO order, given the addition of a null NP complement for all verbs in these constructions.

With the central role of the position of argument merge in this analysis, this volume makes an important contribution to the literature on base argument positions, and the relationship between
case and theta role. Following the work of Kratzer (1996), it has been increasingly assumed that arguments have a very local relationship to their theta-role-assigning heads. M challenges this model, given that KP arguments are merged higher than their theta assigners. On the whole, the formalization of theta assignment and the relationship between theta roles and the obligatory NP complement of V in verbal sentences is admirably clear; however, whether this analysis is independently justified remains uncertain to me. It will be interesting to see if this new analysis of the VSO/VOS alternation will be as crosslinguistically applicable as the VP-remnant approach pioneered by M in earlier work.

While Chs. 2 and 3 focus on the syntax of the sentence, M turns to nominal syntax in Chs. 4 and 5. Here, M follows long-standing views in generative linguistics in suggesting that the nominal syntax of Niuean largely mirrors the main-clause syntax. Here, in keeping with the analysis in Ch. 2, NP undergoes roll-up movement over modifiers, ultimately forming an nP constituent. The discussion of nominals also leads M to one of the few instances of comparison across Polynesian, comparing Niuean to Tongan. M argues that while Niuean has lost the determiner system for marking definiteness and specificity as observed in Tongan, Niuean has retained the syntactic position for determiners, which affects the left periphery of the KP. This chapter concludes with an in-depth discussion of nominalizations.

In Ch. 5, M ties together the discussion of nominals with the verbal syntax by reexamining the role of case, and specifically of the ergative/absolutive system observed in Niuean. M considers the typology of ergative/absolutive languages presented in Legate 2008, but ultimately argues that Niuean is a language in which the absolutive-marked argument should be treated as a type of inner subject. Under this view (and setting aside null NP verbal complements for now), intransitive sentences are the basic sentence type, with a single absolutive-marked argument. As mentioned above, agents, if present, are treated as applicatives under this analysis, and, as such, are case-marked ergative in this language. Ch. 5 and the volume conclude with a big-picture view of the typological properties of Niuean.

The role of case-assigning heads, which are crucial to the high argument merge analysis and, therefore, the derivation of the main-clause word order, will likely be the most challenging area of M’s analysis from a crosslinguistic perspective. As I pointed out in prior research (Medeiros 2013), Eastern Polynesian languages such as Hawaiian have nearly identical syntactic properties to Niuean in terms of predicate-initial word order and the VSO/VOS alternation. The key difference, however, is that Eastern Polynesian languages have nominative/accusative case marking. The syntactic parallelism between these language types thus poses a challenge for any analysis that depends crucially on case, if a unified analysis is desired. This raises the question of the underlying structure and derivation of VSO/VOS in the absence of absolutive and ergative case heads. One approach would be to abandon canonical generative views of nominative and accusative case marking for these languages, and to have these cases assigned in the specifiers of dedicated case heads, above vP. Alternatively, nominative and accusative case could be assigned in the way now familiar in the crosslinguistic literature, in a relationship with verbal and tense heads; under this approach, the syntax of nominative/accusative languages with VSO/VOS alternation would be considerably different from that of languages such as Niuean, despite the similarity on the surface. This issue, as well as the model of theta relationships presented by M, will remain as rich areas for future research.

In its totality, it is very satisfying to have the wealth of data present in this book all in one place. The book itself is aesthetically pleasing, with clear writing and a very helpful index. One strength in this domain is the clarity with which M handles different terminology throughout the text and across the generative literature. Moreover, the synthesis of prior literature gives this volume the feel of a reference work on generative approaches to several major topics, including verb-initial word order, argument structure, and ergativity. Reading through this book gave me the impression that M wrote it not only as an avenue to advance our understanding of these properties of language, but also as a labor of love for the language itself. I expect that this new work by M will have a similarly large impact as her earlier work on this language.
REFERENCES


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The nine essays in this collection do not dwell on the well-known contrast between ‘formalism’ and ‘functionalism’ in linguistics as discussed in Newmeyer 1998, although they are not irrelevant to that debate. What they do dwell on is various senses of the word *form* and its derivatives, as they have been used in Euro-American history and philosophy of linguistics since the nineteenth century. Together, the chapters form a mosaic of scholarship on studies of language that variously incorporate diverse meanings of the terms ‘form’, ‘formal’, and ‘formalism’. The assembly of chapters does, indeed, have a mosaic-like character in that it comprises independent, nonoverlapping texts. Chapter authors sometimes remark on how the edges of their topic approach those of other authors, but the individual contributions have not been forced into a unified tableau. The text presupposes some exposure to the history of western linguistics and to the history of philosophy. It would make bracing, but not impenetrable, reading for linguists without that background. Although only one of the nine authors has an affiliation in the United States, most chapters center on the work of well-known US-based scholars.

Following a scene-setting preface by editor James McElvenny (iii–viii), JUDITH KAPLAN’S Ch. 1 (1–33) offers an analysis of ‘formalism’ in the sense of the diagrams or figures that comparative-historical linguistics has used to visually communicate genealogical (‘vertical’) relationships among languages versus the (‘horizontal’) spread of features across languages spoken by adjacent populations. Beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, Kaplan reports that scholars first conveyed these facts in words and verbal metaphors, then adopted lists, tables, and graphic displays. All of these are ‘formal’ moves in that they distill complex relationships (of descent and of influence) into tables, trees, waves, or Venn-diagram-like figures, where the strategic arrangement of data in two-dimensional space implies a specific position of those data vis-à-vis neighboring data.