

# Polynesian Syntax and its Interfaces

*Edited by*

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OXFORD  
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Great Clarendon Street, Oxford, OX2 6DP,  
United Kingdom

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First Edition published in 2021

Impression: 1

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Published in the United States of America by Oxford University Press  
198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016, United States of America

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data  
Data available

Library of Congress Control Number: 2021931728

ISBN 978-0-19-886083-9

DOI: 10.1093/oso/9780198860839.001.0001

Printed and bound in Great Britain by  
Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

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# Deriving VOS from VSO in Tongan

*Maria Polinsky and Eric Potsdam*

## 4.1 Introduction

Basic word order in the Polynesian language Tongan is VSO (Churchward 1953; Tchekoff 1981; Otsuka 2000, 2002, 2005a, 2005b; Custis 2004; Ball 2008; and others) (1a). VSO appears to be the contextually most neutral order; in particular, it is found in the opening to narratives or conversations (Tchekoff 1981; Otsuka 2000; Custis 2004), is appropriate as a response to broad-focus and verum-focus questions (Polinsky 2016), and in general is used in a broader range of contexts than VOS. In this work, we follow other researchers who assume it as the basic order. However, Tongan also allows VOS order, (1b), in a number of situations. Relevant subjects here and below are shown in **bold**.

(1) a. VSO

Na'e	fili	'e	<b>Sione</b>	'a	Pila.
PST	choose	ERG	Sione	ABS	Pila

b. VOS

Na'e	fili	'a	Pila	'e	<b>Sione.</b>
PST	choose	ABS	Pila	ERG	Sione

'Sione chose Pila.'

(Otsuka 2005b:246)

In what follows, we address the question of how VOS is structurally and derivationally related to VSO.

Recent investigations into the structure of verb-initial languages have confirmed that their word order is not always derived uniformly (see Clemens & Polinsky 2017 for an overview), and crucially, that there are several possible paths leading to VOS in those languages whose basic order is VSO (see Clemens & Coon 2018 for some discussion). In this chapter, we compare two main approaches to deriving Tongan VOS from VSO: dislocation of the object to the left (L-OBJ), and dislocation of the subject to the right (R-SUBJ). We will argue that a subject-dislocation analysis is superior to one that posits leftward movement of the object.

This chapter is structured as follows: Section 4.2 first lays out two proposals for deriving VOS from VSO, providing the necessary background on Tongan

morphosyntax. Under L-OBJ, the object in VSO is moved leftward over the subject. Under R-SUBJ, the subject is positioned in a rightward, clause-peripheral position. Section 4.3 provides a number of arguments in favor of R-SUBJ and against L-OBJ. In Sections 4.4 and 4.5, we develop the R-SUBJ proposal in more detail and propose that the rightward subject obtains its position via movement, as opposed to being base-generated in this clause-peripheral position. Section 4.6 summarizes our findings and presents several unresolved questions which are of interest not only to researchers working on Polynesian but to a broader range of syntacticians.

## 4.2 Tongan morphosyntax

Tongan is a Polynesian language of the Tongic subgroup, spoken by about 190,000 people, with about 100,000 in Tonga itself (Eberhard et al. 2019). Other speakers reside in American Samoa, Vanuatu, Canada, the United States, Australia, and New Zealand.

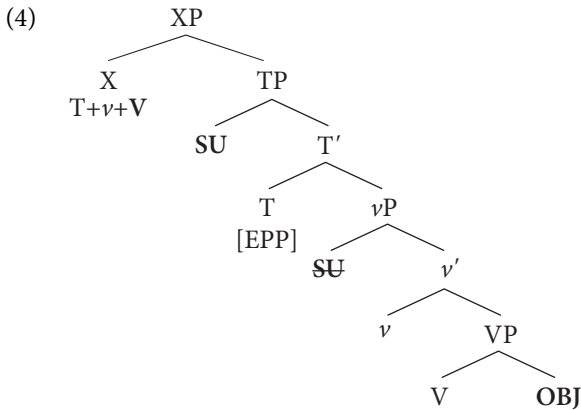
Tongan is predominantly morphologically isolating, and it shows a distinction between functional and lexical morphemes (Churchward 1953; Tchekoff 1981). Syntactically, it is uniformly head-initial in its syntactic phrases and evidences syntactic ergativity (Otsuka 2000; Polinsky 2016). Noun phrases are generally introduced by one of four case particles: ergative, absolutive, dative, or locative. Subjects of transitive clauses are marked with ergative case, *e* ‘ERG’. Subjects of intransitive clauses and objects of transitive clauses are marked with the absolutive case particle *a* ‘ABS’. The dative case particle is *ki* ‘DAT’ and the locative case particle *i* ‘LOC’. Case particles are followed by determiners that indicate specificity according to whether the head noun is a common noun or proper noun. For common nouns, the specific determiner is *he/e* ‘DET.SPC’ and the non-specific determiner is *ha* ‘DET.NSPC’. Determiners are generally null with proper nouns. The template for a Tongan noun phrase is given in (2).

- (2) Tongan noun phrase template  
case specificity N modifiers

Within the verbal predicate, the verb is preceded and followed by various particles, shown in (3). Of relevance to the examples below are the pre-verbal tense-aspect-mood (TAM) particles and subject agreement clitics.

- (3) Tongan verbal predicate template
- |     |         |           |            |   |              |             |
|-----|---------|-----------|------------|---|--------------|-------------|
| TAM | subject | auxiliary | pre-verbal | V | incorporated | post-verbal |
|     | clitics |           | particles  |   | object       | particles   |

Syntactic work on Tongan clause structure (Otsuka 2000, 2002, 2005a, 2005b, 2005c; Custis 2004; and others) has converged on the conclusion that VSO word order is derived from a base SVO structure via movement of the verb to a functional projection XP above TP. The verb moves through successive heads on its way to  $X^0$ , picking up any TAM particles in  $T^0$ . The subject originates in the specifier of  $\nu P$  and obligatorily moves to spec,TP for Extended Projection Principle (EPP) purposes. The object in VSO remains inside VP:



A consequence of this structure is that subjects asymmetrically c-command objects in VSO orders.<sup>1</sup> That is, the ergative noun phrase asymmetrically c-commands the absolutive in VSO (contra Ball 2008).

A note on language consultants is also in order here. In a number of publications on Tongan, there are some discrepancies between the judgments, sometimes critical ones. For example, there are differences between data in Otsuka (2000) and Ball (2008), and our consultants sometimes disagree with both (see also footnote 10). The differences may have to do with a number of factors, including but not limited to, the use of context in an elicitation, the attention to prosody, the consultant's age (our consultants are mostly younger speakers), or degree of bilingualism. Below, when differences in judgments are critical, we flag that in our discussion. With this much background in place, we now turn to a consideration of VOS word order.

Examples (5) and (6) repeat the observation that both VSO and VOS are allowed word orders. This is true, whether the object is a DP complement, (5), or a prepositional phrase (PP) complement or adjunct, (6).

<sup>1</sup> The evidence bearing on the asymmetric c-command is rather subtle. In particular, the binding data show that the ergative noun phrase c-commands the absolutive, and not the other way around, but the facts are complex; we present some of them in Section 4.3.3.

## (5) a. VSO

Na'e   tuku   'e    **Siale**   'a    e    pa'anga.  
 PST   leave   ERG   Siale   ABS   DET   money

## b. VOS

Na'e   tuku   'a    e    pa'anga   'e    **Siale.**  
 PST   leave   ABS   DET   money   ERG   Siale  
 'Siale left the money.'

## (6) a. VSPP

Na'e   'alu   'a    **Mele**   ki   'apiako.  
 PST   go    ABS   Mele   to   school

## b. VPPS

Na'e   'alu   ki   'apiako   'a    **Mele.**  
 PST   go    to   school   ABS   Mele  
 'Mele went to school.'

The VSO ~ VOS alternation seen above is also permitted in embedded clauses, (7), and clausal nominalizations, (8).

## (7) a. VSO

Oku   tui    'e    Mele   [na'e   fili    'e    **Sione**   'a    Pila].  
 PRS   believe   ERG   Mele   PST   choose   ERG   Sione   ABS   Pila  
 'Mele believes that Sione chose Pila.'

## b. VOS

Oku   tui    'e    Mele   [na'e   fili    'a    Pila   'e    **Sione].**  
 PRS   believe   ERG   Mele   PST   choose   ABS   Pila   ERG   Sione  
 'Mele believes that Sione chose Pila.'

## (8) a. VSO

'A   e    kaiha'asi   'e    **Pila**   'a    e    kā.  
 ABS   DET   steal.NMLZ   ERG   Pila   ABS   DET   car  
 'Pila's stealing of the car'

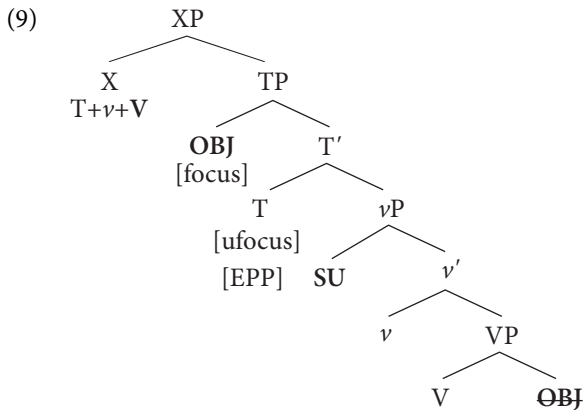
## b. VOS

'A   e    kaiha'asi   'a    e    kā   'e    **Pila.**  
 ABS   DET   steal.NMLZ   ABS   DET   car   ERG   Pila  
 'Pila's stealing of the car'

We develop two analyses of this alternation. The first derivation of VOS involves leftward movement of the object to a position between the verb and the subject; we call this L-OBJ. This analysis follows Miyagawa's (2001, 2003) account

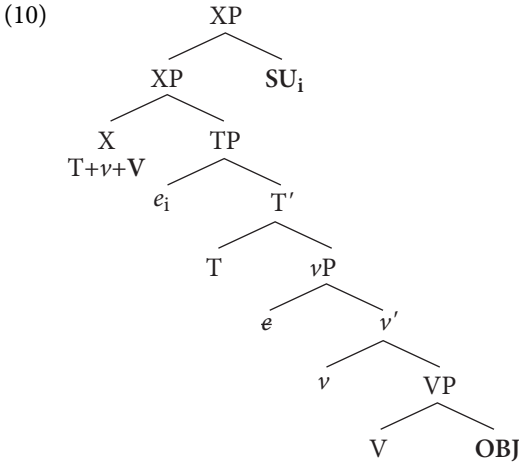
of alternate positioning of objects in Japanese. For Tongan, it has been developed in Custis (2004) and Otsuka (2005a, 2005b, 2005c), and see also Clemens & Tollan (Chapter 5, this volume). A similar analysis, in which the verb undergoes head movement to a position between TP and CP and a discourse-prominent constituent raises to spec,TP, has also been proposed for VSO ~ VOS alternations in Kipsigis (Bossi & Diercks 2019).

The analysis of VOS in Otsuka (2005b) is shown in (9). The subject remains low, in the predicate-internal subject position spec,vP, and the object instead undergoes movement to spec,TP, which is a focus-driven EPP position. This movement to spec,TP is, by hypothesis, A-movement (following Miyagawa's work). Note that discourse prominence is understood broadly here; in Miyagawa's analysis, it was linked primarily to the given, backgrounded, topic-like status of the fronted object; whereas, for Otsuka (and for Bossi & Diercks 2019 as well), discourse prominence is associated with being new, focal information.



The alternative analysis that we will defend involves rightward displacement of the subject, what will be called R-SUBJ.<sup>2</sup> This is shown in (10), where the subject is right-adjoined to the highest clausal projection, XP. For now, we remain neutral regarding the exact mechanism by which the subject is positioned on the right. Spec,TP contains an empty category co-identified with the subject. After defending this analysis, we turn to a consideration of the identity of this empty category and whether it is related to the overt subject by movement or coindexation.

<sup>2</sup> A similar proposal is made for the derivation of VOS in Greek (Georgiagitis & Sfakianaki 2004) and in several Mayan languages (see Clemens & Coon 2018: 267–9).



### 4.3 Evidence in favor of R-SUBJ

This section provides evidence supporting R-SUBJ from a variety of domains, listed in (11).<sup>3</sup>

- (11) a. discourse status of core arguments  
 b. reflexive connectivity  
 c. word order with a peripheral PP

#### 4.3.1 Discourse status of core arguments

The first argument for R-SUBJ comes from a consideration of the discourse status of the core arguments in VSO and VOS. Otsuka (2005b) notes that the immediately post-verbal argument is typically focused or new information. This is what motivates spec,TP as an all-purpose EPP focus position in the L-OBJ analysis. The basis for this claim can be seen in question-answer pairs. The new information that is the answer to the question must appear immediately after the verb for the answer to be felicitous. When the subject is questioned, VSO is required, (12); however, when the object is questioned, VOS word order is required, (13).

- (12) Q: Who left the money?

A1: VSO

Na'e	tuku	'e	Siale	'a	e	pa'anga.
PST	leave	ERG	Siale	ABS	DET	money

<sup>3</sup> An additional argument based on the placement of the definitive accent (Churchward 1953; Clark 1974; Conday 1989; Schütz 2001; Taumoeafau 2002; Anderson and Otsuka 2006; Kuo & Vicenik 2012) is presented in Polinsky (2016: 208–11). For reasons of space, we do not discuss it here.

A2: #VOS

#Na'e   tuku   'a    e    pa'anga   'e    Siale.  
 PST   leave   ABS   DET   money   ERG   Siale  
 'Siale left the money.'

(13) A: What did Siale leave?

A1: VOS

Na'e   tuku   'a    e    pa'anga   'e    Siale.  
 PST   leave   ABS   DET   money   ERG   Siale

A2: #VSO

#Na'e   tuku   'e    Siale   'a    e    pa'anga.  
 PST   leave   ERG   Siale   ABS   DET   money  
 Intended: 'Siale left the money.'

An alternative way of looking at these facts that would account for the infelicity of (12A2) is in terms of characteristics of the clause-final subject. A right-peripheral subject is old or given information, either topical or backgrounded. Focusing of the post-verbal constituent is then a side effect of the need for some constituent to be new information when the clause-final material is old. We state this claim in (14).

(14) Clause-final subjects are old information

The acceptability of (13A1) is compatible with this proposal. VOS is allowed with the object question because the subject is old information.<sup>4</sup>

A number of observations support this alternative viewpoint. First, the post-verbal object need not be focused. Custis (2004), in a corpus-based study of the pragmatics of word order variation, shows that VOS can occur even when the object is presupposed:

(15) Q: What happened to the fish?

A: VOS

Na'e   kaiha'asi   'a    e    ika   'e    Mele.  
 PST   steal       ABS   DET   fish   ERG   Mele  
 'Mele stole the fish.'

(Custis 2004: 19)

This is clearly incompatible with the object being a focus. We propose that the post-verbal position in VOS is covered by a negative condition: it is not backgrounded.

<sup>4</sup> (14) on its own does not account for the infelicity of (13A2). Although VSO is the neutral word, it is reported to be unacceptable here. Custis (2004: 36) states VSO is not possible when the subject is of a lower cognitive status than the object on the Givenness Hierarchy she proposes, following Gundel (1985) and Gundel et al. (1993). In a nutshell, the cognitive status of a referent is associated with its identifiability and activation. In (13A2), the subject is familiar and activated but the object is in focus, a higher cognitive status on the Givenness Hierarchy, which precludes the use of the VSO order.

The second observation supporting (14) is that indefinite subjects are possible in VSO but not VOS:

- (16) a. VS<sub>INDEF</sub>O  
 Na'e 'akahi 'e ha leka 'a e pusi.  
 PST kick ERG DET.NSPC child ABS DET.SPC cat  
 'A child kicked the cat.'
- b. \*VOS<sub>INDEF</sub>  
 \*Na'e 'akahi 'a e pusi 'e ha leka.  
 PST kick ABS DET.SPC cat ERG DET.NSPC child  
 Intended: 'A child kicked the cat.'

The constraint in (14) accounts for the ungrammaticality of (16b) on the assumption that indefinites resist topic interpretation (Reinhart 1981; Gundel 1985, 1988; Krifka 2003). Thus, they are infelicitous as subjects in VOS. We would like to emphasize that this is a constraint imposed by information structure, not a hard rule of syntax; if enough context is provided, we expect this constraint to be overridden. See Georgiagentis & Sfakianaki (2004) for a similar observation regarding VOS in Greek.

Indefinite objects in VSO are not so restricted, as these objects are not in a displaced position. (17) shows that indefinite objects in VSO are permitted, which is consistent with the observation that VSO is the neutral word order in Tongan.

- (17) VSO<sub>INDEF</sub>  
 Na'e 'akahi 'e he leka 'a ha tokotaha.  
 PST kick ERG DET.SPC child ABS DET.NSPC someone  
 'The child kicked someone.'

A third observation in support of (14) comes from *wh*-phrases. Tongan is an optional *wh*-in-situ language (Churchward 1953); however, subjects are only possible in-situ in VSO order:

- (18) a. VS<sub>wh</sub>O  
 Na'e 'akahi 'e hai 'a e pusi?  
 PST kick ERG who ABS DET cat  
 'Who kicked the cat?'
- b. \*VOS<sub>wh</sub>  
 \*Na'e 'akahi 'a e pusi 'e hai?  
 PST kick ABS DET cat ERG who  
 Intended: 'Who kicked the cat?' (ok as an echo question)

On the assumption that *wh*-phrases cannot be old information, the ungrammaticality of (18b) follows. Subject questions can also be expressed using a cleft construction:

- (19) Ko hai na'a ne 'akahi 'a e pusi?  
 KO who PST 3SG.CL kick ABS DET cat  
 'Who kicked the cat?'

Fourth, focused subjects are also excluded from VOS order as they again cannot be simultaneously focused and old information. The particle *pē* in (20) serves to focus the bold-faced subject.<sup>5</sup>

- (20) a. VS<sub>FOC</sub>O  
 'Oku tauhi 'e **Pila** **pē** 'a ia.  
 PRS care ERG Pila EMPH ABS 3SG  
 'Only Pila takes care of him.'
- b. \*VOS<sub>FOC</sub>  
 \*'Oku tauhi 'a ia 'e **Pila** **pē**.  
 PRS care ABS 3SG ERG Pila EMPH  
 Intended: 'Only Pila takes care of him.'

In summary, we propose that subjects in VOS order are discourse restricted to being background, given information. This supports the derivation of VOS using R-SUBJ as we can assign a particular discourse interpretation to subjects that undergo this rightward displacement. Objects may be focused but this is a by-product of the non-focus interpretation of the subject and not an inherent characteristic of this word order. This is not accounted for in L-OBJ since the subject has the same morphosyntax in both VSO and VOS.

#### 4.3.2 Reflexive connectivity

Another argument in favor of R-SUBJ comes from reflexive interpretations. Tongan does not have dedicated anaphors (Churchward 1953; Dukes 1996). Instead, a coindexed interpretation between two noun phrases is expressed with the emphatic particle *pē* 'only'. This particle occurs either in post-verbal position or following the lower coindexed argument. The reflexive reading in such situations is always optional and is also subject to some speaker variation. The examples to follow are marked grammatical or ungrammatical on the coindexed reading.

Example (21) illustrates the use of *pē* in VSO clauses. A proper noun subject can be interpreted as coindexed with a pronominal object if *pē* occurs immediately

<sup>5</sup> This generalization is also consistent with the L-OBJ analysis, according to which focused material must move to the immediately post-verbal position. However, on the proposal advanced here it is part of a whole family of related generalizations that bring together *wh*-words, indefinites, and clear foci, whereas the L-OBJ analysis has to treat them as unrelated facts.

after the verb or after the pronominal object. This is the case whether the object is absolutive, (21a), or a dative object, (21b). If the particle *pē* occurs on the higher coindexed argument, the result is ungrammatical, (22).

- (21) a. 'Oku tauhi (pē) 'e Pila 'a ia (pē) i he fale manaki.  
 PRS care EMPH ERG Pila ABS 3SG EMPH LOC DET hospital  
 'Pila takes care of himself at the hospital.'
- b. 'Oku tokoni (pē) 'a Pila kiate ia (pē).  
 PRS help EMPH ABS Pila DAT 3SG EMPH  
 'Pila helps himself.'
- (22) a. \*'Oku tauhi 'e Pila pē 'a ia i he fale manaki.  
 PRS care ERG Pila EMPH ABS 3SG LOC DET hospital  
 Intended: 'Pila takes care of himself at the hospital.'
- b. \*'Oku tokoni 'a Pila pē kiate ia.  
 PRS help ABS Pila EMPH DAT 3SG  
 Intended: 'Pila helps himself.'

These patterns of interpretation follow given two assumptions: (i) Subjects in spec, TP are structurally superior to complements, and (ii) a reflexive interpretation is possible only when *pē* follows the verb or the structurally lower coindexed argument.

The two hypotheses L-OBJ and R-SUBJ make different predictions regarding the possibility of a reflexive interpretation with VOS word order. Under R-SUBJ, the structural relation between S and O are the same as in VSO (see (4) and (10)). Thus, changing the word order should not alter the possibility or impossibility of a reflexive interpretation. The data in (23) show that this is a correct prediction according to our consultants, although there does seem to be some speaker variation. In particular, (23a) is marked ungrammatical in Ball (2008: 88) and (23b) is marked ungrammatical in Otsuka (2005b: (13a)). The reflexive interpretation obtains if *pē* 'only' follows the verb or the object.

- (23) a. 'Oku tauhi pē 'a ia 'e Pila.  
 PRS care EMPH ABS 3SG ERG Pila
- b. 'Oku tauhi 'a ia pē 'e Pila.  
 PRS care ABS 3SG EMPH ERG Pila  
 'Pila takes care of himself.'

Under the L-OBJ analysis, the predictions are different: In VOS, the object A-moves across the subject to spec,TP. (23a–b) are predicted to be bad as Principle C violations. The pronoun 'a ia (pē) '3SG.ABS' c-commands the R-expression 'e Pila. Instead, movement of the object yields a configuration in which the absolutive object can bind the ergative subject, as A-movement is known

to create new binding options. Thus, reversing the two noun phrases, the pronoun and the R-expression, to alleviate the Principle C violation should result in grammaticality, which it does not, (24).

- (24) \*‘Oku tauhi ‘a Pila ‘e ia (pē).  
 PRS care ABS Pila ERG 3SG EMPH  
 Intended: ‘Pila takes care of himself.’ (Otsuka 2005b: (13b))

To handle this incorrect prediction, Otsuka (2005b: 250) stipulates that the antecedent of a reflexively interpreted pronoun must be ergative, in order to prevent (24); however, this incorrectly excludes (21b), in which an absolutive subject is coindexed with a dative object.

In summary, reflexive patterns in VSO and VOS orders are identical for our consultants, supporting R-SUBJ.

### 4.3.3 Word order with a peripheral XP

This section develops an argument for R-SUBJ based on word order possibilities when a PP is present in the structure. The unmarked word order with PPs is VSOPP, (25), but other orders are possible.

- (25) Na‘e tuku ‘e Sione ‘a e tohi [‘i he loki]<sub>PP</sub>.  
 PST leave ERG Sione ABS DET book LOC DET room  
 ‘Sione left the book in the room.’ (Otsuka 2005b: (24a))

We assume that such PPs are attached rather low in this position. For concreteness, we adjoin them to VP:

- (26)
-

According to our consultants, the word order possibilities for a PP in a transitive clause are as in (27), with the data given in (28). The generalization is that a PP must be final in the clause, or it may precede S in VOS. Other options are ungrammatical.

(27) WORD ORDER OPTIONS WITH V, S, O, AND PP

- a. Grammatical: VSOPP, VOSPP, VOPPS
- b. Ungrammatical: \*VPPSO, \*VSPPO, \*VPPOS

(28) a. VSOPP

Na'e   tuku   [e    Sione]   [a    e    tohi]   [i    he   loki]  
 PST   leave   ERG   Sione   ABS   DET   book   LOC   DET   room  
 'Sione left the book in the room.'

b. VOSPP

Na'e   tuku   [a    e    tohi]   [e    Sione]   [i    he   loki]  
 PST   leave   ABS   DET   book   ERG   Sione   LOC   DET   room

c. VOPPS<sup>6</sup>

Na'e   tuku   [a    e    tohi]   [i    he   loki]   [e    Sione]  
 PST   leave   ABS   DET   book   LOC   DET   room   ERG   Sione

d. \*VPPSO

\*Na'e   tuku   [i    he   loki]   [e    Sione]   [a    e    tohi]  
 PST   leave   LOC   DET   room   ERG   Sione   ABS   DET   book

e. \*VSPPO

\*Na'e   tuku   [e    Sione]   [i    he   loki]   [a    e    tohi]  
 PST   leave   ERG   Sione   LOC   DET   room   ABS   DET   book

f. \*VPPOS

\*Na'e   tuku   [i    he   loki]   [a    e    tohi]   [e    Sione]  
 PST   leave   LOC   DET   room   ABS   DET   book   ERG   Sione

Turning to the two hypotheses under consideration, they make different predictions regarding the (un)grammaticality of these patterns, which are summarized in Table 4.1.

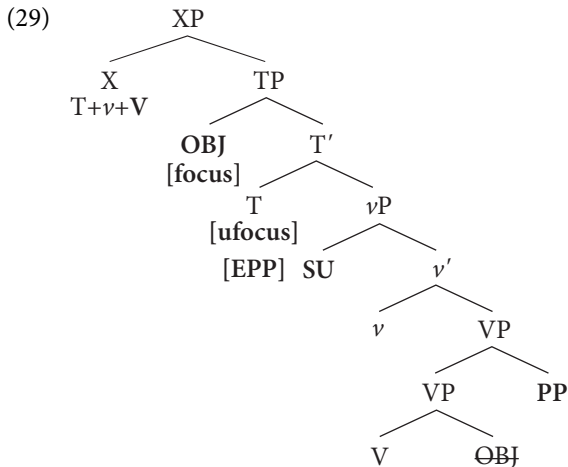
<sup>6</sup> This word order is marked ungrammatical in Otsuka (2005b: (24d)) but grammatical in Ball (2008).

**Table 4.1** Word order predictions under L-OBJ and R-SUBJ

	Order	L-OBJ	R-SUBJ
1	VSOPP	✓	✓
2	VOSPP	✓	✓
3	VOPPS	✗	✓
4	*VPPSO	✓	✗
5	*VSPPO	✗	✗
6	*VPPOS	✗	✗

Both hypotheses correctly generate the orders 1 and 2 in which the PP is clause-final, VSOPP and VOSPP, and preclude orders 5 and 6 where the PP directly precedes the object, \*VSPPO and \*VPPOS. They make different predictions about orders 3 and 4, VOPPS and \*VPPSO. L-OBJ both undergenerates and overgenerates these two orders, while R-SUBJ correctly accounts for the data. We turn to the predictions of L-OBJ first.

The structure in (26), above, and (29) both show that L-OBJ correctly generates VSOPP and VOSPP.



However, L-OBJ overgenerates order 4, \*VPPSO, given Otsuka's (2005b: 261–5) assumption that PPs can also move to spec,TP to be interpreted as focused and to satisfy the EPP. This assumption is necessary to derive the VSPP ~ VPPS alternation, seen in (6). \*VPPSO order is ungrammatical, (28d), despite the availability of the derivation shown in (30).<sup>7</sup> The sentence below is ungrammatical

<sup>7</sup> Otsuka (2005b: 265) recognizes that this is a problem for the L-OBJ analysis and proposes a tentative explanation in terms of contextual markedness to account for the data.

even as the answer to the question ‘Where did Sione leave the book?’, although in that case ‘*i he loki* ‘in the room’ (shown underlined) is focused as a consequence of being the answer to a question.

- (30) \*Na‘e   tuku   ‘i   he   loki   ‘e   Sione   ‘a   e   tohi   t<sub>pp</sub>  
          PST   leave   LOC   DET   room   ERG   Sione   ABS   DET   book  
          ‘Sione left the book in the room.’

At the same time, L-OBJ cannot generate order 3, VOPPS, which is grammatical according to our consultants, (28c). One might hypothesize a derivation shown in (31) in which both the object and the PP move leftward over the subject in spec,  $\nu$ P; however, there is only one spec,TP position available.

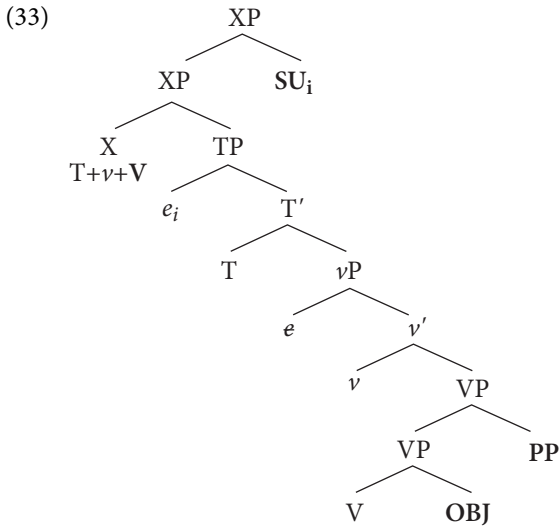
- (31) Na‘e   tuku   ‘a   e   tohi   ‘i   he   loki   ‘e   Sione   t<sub>obj</sub>   t<sub>pp</sub>  
          PST   leave   ABS   DET   book   LOC   DET   room   ERG   Sione  
          ‘Sione left the book in the room.’

Turning to the predictions of R-SUBJ, it also correctly generates order 1, VSOPP, (26) above, and order 2, VOSPP, as shown in (32). We assume for (32) that PPs can adjoin outside the rightward subject.

- (32)
- 
- ```

graph TD
    XP1[XP] --- XP2[XP]
    XP1 --- PP[PP]
    XP2 --- XP3[XP]
    XP2 --- SUi[SUi]
    XP3 --- X[X  
T+v+V]
    XP3 --- TP[TP]
    TP --- ei[ei]
    TP --- Tprime[T']
    Tprime --- T[T]
    Tprime --- nuP[nuP]
    nuP --- e[e]
    nuP --- vprime[v']
    vprime --- nu[nu]
    vprime --- VP1[VP]
    VP1 --- VP2[VP]
    VP1 --- tpp[tpp]
    VP2 --- V[V]
    VP2 --- OBJ[OBJ]
  
```

R-SUBJ also correctly generates order 3, VOPPS, (33).



It will correctly not generate any of the ungrammatical orders in which the PP precedes O, as this order cannot be derived, regardless of the position of the subject. This contrasts with L-OBJ, which incorrectly allows the O to be displaced leftward to precede the PP.

In summary, R-OBJ does a superior job in accounting for word orders in the presence of a PP. These orders show that PPs must follow O, appearing either clause-finally or immediately before S in VOS. These empirical generations strongly suggest that VOS is about an unusual position of the subject, not the object.

#### 4.3.4 Inconclusive data

Otsuka (2005b) offers two arguments in support of L-OBJ, from Weak Crossover (WCO) and locality. In this section, we briefly review these arguments in order to show that the data do not help to decide between the two analyses under consideration.

WCO (Postal 1971; among others) is a phenomenon in which a noun phrase crosses over a pronoun which it is coindexed with, but which does not c-command the DP's base position:

- (34) WCO configuration  
 DP<sub>i</sub> ... [...pro<sub>i</sub> ...] t<sub>i</sub>

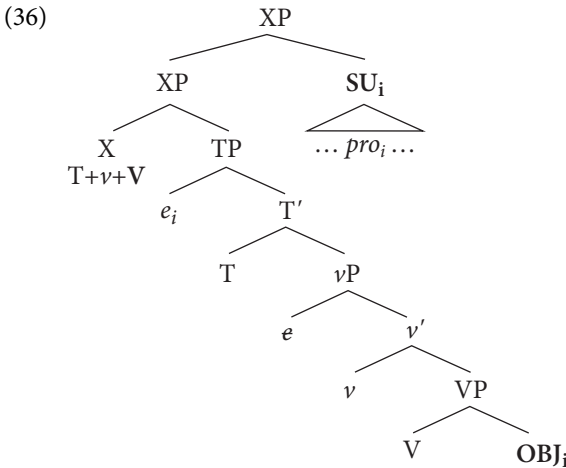
It is generally recognized that when the movement shown in (34) is A'-movement, the result is weakly ungrammatical. A-movement does not result in a WCO violation.

Otsuka (2005b) shows that VOS does not result in a WCO violation under L-OBJ:

- (35) Na'e fili [‘a e taha kotoa]<sub>i</sub> ‘e he'ene<sub>i,k</sub> tamai t<sub>i</sub>  
 PST choose ABS DET one all ERG 3SG.POSS father  
 ‘His<sub>i,k</sub> father chose everyone<sub>i</sub>.’

The grammaticality of (35) is compatible with the L-OBJ analysis. Although the object moves over S to spec,TP, the movement is A-movement, so that the object can be coindexed with the pronoun.<sup>8</sup> WCO is expected to be absent.

R-SUBJ, in contrast, predicts that this sentence should be ungrammatical on the bound variable interpretation. The object does not bind the coindexed pronoun inside the subject:

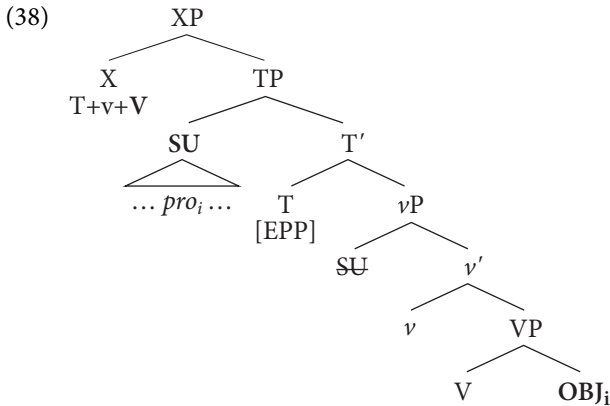


The problem with the argument is that (35) also has a bound variable interpretation in the VSO order, (37).

- (37) Na'e fili ‘e he'ene<sub>i</sub> tamai [‘a e taha kotoa]<sub>i</sub>  
 PST choose ERG 3SG.POSS father ABS DET one all  
 ‘His<sub>i,k</sub> father chose everyone<sub>i</sub>.’

The grammaticality of (37) is mysterious on either analysis. It has the structure shown in (38), in which the object does not bind the coindexed pronoun inside the subject.

<sup>8</sup> It is unclear whether Tongan has WCO in A' contexts. Otsuka (2005b) claims that it does; however, Hendrick (2005b) argues that WCO under A'-movement is absent from Tongan.



Given that (37) is grammatical in the absence of syntactic binding, there is no reason to expect that (35) will not also be grammatical without binding, under either analysis.

The second argument that Otsuka (2005b: 250) offers for L-OBJ is that O in VOS cannot come from an embedded clause:

- (39) a. 'Oku tui 'e Mele [na'e fili 'e Sione 'a Pila]  
 PRS believe ERG Mele PST choose ERG Sione ABS Pila  
 'Mele believes that Sione chose Pila.'
- b. \*'Oku tui 'a Pila<sub>i</sub> 'e Mele [na'e fili 'e Sione t<sub>i</sub>]  
 PRS choose ABS Pila ERG Mele PRS believe ERG Sione  
 Intended: 'Mele believes that Sione chose Pila.'

The ungrammaticality of (39b) is expected under both L-OBJ and R-SUBJ, however. With L-OBJ, A-movement is clause-bound; consequently, the object cannot move from an embedded clause. With R-SUBJ, there is no derivation for this word order. There is no mechanism by which the object of the embedded clause can get into the matrix clause as the hypothesis only allows displacement of a subject. Even if objects were allowed to displace, it would move rightward and appear at the end of the clause, not immediately after the matrix verb.

Aside from the two arguments discussed by Otsuka (2005b), which we just reviewed, another argument that could decide between L-OBJ and R-SUBJ could come from coordination.<sup>9</sup> The two analyses make different claims about the constituency of VO in VOS orders. Under R-SUBJ, VO is a constituent (see (10)). Under L-OBJ, in contrast, VO is not a constituent (see (9)). Consequently, R-SUBJ predicts that strings as in (40) should be grammatical as VO coordination while L-OBJ predicts that they will not be.

<sup>9</sup> We are grateful to an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this line of argumentation.

## (40) VO Conjunction VO S

Tongan has the conjunction *mo* ‘and’ which conjoins noun phrases and predicates (Otsuka 2010). Sentences corresponding to the word order in (40) using *mo* are indeed possible:

(41) [V*mo*VOS]

[[‘Oku ‘a ‘alo ‘a e vaka] mo [pō ‘a e ika]] ‘e Sione  
 PRS paddle ABS DET boat CONJ catch ABS DET fish ERG Sione  
 ‘Sione is paddling the boat and catching fish.’

This would seem to support R-SUBJ, as VO is coordinated with VO, as bracketed. At the same time, there are a number of complexities that weaken the argument. Most important among them is the lack of clarity with respect to the status of *mo*, which appears to be ambiguous between a coordinating conjunction and a preposition meaning ‘with’ (Churchward 1953: 44–7, 112–14; see also Otsuka 2010). If *mo* is the head of a PP in (41), then the structure is no different from the previously discussed instances of VOPPS, as in (31) above. In support of this option is the grammaticality of (42) in which *moVO* appears clause-finally.

(42) [VS*mo*VO]

‘Oku ‘a ‘alo ‘e Sione ‘a e vaka [mo pō ‘a e ika]  
 PRS paddle ERG Sione ABS DET boat CONJ catch ABS DET fish  
 ‘Sione is paddling the boat and catching fish.’

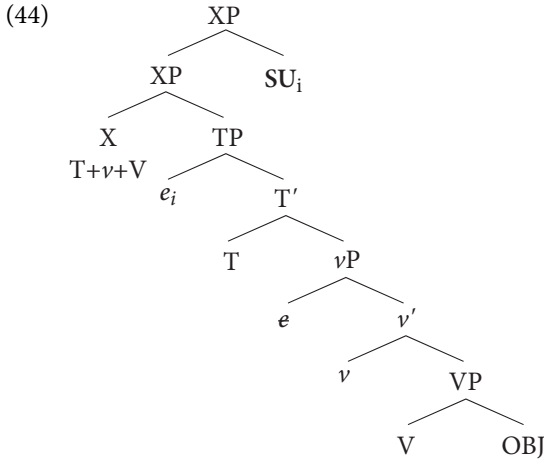
Other conjunctions attested in Tongan (*pea*, ‘o, both meaning ‘and’, and *ka* ‘but’) join constituents larger than a TP, which make them not useful for testing (40).

#### 4.3.5 Intermediate summary

This section has offered a series of arguments showing that VOS word order is derived from VSO via a mechanism that targets S, placing it in a clause-peripheral position. In contrast to the claims of the L-OBJ analysis, we are arguing that VOS is about the subject, not the object. From a cross-linguistic perspective, object shift for purposes of focus as in L-OBJ would be unusual. Object shift is typically motivated by topicality (non-focus) (Neeleman & Reinhart 1998; Holmberg 1999; Miyagawa 2003; but see Bossi and Dierks 2019 on Kipsigis). The core insight of the R-SUBJ analysis is that VOS is associated with special characteristics of S, which we summarize in (43).

- (43) a. S is backgrounded  
 b. S shows reflexive connectivity  
 c. S is always final or followed by a PP

The structure we propose for VOS is repeated below.

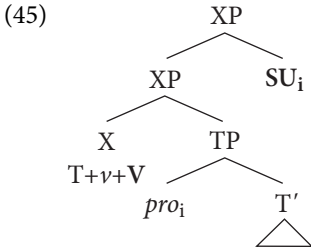


Having established this result, Section 4.4 turns to the syntactic details of this analysis, specifically, the identity of the empty category shown in spec,TP.

#### 4.4 The empty category in R-SUBJ

This section provides evidence that the clause-final subject in VOS orders obtains its position through movement. The empty category shown in (44) is a trace/copy of A'-movement. We will contrast that with an analysis in which the subject is base-generated in its rightward position.

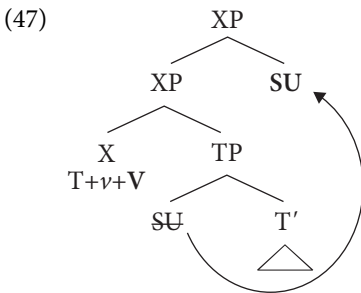
Under a BASE-GENERATION account, the subject in VOS is base-generated in its right-peripheral position and is coindexed with a null pronoun in the subject position, spec,TP. The base-generated subject under this proposal is what is sometimes called a HANGING TOPIC (Cinque 1977; de Vries 2009; among others), and we will sometimes refer to it as such. The relevant part of the structure of VOS under base-generation is shown in (45). The rightward subject is base-generated in this position. The subject position, spec,TP, is occupied by a null pronoun. The central characteristic of this analysis is that the clause-final S and the element in spec,TP are related only via coindexation. This relationship is known to be able to be non-local.



In support of this analysis is the observation that Tongan is a *pro*-drop language (Tchekhoff 1981; Otsuka 2000; Custis 2004). Referential arguments need not be phonologically realized, (46).<sup>10</sup> Thus, we know that *pro* is independently available in the language.

- (46) Q: Ko e hā e me'a na'e fai 'e Pita?  
 PRED DET what DET thing PST do ERG Pita  
 'What did Pita do?'  
 A: Na'e kai *pro* 'a e ika  
 PST eat ABS DET fish  
 '(He) ate fish.' (Otsuka 2005d: (18))

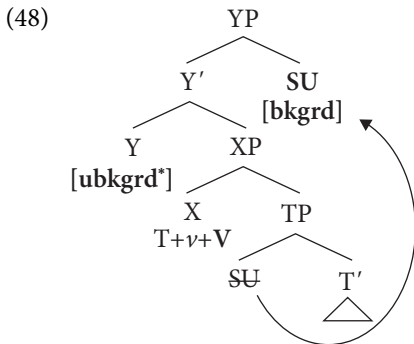
We contrast this analysis with a MOVEMENT analysis in which the subject obtains its rightward position via movement, (47). The movement is similar to Rightward Scrambling. We assume that this movement is A'-movement and tentatively assume that it simply adjoins the subject to the highest projection of the clause, which we have called XP. The movement is upward, in satisfaction of the Proper Binding Condition (Fiengo 1977) and the Extension Condition (Chomsky 1995).



<sup>10</sup> Argument drop is common when arguments are backgrounded and/or topical. Argument drop is commonly found with topics that are already established in discourse, but beyond this simple observation, there is little understanding of what exactly determines the choice between a null or a rightward topic. This choice has not been investigated for Tongan or, for that matter, for quite a few other languages where both options are available (for instance, for Greek which has the same alternation; Georgiafenitis & Sfakianaki 2004). We leave this general question for further study.

Although rightward movement has an uncomfortable position in generative syntax—for example, Kaynian Antisymmetry (Kayne 1994) excludes it completely—it is still widely posited and argued for (Kural 1997; Ko 2008; Ko & Choi 2009; Manetta 2012; Overfelt 2015; among others) and we will adopt it here.

We do not have a good explanation at this time for why this movement is associated with the backgrounding of the subject, as demonstrated in Section 4.3.1. Minimalist assumptions would lead us to posit a feature such as [bkgrd] on a head that triggers movement of the subject to the head's specifier in order to check that feature (see Manetta's 2012 EPP-R feature), (48). Since this strikes us as ad hoc at this point, we do not adopt it in what follows.



Rightward movement has been widely investigated in syntactic theory (see Beermann et al. 1997 and Webelhuth et al. 2013; among others) and, unlike coindexation, it is known to be subject to strict locality conditions of various kinds and to show connectivity between the base position and the landing site. We will recruit these characteristics in Section 4.5 to argue in favor of this analysis.

## 4.5 Evidence in favor of movement

This section provides evidence supporting movement from case connectivity, the distribution of subject clitics, and clause-boundedness.

### 4.5.1 Case connectivity

The first argument comes from case connectivity. The observation is that the subject in VOS shows the case appropriate to the matrix predicate; it shows the same case on the subject as in the corresponding VSO word order. (49a) illustrates a transitive verb with an ergative-absolutive case frame, (49b) illustrates an intransitive verb with an absolutive case frame, and (49c) illustrates a middle

predicate with an absolutive-dative case frame. In each instance, the case on the clause-final subject is determined by the matrix predicate, independent of the VOS word order.

- (49) a. Na'e   tuku   'a    e    pa'anga   'e/\*'a    **Siale**  
           PST   leave   ABS   DET   money    ERG/ABS   Siale  
           'Siale left the money.'
- b. Na'e   'alu   ki   'apiako   'a/\*'e    **Mele**  
           PST   go   to   school    ABS/ERG   Mele  
           'Mele went to school.'
- c. Na'e   sio   ki    he    faiako   'a/\*'e    **Pila**  
           PST   see   DAT   DET   teacher   ABS/ERG   Pila  
           'Pila saw the teacher.'

Case connectivity follows if the clause-final S is moved to that position. It receives its case prior to movement to the rightward position. Under a base-generation approach, case connectivity is unexpected. Such hanging topics typically appear in a fixed, default case because case is not generally transmitted through coindexation.<sup>11</sup>

#### 4.5.2 Subject clitics

The distribution of subject clitics in Tongan also supports a movement analysis of VOS. Subject clitics appear between the TAM marker and the verb. In VSO, subject clitics occur when the subject is null but not when it is a full noun phrase, such as a name (Chung 1978; Dukes 1996; Otsuka 2000):

- (50) a. Na'a   **ne**       kai   *pro*   'a    e    ika  
           PST   3SG.CL   eat       ABS   DET   fish  
           'He ate the fish.' (Otsuka 2000: (6.2b))
- b. \*Na'a   **ne**       kai   'e    **Sione**   'a    e    ika  
           PST   3SG.CL   eat   ERG   sione   ABS   DET   fish  
           Intended: 'Sione ate the fish.' (Otsuka 2000: (6.34))
- (51) a. Na'a   **ne**       'alu   *pro*  
           PST   3SG.CL   go  
           'He went.' (Otsuka 2000: (6.2a))

<sup>11</sup> German optionally allows case connectivity in its hanging topic construction (Grohmann 2000). This is the only instance of case connectivity in a hanging topic construction that we are aware of.

- b. \*Na'a ne 'alu 'a Sione  
 PST 3SG.CL go ABS Sione  
 Intended: 'Sione went.' (Otsuka 2000: (6.4a))

If VOS is derived by movement from VSO, then the distribution of subject clitics should be the same under VSO and VOS. If the subject is a full noun phrase and moves rightward, it should still be incompatible with a subject clitic. This is what we find. VOS does not allow subject clitics, (52), regardless of whether the subject is ergative or absolutive.

- (52) a. \*Na'a ne kai 'a e ika 'e Sione  
 PST 3SG.CL eat ABS DET fish ERG sione  
 Intended: 'Sione ate the fish.'
- b. \*Na'a ne 'alu ki 'apiako 'a Mele  
 PST 3SG.CL go to school ABS Mele  
 Intended: 'Mele went to school.'

Under a movement analysis, these examples are ungrammatical for whatever reason (50b) and (51b) are ungrammatical (see Otsuka 2000 for one analysis). Movement of the subject rightward does not change the internal structure of the clause. In contrast, under a base-generation approach to VOS, the clause to which the hanging topic is attached should be well-formed independent of the presence/absence of the hanging topic. In particular, in the presence of *pro*, see (45), a subject clitic should be allowed.

On the other hand, a related set of data is problematic for the movement analysis, and we present this data for completeness. Some speakers allow the subject in VOS clauses to be doubled by an epithet immediately after the verb, (53b). We just saw that the clause-final subject cannot be doubled by a subject clitic, (52), so this option is unexpected. If the post-verbal subject position is filled by a trace of movement, one should not be able to insert another noun phrase in that position under our movement account. We have no explanation for this fact under the movement analysis; however, we would like to note that while clitic doubling is universally rejected by all our consultants, the judgments on epithets are more varied. A complete analysis would need to start with a clear set of conditions on epithet licensing in Tongan; a possible solution would be to analyze the subject and the epithet as an appositive structure, with the subject then moving to the right.<sup>12</sup> That may potentially save the movement analysis.

<sup>12</sup> We are grateful to the anonymous reviewer for this suggestion.

- (53) a. Na'e 'alu 'a Pila ki he'ene pilinisipi  
 PST go ABS Pila DAT POSS.3SG principal  
 'Pila went to his principal.'
- b. %Na'e 'alu 'a e to'a mo e to'a<sub>i</sub> ki he'ene pilinisipi  
 PST go ABS DET fellow DAT POSS.3SG principal  
 'a Pila<sub>i</sub>  
 ABS Pila  
 'The idiot went to his principal, Pila.'

#### 4.5.3 Clause-boundedness

Our final argument for movement comes from the boundedness of VOS. We claim in this section that S in VOS cannot originate from a lower clause, for example, if O is a clause. This will turn out to support a movement approach.

Embedded clauses are strictly sentence-final, so it is rather difficult to determine conclusively whether R-SUBJ can cross clause boundaries. An embedded subject that appears linearly on the right could still be in the embedded clause. Nevertheless, the data are suggestive if we instead look at clausal nominalizations, which do not need to be sentence-final. The nominalized clausal complement in (54) can occur in either a VSO, (54a), or VOS order, (54b). The examples contain two temporal adverbials to show that we are dealing with two clausal domains and to identify the edges of these domains. We assume that the temporal adverbs occur in the clause that they modify.

- (54) a. Te nau tala ange [DP 'a e [clause kaiha'asi  
 NPST 3PL.CL tell DIR ABS DET steal.NMLZ  
 'e Pila 'a e kā 'aneafi]] 'apongpongi  
 ERG Pila ABS DET car yesterday tomorrow  
 'Tomorrow they will be telling about Pila's stealing the car yesterday.'
- b. Te nau tala ange [DP 'a e [clause kaiha'asi  
 NPST 3PL.CL tell DIR ABS DET steal.NMLZ  
 'a e kā 'e Pila 'aneafi]] 'apongpongi  
 ABS DET car ERG Pila yesterday tomorrow  
 'Tomorrow they will be telling about Pila's stealing the car yesterday.'

(55) shows that the subject of this nominalized clause may not be positioned outside of the nominalization, at the end of the matrix clause. We take this to demonstrate that R-SUBJ is clause-bound.

- (55) \*Te nau tala ange [DP 'a e [clause kaiha'asi  
 NPST 3PL.CL tell DIR ABS DET steal.NMLZ  
 'e—Pila 'a e kā 'aneafi]] 'apongpongi 'e Pila  
 ERG Pila ABS DET car yesterday tomorrow ERG Pila

A base-generation analysis of VOS cannot account for this restriction. Coindexation is in general not subject to locality. A hanging topic, for example, can be related to its interpreted position over an arbitrarily long distance. Ross's (1967: 423) example in (56) shows this for the English Left Hanging Topic construction.

- (56) **That traffic expert<sub>i</sub>**, [the man my father works with in Boston is going [to tell the police [that **he<sub>i</sub>** has set the traffic light on the corner of Murk Street far too slow]]].

Turning to movement, rightward movement is widely claimed to be clause-bound (Ross 1967: 307; Perlmutter & Soames 1979; Overfelt 2015; Baltin 2017; and others). Specifically, it is subject to the Right Roof Constraint (Ross 1967; Perlmutter & Soames 1979; Baltin 2017) formulated in (57).

- (57) *Right Roof Constraint* (Baltin 2017)  
An element cannot move rightward out of the clause in which it originates  
Ross's (1967: 429) English examples in (58) show that rightward hanging topics in English are clause-bound (see also Cinque 1990; Ott & de Vries 2016).
- (58) a. [That they spoke to the janitor about that robbery yesterday, the cops],  
is terrible.  
b. ?\*[That they spoke to the janitor about that robbery yesterday] is  
terrible, the cops.

Overfelt (2015) provides an account of the clause-boundedness of rightward movement in terms of Economy. Regardless of its source, if R-SUBJ is in fact clause-bound, this follows if VOS is derived by movement.

In summary, this section has provided evidence that S in VOS reaches this position via rightward A'-movement. This accounts for connectivity with the genuine subject position, spec,TP, and locality seen in VOS. Section 4.6 summarizes our observations and various theoretical issues.

## 4.6 Conclusions and open questions

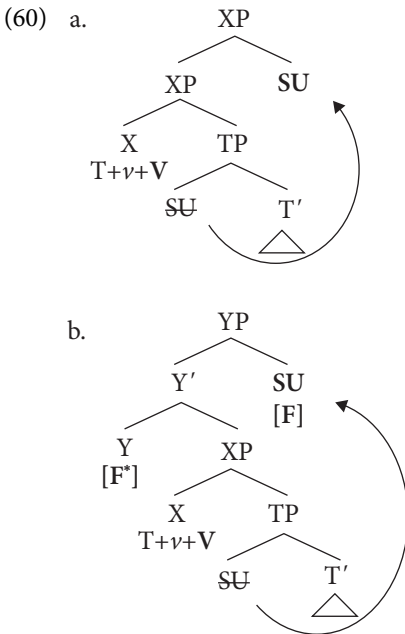
This chapter has described and analyzed the syntax of VOS word order in Tongan with respect to the base VSO order. (59) summarizes the crucial characteristics of S in VOS, most of which we have documented in this chapter.

- (59) a. S is backgrounded  
b. S shows reflexive connectivity

- c. S is always final or followed by a PP
- d. S shows case connectivity
- e. S disallows subject clitic doubling
- f. S allows doubling by an epithet for some speakers
- g. S may not originate in an embedded clause

In the broad picture, S in VOS is informationally backgrounded; however, syntactically, it acts like S in VSO. There are connectivity effects with respect to binding phenomena, locality, and case.

We have argued that the derivational relationship between VSO and VOS in Tongan is more effectively captured by the rightward displacement of SUBJ than by leftward displacement of OBJ. This displacement shows many of the hallmarks of rightward movement. We analyzed rightward displacement as generic A'-movement to a position right-adjoined to the highest clausal node, (60a). We did not try to argue in favor of that as opposed to movement to a right specifier, (60b), which would be more in keeping with minimalist assumptions that all movement is driven by feature checking. In the case of (60b), some strong feature [F\*] on the head of YP can drive the movement of a backgrounded subject to the right specifier of YP.



If this analysis stands up to additional scrutiny, a number of language-specific questions remain. One is how the backgrounded status of the moved subject

arises. Minimalism can stipulate that the movement is driven by a [bkgrd] or [topic] feature but this only pushes the problem into the syntax and does not explain anything. It is also incompatible with the claim that information structure notions such as topic are not directly encoded in the syntax (Chomsky 2008; Fanselow & Lenertová 2011).

A second question is whether the rightward movement we have proposed targets only subjects. We have implicitly assumed that it does but this is an ad hoc stipulation and a more general analysis would allow objects and other dependents to undergo rightward movement as well. Object movement would be difficult to see because it would still yield VSO word order, but it may be detectable in the prosody of the relevant utterances.

The analysis also has implications for syntactic theory more generally. Rightward movement is much less common than leftward movement and it superficially displays distinct characteristics. As a consequence, a number of works have tried to argue that it does not exist (Chomsky & Lasnik 1977; Rochement & Culicover 1990; Kayne 1994; among others). If R-SUBJ is appropriate for Tongan, it provides us with another instance of rightward movement against which we can test the numerous hypotheses that try to reanalyze rightward movement as something else or insist that it exists and has expected characteristics (see the introductions to and papers in Beermann et al. 1997 and Webelhuth et al. 2013 for discussion).

A potentially promising alternative analysis that we do not pursue for reasons of space is ellipsis. Ott & de Vries (2016) argues that right dislocated elements should be analyzed using coordination and deletion. In this scenario, VOS as in (61a) results from coordination of two clauses, with the second clause specifying the first one, as schematized in (61b). The first clause contains a, typically null, subject and the second clause contains the overt rightward subject. The two subjects are linked cataphorically, and the second clause is reduced through movement of the overt subject followed by ellipsis, as shown in (61b) for the VOS clause in (61a).

- (61) a. Na'e   tuku   'a    e    pa'anga   'e    Siale  
           PST   leave   ABS   DET   money    ERG   Siale  
           'Siale left the money.'
- b. [CP<sub>1</sub> Na'e   tuku   *pro*<sub>i</sub>   'a    e    pa'anga] &  
           PST   leave            ABS   DET   money  
           [CP<sub>2</sub> 'e   Siale<sub>i</sub>   {<sub>XP</sub> na'e—tuku {<sub>TP</sub> t<sub>i</sub>—'a e pa'anga}}]  
           ERG   Siale   PST       leave       the money  
           'He left the money, Siale, left the money.'

Such an analysis is developed in Koster (2000), de Vries (2007, 2009, 2011), and Ott & de Vries (2016). It is in some ways a hybrid of the two analyses we

considered earlier. As in the base-generation analysis, the subjects in the two clauses are related by coindexation. As in the movement account, however, the overt subject has undergone A'-movement, although in a separate clause. The analysis has the potential to account for a broad range of facts without appeal to rightward movement and the attendant problems that we pointed out above. We leave this for future work.

### Acknowledgments

This work was supported in part by NSF grants BCS-1144223, BCS-1563129, and BCS-1619857 and by the Distinguished Guest Scientist award at the Research Institute for Linguistics, Hungarian Academy of Sciences to Maria Polinsky. We are grateful to our Tongan consultants: Sisilia Lutui, Saia Mataele, Sofia Tolu, Melenaita Taumoeofolau, and especially Kolotina Halaifonua. Many thanks to Jason Brown, Ivano Caponigro, Lauren Clemens, Marcel den Dikken, Bill Idsardi, Idan Landau, Ted Levin, Diane Massam, Omer Preminger, Deniz Rudin, two anonymous reviewers, and the audiences at AFLA 22, the Toronto Polynesian Workshop, and USC for discussion of various aspects of this project. We are solely responsible for all errors.

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