

This talk investigates a grammatical specificity contrast in Western Samoan (henceforth, “Samoan”), drawing on novel data from elicitation with 4 native speakers. I first show that the Samoan system does not reflect any classic definition of specificity from existing literature—it is not based on partitivity, referentiality, or scope. I then propose an analysis implemented in Hamblin alternative semantics, in which the specific (*SPEC*) denotes a choice fn. over a property and the nonspecific (*NSPEC*) denotes individual alternatives with a property. The difference between the two thus amounts to their type (*et vs. e*) and whether they generate alternatives.

“Specificity” is a notoriously non-specific label, often given to article systems that otherwise defy classification. Farkas (1994) notes what are perhaps the three most common uses of the term, in which *SPEC* articles are defined as a) taking wide scope, b) being referential, or c) being partitive. In studies of specificity, Samoan is cited as a language with a specificity contrast displayed between the articles *le* ‘*SPEC*’ and *se* ‘*NSPEC*’. This classification comes from Mosel & Hovdhaugen’s (1992) grammar, which chooses the term “specificity” simply to differentiate the Samoan system from an English-like system based on definiteness. Their comments and examples have been used to corroborate different theories of specificity; e.g., Ionin (2006) suggests Samoan data support the idea that specificity corresponds to “noteworthiness”. However, deeper probing often reveals that Samoan does not fit so neatly into pre-established theoretical categories (e.g., Tryzna (2009)).

In this talk, I examine 5 hitherto underexplored aspects of the contrast between these two articles based on in-depth elicitation sessions with 4 native speakers. (1): Using *NSPEC* results in a sense of speaker uncertainty, even alongside predicates such as *iloa* ‘know’. (2): The distribution of *NSPEC* resembles that of negative polarity items (NPIs) or free-choice items (FCIs), in that it is unacceptable in out-of-the-blue episodic sentences, but can occur in negation or question environments, or modified by relative clauses (interrogative ex. shown in (2)). (3): Also like NPIs, *NSPEC* can have a domain-widening interpretational effect similar to English *any*. (4): *NSPEC* interestingly *can* occur in episodic sentences as long as sufficient context is provided—as shown in the example, where adding other nominals of the same property to the context renders the sentence acceptable.

(1) a. Ou te iloa o le / se maile na aia le i’a.  
 1.SG NPST KNOW PRES SPEC NSPEC dog PST eat SPEC fish  
 ‘I know **a dog** ate the fish.’  
*Speaker comment with NSPEC: “Maybe you’re not sure which dog ate the fish.”*

(2) a. \*E to’atolu fafine e nonofo i se nofoa.  
 NPST two woman NPST sit.pl LOC NSPEC chair  
 Intended: ‘Two women are sitting on **a chair**.’  
 b. E to’atolu fafine e nonofo i se nofoa?  
 ‘Are two women sitting on **a chair**?’

(3) E le’i tusia Tai se upu!  
 NPST NEG write T. NSPEC word  
 ‘Tai didn’t write **a (single) word**!’

(4) ?? Sa fafaga e tama:loloa se malie.  
 PST feed ERG man.pl NSPEC shark  
 Intended: ‘The men fed **a shark**.’  
*Acceptable with the following context: The men are supposed to feed someone’s shark; they feed some shark (one of the sharks), but evidently it was the wrong shark.*

Finally, (5): Both *NSPEC* and *SPEC* can take narrow scope with respect to other operators, such as *so’o* ‘every’ in (5). However, speakers tend to interpret *SPEC* as having wide scope if presented with a *NSPEC* minimal pair alternative.

(5) So’o se aiga lava le / se tagata pisa.  
 every NSPEC family EMPH SPEC NSPEC person noisy  
 ‘In every family there’s **a noisy one [person]**.’ ( $\forall > SPEC$ )

Collins (to appear) argues that the *SPEC/NSPEC* distinction in Samoan corresponds to a scopal contrast, where *SPEC* corresponds to wide scope and *NSPEC* to narrow. However, examples such as (5),

where both SPEC and NSPEC can take narrow scope, refute this. (5) additionally shows that the distinction is not one of referentiality, since SPEC can plainly be nonreferential. Further, (4) shows that Enç’s (1991) partitive hypothesis, in which SPECs have partitive semantics, cannot be correct—here, it is NSPEC which corresponds to a partitive-like reading.

I suggest that the two articles differ in that NSPEC generates alternatives with the relevant property while SPEC is interpreted as a choice fn. over a property. This can be captured in a Hamblin (1973) framework, where indefinites are treated as sets of alternatives.

- (6) Denotation of *le malie* ‘SPEC shark’:  $\llbracket \text{le malie} \rrbracket^{w,g} = \{f(\lambda x. \text{shark}(x) \text{ in } w)\}$   
 (7) Denotation of *se malie* ‘NSPEC shark’:  $\llbracket \text{se malie} \rrbracket^{w,g} = \{x \mid \text{shark}(x) \text{ in } w\}$

According to (6), SPEC represents the singleton set containing a choice fn. over the relevant property (SHARK). Meanwhile, according to (7), NSPEC represents the set of entities with the relevant property (the set of all sharks). Both these denotations must pass through further steps to become interpretable; (6) must be existentially closed, and (7) can either be existentially closed or composed by some other operator to yield a singleton set. For SPEC in (6), I propose that the choice fn. involved is of the sort introduced by Reinhart (1997) and implemented by Chung & Ladusaw (2004) in their operation Specify—used to explain SPEC in Māori, which is related to Samoan. Crucially, Reinhart’s choice fn. allows existential closure at any point in a derivation, which permits SPEC to have both wide and narrow scope readings.

Meanwhile, to render (7) interpretable, I (like Kratzer & Shimoyama (2002)) propose that various operators ( $\neg$ , Q, etc.) may compose the alternatives. For instance, in (3),  $\neg$  applies to the set of every word alternative in world  $w$ , rendering a wide-domain interpretation. However, if no such operator is present, I follow Kratzer & Shimoyama (2002) in assuming that an assertoric operator of the sort in (8), which sits in a structurally high position, may serve as an existential closure “catch-all”. This operator comes with the condition in (9).

- (8)  $\llbracket \exists \alpha_{st} \rrbracket^{w,g} = \{ \lambda w'. \exists p [p \in \llbracket \alpha \rrbracket^{w,g} \ \& \ p(w') = 1] \}$   
 = the singleton set containing the proposition that is true in all worlds in which some proposition in  $\alpha$  is true

- (9) *Non-trivial Alternative Generation*: There must exist discourse-available alternatives.

When NSPEC nominals come into contact with operators such as Q in (2b) or  $\neg$  in (3), there need not exist discourse-available alternatives because (9) is not in play. This means that NSPEC will always be acceptable in NPI-like environments. However, if no other operator exists and the denotation is composed by the assertoric operator, there must be discourse-available alternatives for the relevant NSPEC nominal. This condition is not satisfied in out-of-the-blue contexts, but with contextual accommodation, such as that in (4), episodic sentences (i.e., sentences without other operators) may become acceptable. Finally, NSPEC introduces a sense of uncertainty because it introduces a set of alternatives of the same property. That is, uttering NSPEC means that other dogs are present in the discourse, resulting in the comment, “Maybe you’re not sure *which* dog ate the fish.” This also results in speakers often interpreting the alternative to NSPEC, SPEC, as meaning ‘a particular’—that is, having wide scope. This contrast, however, is pragmatic rather than semantic, and can be canceled in contexts such as (5).

While I argue that this analysis captures the Samoan data better than previous ones, I importantly do not claim that all languages with SPEC articles are like Samoan. In fact, the opposite seems to be true: the data presented suggests that non-definite article systems vary extremely widely, even more so than previously imagined, resulting in the need to define “specificity” in even more abstract terms—or to cease to consider it a salient category altogether.

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