

# The development of nonspecific articles

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# Articles and nonspecificity

## Articles

Articles are markers in the nominal domain whose main function is to encode the referential function of the noun that they occur with.

## Specific

Not all discourse participants have the knowledge to unambiguously identify the referent, but all discourse participants know that there is a certain single referent.

- (1) She met [a new neighbor] this morning.

## Nonspecific

There is no single, certain referent linked to the expression; either the discourse participants do not know whether such a referent exists, or it is not relevant which referent of a set of possible referents is referred to.

- (2)
  - a. She would like to buy [a house] (but she hasn't found a suitable one yet).
  - b. Have some candy (any piece you like).

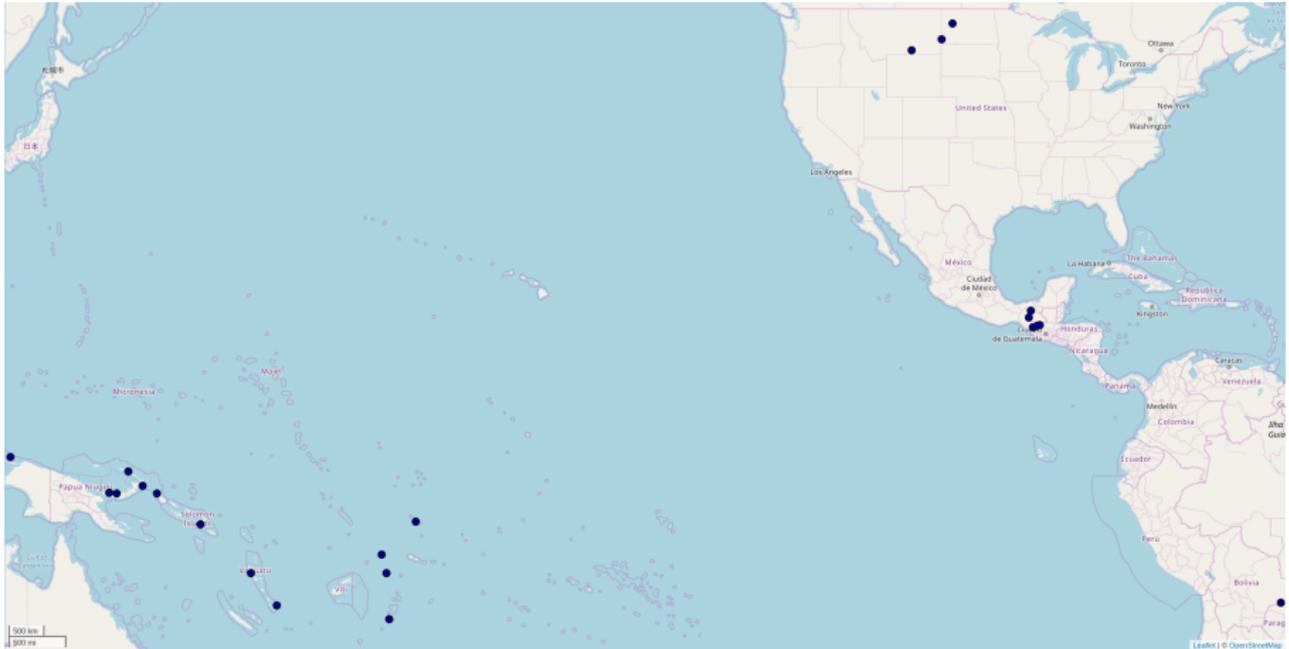
# Nonspecific articles

## An example from Lakota (Siouan, USA/Canada)

- (3) [igmu' wã] wachi  
cat **EXSPEC** want.s:1SG.o:3SG  
'I want a (particular) cat.' (Van Valin 1977: 64)
- (4) [igmu' wãži] wachi  
cat **NONSPSEC** want.s:1SG.o:3SG  
'I want a (any) cat.' (Van Valin 1977: 64)

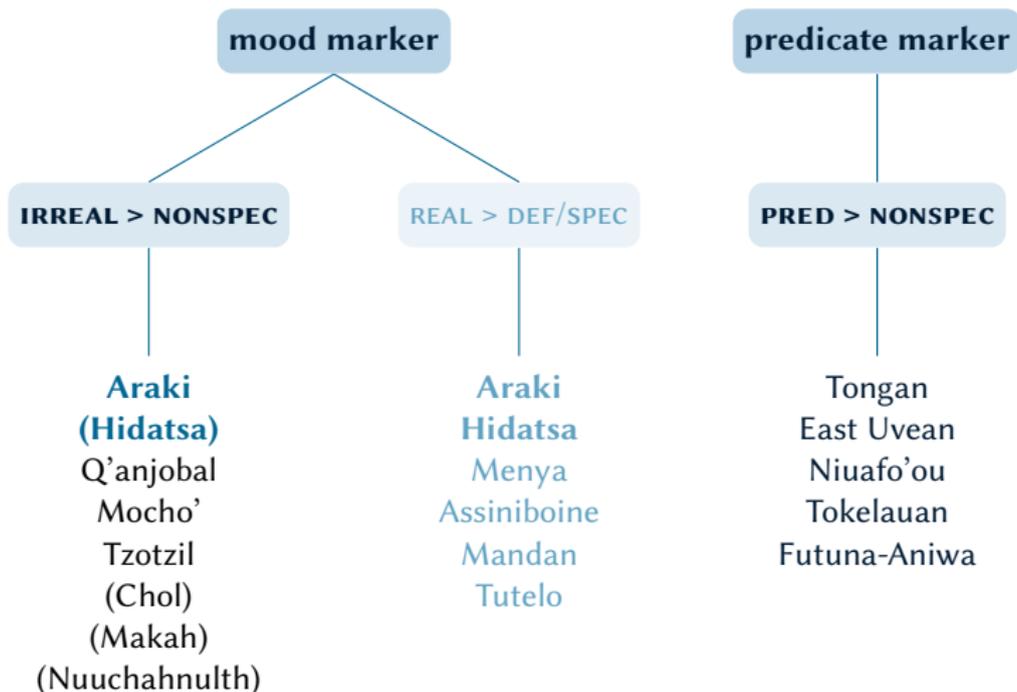
- Nonspecific articles are distinct from NPIs like *any* in English.
- Languages with NPIs do not obligatorily need to distinguish between specific and nonspecific referents.
- Languages with nonspecific articles have to mark a nonspecific referent as such.

# Areal distribution of nonspecific articles



# Diachronic sources of nonspecific articles

I will talk about two possible developments of nonspecific articles here.



# 1. IRREALIS > NONSPECIFIC

# Q'anjob'al (Mayan, Guatemala)

## ❶ -oq as an irrealis marker of an event:

- (5) q-q'anjab' ayach ta q-ach q'anjab'-oq.  
POT-talk TO.2 COND POT-2PL talk-IRR  
'X will talk to you, if you talk.'

(Mateo Toledo 2017: 538)

## ❷ -oq as an irrealis marker of a nominal predicate:

- (6) man anima-oq hach.  
NEG person-IRR 2SG  
'You are not a person.'

Q'anjobal (Mateo Toledo 2017: 551)

→ ambiguous reading between irrealis predicate interpretation and nonspecific referential interpretation

## ❸ -oq as a nonspecific marker in a free choice (7) context:

- (7) asi' yul [junoq tuktuk]  
go.IMP in NONSPEC tuktuk  
'Let's take a (any) tuktuk.'

(primary data)

## 2. REALIS > DEFINITE

❶ the emphatic DECLARATIVE marker *-s/-sd(aaʔ)* on the verb

- (8) hiirahbí-dhaa agá-waa-**sd**.  
difficult-NEG suppose-1CAUS.DIR=**EMPH.DECL**  
'I didn't think it would be hard.' (Park 2012: 232)

❷ the emphatic DECLARATIVE marker on clausal elements used as arguments

- (9) agu-agháàga-gsá-aci-**s** m-îi-hee.  
REL-late-USI-COMPR=**EMPH.DECL** 1-PRO-EMPH  
I'm the one who's always late. (Park 2012: 407)

❸ The DEFINITE article *-s* on nouns without clausal modifiers used as arguments

- (10) masúga-**s** adáàsi-hgua núdhi-Ø.  
dog-**DEF** outdoors-LOC tie-IMPER.SG  
'Tie **the** dog up outside!' (Park 2012: 365)

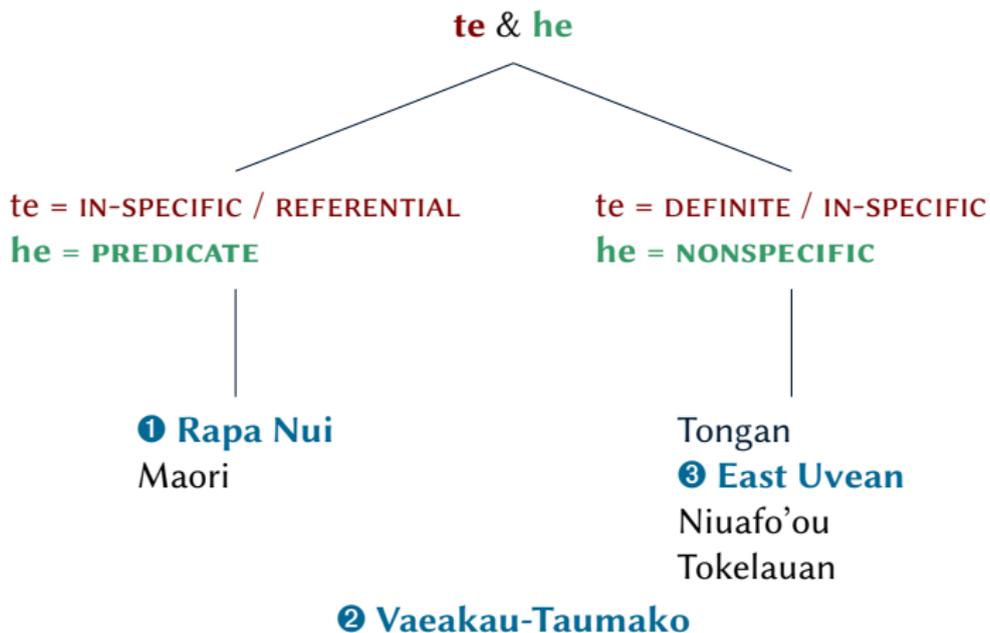
### **3. PREDICATE > NONSPECIFIC**

# Oceanic



- Some Oceanic languages use **te** as the definite/inclusive-specific article and **he** as the nonspecific article.
- In other languages, **te** is an article and **he** rather a predicate marker.

# The development PREDICATE > NONSPECIFIC



# ① *he* as a predicate marker in Rapanui Polynesian, Chile

- **he** is used as predicate marker:

(11) a Thor Heyerdahl [**he** científico e tahi]  
PROP Thor Heyerdahl **PRED** scientist NUM one  
'Thor Heyerdahl was a scientist' (Kieviet 2017: 452)

- **he** is used to express similarity:

(12) rā me'e era [pē **he** tiare] he mōrī  
DIST thing DIST like **PRED** flower PRED light  
'Those things like flowers are lights.' (Kieviet 2017: 452)

- The referential article **te**, instead of the predicate marker **he** is used with nonspecific referents:

(13) he kī ō'oku ki kō'ku ŋā poki taina era mo oho o mātou mo  
NTR say O.POSS:1SG to O.POSS:1SG PL child sibling DIST for go of 1PL.EX for  
kimi i [**te** pipi]  
search ACC **REF** shell  
'I told my brothers and sisters that we would go to look for shells.'  
Rapa Nui (Kieviet 2017: 239)

## ② *he* as a **predicate** marker in Vaeakau-Taumako

(Polynesian, Solomon Islands)

- The marker **(h)e** occurs with nominal predicates:

(14) Na no hinga po a ia [**e** no-nohine], ioko ia na na **e**  
DEM IPFV do COMP PERS 3SG **PRED** RED-WIFE CONJ 3SG DEM DEM **PRED**  
pakhola loa te=na.  
giant EMPH SPEC=DEM  
'She acts like a woman, but she is really a giant.'  
(Næss and Hovdhaugen 2011: 167)

- (h)e** occurs with modifiers that are internally-headed relative clauses:

(15) Lha=ko kutea [hai lakau **e** loa la].  
3DU=INCP see-TR one tree **PRED** long DEM  
'They saw a tall tree (They saw a tree which is tall).'

(Næss and Hovdhaugen 2011: 185)

## ② *he* as a **nonspecific** marker in Vaeakau-Taumako

(Polynesian, Solomon Islands)

- We also find **(h)e** in negated existential constructions:

(16) Siai loa [e mahila] k=u kapakapa ai i hale.  
NEG EMPH **PRED/NONSPEC** knife HORT=1SG work PRO.OBL LDA house  
'There is no knife for me to use in the house.' (Næss and Hovdhaugen 2011: 167)

- And **(h)e** occurs with nonspecific arguments as well:

(17) Ta he-henga [e nohine] mona.  
1DU.IN.HORT RED-search **PRED/NONSPEC** wife BEN-POSS:3SG  
'Let's look for a wife for him.' (Næss and Hovdhaugen 2011: 166)

### ③ *he* as a nonspecific marker in East Uvean

(Polynesian, Wallis and Futuna)

- East Uvean does not use **he** as a predicate marker; **'e** is used instead.

(18) **'e** lahi te tagataa.  
NPST big INSPEC man.DEF  
'The man is big.'

(Livingston 2016: 139)

- **he** marks nonspecific referents:

(19) kei au fia kai [**he** mo'i laisi].  
still 1SG want eat NONSPEC CL rice  
'I still want to eat a bit of rice (but am not sure whether there's any left).'

(Livingston 2016: 43)

- **he** is also used in free choice context:

(20) mai **ha-**'a 'aku.  
DIR1 NONSPEC-GEN GEN.1SG  
'Give me some.'

(Livingston 2016: 90)

## Factors favoring the development of NONSPEC markers

- a systematic REALIS / IRREALIS distinction
- word class flexibility
- definite/other determiners (paradigmaticity)
- relative clause properties
- “broad” applicability of the constructions
  - conditional clauses expressed similarly to relative clauses (IRREAL > NONSPEC)
  - possession expressed by the predicate marker (PRED > NONSPEC)

# Word class flexibility

(cf. Rijkhoff and van Lier 2013)

Lexemes can be **referring** (“noun-like”) or **predicating** (“verb-like”).

This applies to all languages with nonspecific articles.

Independently of their syntactic status, the examples showed that

- the use of the irrealis markers with typical event expressions extends to the use with typical referent expressions in a number of languages.
- this is the only way nonspecific reference can be expressed in those languages:

- (21) a. *I want a bike.*  
b. *I want a thing / one that shall be a bike.*

# Relative clause properties

Many languages with nonspecific articles are reported to have internally-headed relative clauses and / or allow for headless relative clauses.

- (22)
- a. I want to buy **a bike**. (But I haven't found the right one yet.)
  - b. I want to buy [**a thing/one/it would be a bike**]. (internally-headed RC)
  - c. I want to buy [**what would be a bike**]. (headless RC)

Both relativization strategies may favor

- a stronger integration of the (syntactic/semantic) head into the RC, allowing for the re-interpretation of the irrealis predicate marker as a nonspecific marker of the head noun
- the use of the RC in various argument positions as referential expressions

# “Broad” applicability of the construction

## Conditional clauses & relative clauses

(IRREAL > NONSPEC)

In a number of languages discussed, (irrealis) conditional clauses are similar to relative clauses.

- (23) [mirí **aru**-madú-hgaa] adí-hgee hirí-c.  
water **REL**-exist-LOC house-DIM make-DECL  
'He built a little house where there was water.'

Hidatsa (Park 2012: 519)

- (24) [**aru**-a'ígubxi maa-ééhgee-rúg] aru-nii-maa-hgiwé'<sup>?</sup>-c.  
**REL**-answer 1A-know-COND IRR-2B-1A-tell-DECL  
'If I knew the answer I would tell you.'

Hidatsa (Park 2012: 288)

# “Broad” applicability of the construction

## Possession

(PRED > NONSPEC)

In the Oceanic languages with nonspecific articles originating from predicative markers, those markers are also used for possession.

(25) 'e i ai [t-o-ku fale].

NPST EXIST **SPEC**-GEN-1SG house

'I have a house.' (lit. 'There is a house belonging to me.')

East Uvean (Livingston 2016: 87)

(26) 'e mole i ai [h-o-ku fale].

NPST NEG EXIST **NONSPEC**-GEN-1SG house

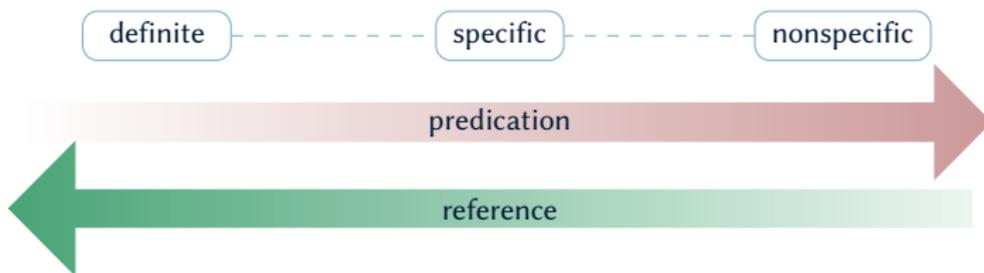
'I don't have a house.' (lit. 'There is no house belonging to me.')

East Uvean (Livingston 2016: 87)

# Conclusion

## IRREALIS / PREDICATE MARKER > NONSPECIFIC MARKER

- Many examples of nonspecific markers may not be nominal markers in the strict sense.
- but:** Irrealis/predicate markers can develop into markers that are functionally equivalent to nonspecific determiners in that they are the only way of expressing nonspecificity in those languages.
- ☞ Irrealis events and nonspecific referents are very similar (they occur in the same contexts).
  - ☞ Nonspecific referents are less referential than definite or specific referents.
  - Given that other languages **do** conceptualize nonspecific referents as nominal, referential expressions,
  - ☞ referentiality should be treated as a matter of degree.



**Thank you!**

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