

**GENITIVE CONSTRUCTIONS AND AGENCY  
IN SAMOAN DISCOURSE**

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**1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>**

This paper discusses the tendency in Samoan discourse to use genitive constructions for a wide range of participant roles, including Agents. This study is part of a larger research project on Samoan language use and language acquisition (cf. Duranti and Ochs 1989) focussing on the linguistic constitution of participant roles and actions through the interaction of syntax, semantics, and pragmatics. This theme has fascinated many linguists, psychologists, and anthropologists in this century, including Sapir (1929), Whorf (1941), Fillmore (1968; 1977), and Talmy (1972). Whorf's notion of "objectification of subjective experience" and Fillmore's notions of "case" and "frame" are particularly relevant to our discussion. We believe with Fillmore that languages "differ in interesting ways in the options they present in taking particular perspectives on complex scenes" (1977: 74). The extent to which such variation is random or partly predictable on the basis of some general principles is something of interest to us. In particular, we will be exploring a case in which speakers favor what appears to be, across languages, a dispreferred encoding strategy. According to what has been known as the "topicality hierarchy" (Givón 1976; Hawkins and Hyman 1974) or the "saliency hierarchy" (Fillmore 1977), human participants, agents of change, and definite referents are likely to be expressed as Subjects in nominative-accusative languages or as Agents (with ergative case) in ergative-absolutive languages (cf. Dixon 1979; Fillmore 1968; Silverstein 1976). In Samoan discourse, however, human agents and actors, among other roles, are often expressed through genitive phrases. The fact that

genitives, often called "possessives," do not simply or exclusively express relations of ownership has been noted by a number of scholars working on a variety of languages (cf. Clark 1978; Lyons 1968, 1977; Parisi and Castelfranchi 1974; Bugenhagen 1986).<sup>2</sup> The Samoan data, which include such diverse genres as conversation, political oratory, and personal letters, represent, however, what is to our knowledge both the most varied and the most recurrent use of genitive constructions for semantic roles other than possession.

In this paper, we will first provide a brief description of the uses of genitive constructions by Samoan adults; then we will discuss some of the semantic and pragmatic differences between the expression of agentivity through genitives and through ergative NP's. Finally, we will provide a cognitive schema and a culture-specific interpretation for the agentive decoding of genitives in Samoan. As perhaps apparent from our examples, our data include such diverse genres as conversation, political oratory, and personal letters.

## 2. Background: sentence types in Samoan discourse

The study of genitive constructions in Samoan discourse grew out of a number of observations we have been making on Samoan grammar based on verbal interactions recorded in 1978-79, 1981, 1988 across a variety of contexts in a traditional village in Western Samoa. In particular, we were struck by a three findings:

- a. The relatively rare occurrence of 3 full constituents (viz. Verb, Agent, Object, or Indirect Object) in utterances with transitive verbs (cf. Duranti 1981; Ochs 1982; 1985).
- b. The tendency for utterances, across contexts and across syntactic types (viz. with transitive, intransitive, and semi-transitive or 'middle' verbs), to exhibit on the surface two main constituents, i.e. a Verb, or Verb Complex (VC)<sup>3</sup> and a Nominal Argument.

### (1) VC + Nominal Argument

We called this tendency the "Two Constituent Bias" (cf. Duranti and Ochs 1983; Ochs 1988). More or less around the same time, Du Bois had independently arrived at a similar notion which he called the "Preferred Argument Structure" (see Du Bois 1987). Both in Du Bois's and in our case, we found that the more common NP argument to be expressed with a full lexi-

cal item (as opposed to anaphoric forms) was either a Subject of an intransitive verb (or adjective) or an Object of a transitive verb. More recently, we have found that this pattern is characteristic not only of spoken Samoan but also of certain written genres. Example (2) is from a letter. The VC constituent and the NP (or PP) which follows are separated by brackets.

- (2) (from a letter, "Ma1")<sup>4</sup>
- 30 [Ua fiu foi] [si teine o Pese]  
TA fed up also AFF girl PRED Pese  
'Pese, the poor girl, is also tired'
- 31 [e fai iai] [i le tama]  
TA do pro PREP ART boy  
'to tell him, the boy'
- 32 [e tuu] [le inu pia]  
TA drop ART drink beer  
'to stop drinking beer'
- 33 ae [alofa atu]  
but love DX  
'and (instead) be compassionated'
- 34 [e avatu] [se tupe]  
TA give+DX ART money  
'to send some money'
- 35 [e fai ai] [saogatupe a si tama o S. T.]  
TA do pro collect+money of AFF boy PRED S. T.  
'to make (with it) donations of the poor boy S. T. (Name)'
- 36 ma le toeaina]  
and ART oldman  
'and the old man'

Lines 30, 32, 34, and 35-36 have a VC and an NP, whereas line 33 has a VC and a PP, and line 33 only a VC. In our view, the fact that virtually all clauses except the first can be interpreted as having undergone Equi NP deletion does not make the argument of the Two Constituent Bias less strong, given that we are making a "preference" argument and the speaker/writer has the option to produce either main clauses (with full constituents) or subordinate ones (with deletion or zero anaphora). The Two Constituent Bias, however, works as well in main clauses as shown in the following

excerpt from a conversation in which two chiefs and an orator (F.) are discussing different people's ability to perform traditional speechmaking:

- (3) (From a conversation, "The watch")  
 500 F; [e feololo aa] [le laauga a si koiga].  
 TA not bad EMP ART speech of AFF old man  
 'The poor old man's speech is not bad.'  
 501 T; laga [lelei] [Pua].  
 because good Pua  
 'Because Pua is good.'  
 502 (1.0)  
 503 'a [e pau aa le mea] ['o le u'umi].  
 but TA only EMP the thing PRED ART long  
 'but the only thing is the length.'  
 504 (.6)  
 505 F; -hh aa?  
 '-hh what?'  
 506 T; [pau le mea] ['o le u'umi].  
 only ART thing PRED ART long  
 'The only thing is the length.'  
 507 F; (CL)  
 508 (2.0)  
 509 T; 'a [e lelei kele] [Pua].  
 but TA good very Pua  
 'but Pua is very good.'  
 510 (.5)  
 511 F; [pu'upu'u] [le laauga a le kamaaloo o Pua].  
 short ART speech of ART man PRED Pua  
 'the man Pua gave a short speech'  
 (lit. 'the man Pua's speech (was) short')

In this segment, all utterances contain only main clauses and, except for the interrogative *aa?* 'what?' in 505, they all have two constituents (see lines 500, 501, 503, 506, 509, 511).

Both in our case and in Du Bois's study, the fact of working with ergative languages (Samoan in our, Sacapultec in his) made it even more apparent that we were dealing with a discourse strategy that preferred the expression of Absolutive NP's, viz. Subjects (of intransitive clauses) or Objects (cf. Comrie 1978; Dixon 1979) over Agent NP's as full constituents (Ochs 1982). This means that (1) could be more accurately represented as (4):

(4) VC + Absolutive NP

c. Finally, differently from Du Bois, we also found that if we paid attention to the internal structure of the Absolutive NP in Samoan discourse, (4) did not necessarily imply an overall "avoidance" of Agent NP's (or of other kinds of semantic roles, e.g. Benefactives), although the definition of "Agent" may have to be reconsidered. If we take a strictly grammatical or, rather, syntactico-semantic definition, viz. Agents as the subject of transitive clauses, then our data largely confirm Du Bois' findings. Lexical Agents of transitive clauses are also relatively rare in our data (cf. Ochs 1982), whereas lexical Subjects of intransitive clauses and lexical Objects of transitive clauses are much more frequent. On the other hand, if we widen our notion of Agent to include participants in the potential or factual role of agents in the described, evoked, or presupposed event, regardless of the grammatical role of the phrase in which they are linguistically expressed, our data show different results.

### 2.1 The Absolutive NP as a Complex NP

In particular, our data point to the importance of considering the **internal structure of the Absolutive NP**. In a significant number of cases, the so-called "Absolutive NP" is in fact a complex NP that includes both an Affected Object (or Undergoer) as a Head Noun and some other semantic role(s) in the Modifier. The Modifier typically consists of a genitive construction, marked by the prepositions *o* or *a*.<sup>5</sup> This kind of construction is here schematically presented in (5) (the angled brackets indicate an "either or" condition in the case of coreferentiality of Pro and NP):

(5) Verb Complex + [ <sub>NP</sub> Art <Gen Pro> Head Noun <Gen NP> ]

Examples of this construction can be found in lines 35-36 in (2) and in lines 500 and 511 in example (3). As shown in those examples and in the following ones, while genitive constructions in Samoan often express a relation of

“possession,” they express other participant roles as well.<sup>6</sup> Thus, for instance, in (6), which is taken from a conversation, the genitive phrase *a Eki* ‘Eti’s’<sup>7</sup> refers to the person who prepared the food. Given that he is the young untitled male of the family, it would be inappropriate, in a Samoan cultural context, to define the food he cooked for others as “belonging” to him. We consider this an example of genitive construction used to express an Agent participant:

## AGENT:

- (6) (“Pastor and Deacon”)  
 → 24 *fai le umu kalo a Eki ma lu'au*  
 do ART oven taro of Eti and palusami  
 (lit. Eti’s oven taro and palusami (was) made)  
 ‘Eti made baked taro and palusami’
- 25 *e fa'akali mai ai.*  
 TA wait DX pro  
 ‘to welcome (them) with it.’

The common use of genitives instead of main NP arguments is demonstrated in the next example, which is taken from the same letter quoted in (2). Whereas English, as shown in the translation, would typically choose to express the subject-agent of the verb in the relative clause (*that you sent*), Samoan prefers to express the same information by modifying the head noun with a genitive pronoun (*lau* ‘your’) and leave out the Agent of *aumai* ‘give, send’ in the relative clause:

- (7) (“Ma1”)  
 13 *Ia o lea ua ou mauaina lau tusi [RC na aumai.]*  
 SO PRED ADV TA I get-Cia your letter PST give  
 (lit. ‘I have just received your letter (that) (was) sent’)  
 ‘I have just received the letter you sent’

Example (8) below shows the same kind of syntactic structure from a conversation and example (9), taken from a meeting of the village council (*fono*), represents a similar construction, this time in a wh-question:

- (8) (“The watch”)  
 620 *'o Maka e faa kaalaa laga fa'amaavaega*  
 PRED M. TA four dollar his farewell  
 ‘As for M., he gave 4 dollars for the farewell (gift)’

- 621 *ga alu ma ave iai le faa kaalaa e-*  
 PST go and give pro ART four dollars TA  
 ‘(he) came and gave them 4 dollars to-’
- 622 *e fesoasoagi iai i saga mea [RC e fai]*  
 TA help PRO PREP his thing TA do  
 ‘to help (with) them for something he (wants) to do’
- (9) (Fono April 7, III, 85)  
 F; *'o le aa le mea a Loa [RC ua fai]?*  
 PRED ART WH ART thing of L. TA do  
 (lit. ‘what is the thing of Loa (that) has done?’)  
 ‘what has Loa done?’

The following examples show other kinds of participant roles expressed through genitive phrases:

## GOAL:

- (10) (“PI-4”)  
 A; *fai mai avaku le fagu susu a le kama.*  
 say DX give+DX ART bottle milk of ART boy  
 ‘said “give the milk bottle to the boy”’

## BENEFACTIVE:

- (11) (“Pastor and Deacon”)  
 → 262 *ia 'ou kago akufa'a- fai le-*  
 SO I touch DX CAUS- do ART  
 ‘so I reach and get’
- 263 *le afakalaa a Lua ia ma loga ko'alua.*  
 ART halfdollar of L. INT and his spouse  
 ‘half a dollar for Lua and his wife.’

## ACTOR:

- (12) (“PI-9”) (I., aunt, talking to P.)  
 I; *vala'au Kaepii lale sau*  
 call Taepii there come  
 ‘call out for Taepii to come’
- fai le kou sa'asa'a.*  
 do ART your dance  
 ‘(so that) you all do a sa'asa'a (dance)’

## EXPERIENCER:

(13) (PI-3)

I; *ese fa'aali'i o lea kegikiki!*  
 exceptional rage of that girl  
 (lit. 'exceptional (the) rage of that girl!')  
 'the little girl is really in a rage!'

## LOCATIVE:

(14) (Fono April 7, II, p.50)<sup>8</sup>

*M;e leai ma se isi o le kou Falelua e koe*  
 TA NO with ART other of ART your F. TA remain  
*gofo.*  
 stay  
 'there is no one from (lit. 'of') your Two Subvillages (who)  
 stays back.'

## KIN:

(15) (PI-VII) (I., aunt, asks P. about the boy Ligo)

I; '*o ai le kamaa o le ali'i lea o Ligo?*  
 PRED who ART father of ART fellow that PRED L.  
 'Who is the father of that boy Ligo?'

Table 1. Distribution of Semantic Roles in Genitive Constructions\*

Context: Semantic Roles** Encoded:									
	POSS	BEN	GL/LC	AG	ACT	EXP	PART	PNT	REL/KIN
Informal Women's Speech	.19 (27)	.14 (20)	.06 (9)	.16 (22)	.16 (23)	.06 (8)	.04 (6)	.01 (2)	.16 (22)
Informal Men's Speech	.21 (17)	.12 (10)	.16 (13)	.19 (16)	.08 (7)	.06 (5)	.10 (8)	-	.23 (19)
TOTAL:	.20 (44)	.13 (30)	.10 (22)	.17 (38)	.13 (30)	.06 (13)	.06 (14)	.01 (2)	.23 (51)

\* Each genitive construction may encode more than one semantic role.

\*\* POSS=possessor, BEN=benefactive, GL/LC=Goal/locative, AG=agent, ACT=actor, EXP=experiencer, PART=body part or other part/whole relation, PNT=patient, REL/KIN=social relationship, including kinship.

Table 1 shows the distribution of different semantic roles in genitive phrases in adult speech. As shown in Table 1, after Possessor, Agent is one of the most common types of semantic roles expressed through genitive phrases. This finding opens up a whole series of questions about the definition of Agents and their distribution in a language like Samoan. Before turning to that discussion, however, we will briefly consider the implications of the frequent use of complex NP's with genitive phrases for Samoan child language acquisition.

## 4. Agents in genitive phrases

From the point of view of the syntactic relationship between genitive phrase and its possible interpretations in terms of major NP constituents, what we have in Samoan is a tendency to create genitive phrase slots for human participants that could have been expressed in other grammatical roles. Rather than the putatively "natural" or "universal" tendency for human participants to appear as Subjects or Agents, a tendency codified as "Subjectivization" in Case Grammar (cf. Fillmore 1968; 1977; cf. also Kuno 1974) and "genitive ascension" in Relational Grammar (cf. Kimenyi 1980), in Samoan we seem to have something like "genitivization," that is, the embedding of a potentially major participant role within another NP, typically the NP that contains the Affected Object, as a genitive modifier. This would be a kind of "detransitivization" (cf. Ochs 1982; Mosel 1985).

This view, however, is still very much bound to the hypothesis of a transformational source for genitive constituents. This view is in fact misleading for a number of reasons. Let us examine two of them: (a) the paraphrasability of genitive phrases as main NP constituents, and (b) the criteria for defining a given NP as an Agent.

## 4.1 Paraphrasability

Complex NP's containing genitive Agents sometimes can be paraphrased as canonical transitive clauses. This is easy to do with clauses that already have a potentially canonical transitive verb. Thus, for example, line 41 in (16a) could be paraphrased as (16b), with what is a complex genitive construction in (16a) replaced in (16b) by an NP marked by the ergative marker *e*:

- (16) a. (from letter "Ma1")  
 41 *e fai fa'afiafiaga a le autalavou a K. ma L.*  
 TA do practice of ART youth ass. of K. and L.  
 (lit. 'do fiafia practice of the Youth Association of K. and L.')
- 'K.'s and L.'s youth association has been doing the fiafia practice' (K. and L. stand for two young men's names)
- 42 *e sue ai tupe*  
 TA search pro money  
 'to raise money (with it)'
- 43 *e fai ai le latou falesa fou.*  
 TA do pro ART their church new  
 'to make (with it) their new church.'
- (16) b. (compare with line 41 above)  
*e fai fa'afiafiaga e le autalavou a K. ma L.*  
 TA do practice ERG ART youth ass. of K. and L.  
 'K.'s and L.'s youth association has been doing the fiafia practice'

The paraphrasability test, however, raises some questions as to the adequacy of viewing genitive phrases as "another way of saying the same thing." In many cases there are more or less subtle semantico-pragmatic differences between the version with the genitive phrase and the one with the ergative marker. The use of an Absolutive NP with a genitive focusses on the Object or result of an action and presents the Agent as not necessarily responsible for the creation or pursuit of the Object, whereas the ergative NP with a canonical verb highlights the human participant (Agent) as a willful and responsible actor whose actions may directly affect an object. This is illustrated in (17):

- (17) a. ("Pastor and Deacon")  
*koiki maua le maakou faa kaalaa*  
 almost got ART our four dollar  
 (lit. 'almost got our four dollars')
- 'we almost got four dollars'
- b. *koiki maua le faa kaalaa e maakou*  
 almost got ART four dollar ERG we  
 'we almost got the four dollars (we were looking for, as if they had been hidden from us)'

These two examples also show that the change from genitive to ergative involves not only a difference in the way in which the human participant's role is presented, but also a change in the identifiability of the Patient: the Object is more identifiable in (17b) — with the ergative NP — than in (17a) — with the genitive phrase. The identifiability of the Object is an example of the property of transitive clauses that Hopper and Thompson (1980), following Timberlake (1975), call "individuation." Clauses with a "highly individuated" Object are more transitive than those with a non-individuated Object. This accounts for the fact that in clauses in which a generic Object is incorporated in the verb, the Agent "loses" the ergative marker and is marked like the Subject of an intransitive clause:

- (18) a. *na inu e le tamaloo pia e lua*  
 TA drink ERG ART man beer TA two  
 'The man drank two beers'
- b. *e inu pia so'o (\*e) le tamaloo*  
 TA drink beer frequently ERG ART man  
 'The man drinks beer all the time'

Furthermore, the genitive phrase may encode more than one role for the same human participant, whereas the ergative NP encodes only one role (viz. Agent). The sentence in example (16a), for instance, implies that the Youth Organization (*autalavou*) is involved in the practice and is also the beneficiary of the event (viz. thanks to the money that will be raised during the feast). (16b) instead implies that the Youth Organization does the practice and the practice only. In general, an ergative NP implies that the Agent participant is involved in the action described by the verb in a more restricted sense than is implied by the genitive NP.

There are even cases where the verb *fai* 'do, make' accompanied by a complex NP containing a genitive phrase can completely lose its active, potentially transitive meaning and simply describe a property or state of affairs. This is the case, for instance, with such idiomatic expressions as *fai le to'alua*, lit. 'do the spouse' which means 'has a spouse' or 'is married.' As shown in (19), this construction cannot be used with the ergative marker at all and must be used intransitively, with what corresponds to the English subject obligatorily in the genitive phrase:

- (19) a. *'ua fai le to'alua a le tama?*  
 PERF do ART spouse of ART boy  
 'Is the young man married?'

## b. \*'ua fai e le tama le to'alua?

ERG

What we find then is that, differently from English, where, as pointed out by Keenan (1984), Subjects of transitive verbs can express a wide range of semantic roles,<sup>9</sup> in Samoan, Agent NP's marked by the ergative preposition *e* cover a restricted set of roles (Cook 1988). In particular, in Samoan, the use of ergative Agents seems associated with a stance that assumes accountability if not premeditated actions by the Agent participant (cf. Duranti 1990b). When the genitive phrase, as opposed to the ergative phrase, is used to refer to the putative Agent, the description of the event seems to focus on the product or result of the action of the verb (if the verb is a potentially transitive verb) rather than on the party who is responsible for the process. For this reason, genitive phrases seem to cover cases that in other languages might be expressed by passives or stative-like clauses where the Patient or underlying Object acquires the syntactic role of Subject.

## 4.2 What is an Agent?

It is generally accepted that the characterization of an action or event as involving more or less transitivity is partly a choice that speakers make. It is not simply the description of a language-independent situation "out there." Several recent studies have stressed the fact that the relationship between language and context is a dialogical one where talk defines the context just as much as the context helps define the form and content of linguistic performance (cf. Duranti and Goodwin to appear). Transitivity is no exception. It represents a stance, a perspective on a situation. Whether or not speakers will choose to rely on it will depend on a number of factors, some related to the options offered by the language they use, other ones related to their subjective as well as cultural preferences. Echoing what has already been asserted by Sapir, Whorf, and Fillmore, we are also suggesting that languages *qua* cultural products and cultural tools will vary in the extent to which agentivity is explicitly expressed or implied through linguistic encoding. In Samoan, the use of genitive constructions, as opposed to transitive clauses, is so pervasive, that we, as analysts, are forced to reconsider our definition of "Agent."

If, in order to identify an NP as an "Agent," we must find a corresponding clause in which the same NP **can** be explicitly marked as an Agent,

viz. with an ergative marker, it would be difficult to argue that a sentence like (20) is transformationally or simply paraphrastically related to (21):

(20) *e lelei le laauga a Lua*  
TA good ART speech of Lua  
'Lua's speech is good'

(21) *e fai e Lua le laauga lelei*  
TA DO ERG Lua ART speech good  
'Lua gives a good speech'

In fact, however, it is precisely a sentence like (20) that is understood as a transitive clause in line 511 of example (3) — reproduced here as (22):

(22) *pu'upu'u le laauga a le kamaloo o Pua.*  
short ART speech of ART man of Pua  
(lit. 'the man Pua's speech (was) short')  
'the man Pua gave a short speech'

Although the utterance in (22) is an assessment about Pua's speech performance, its grammatical structure focusses more on the product of the performance, i.e. the speech, rather than on the performer. Although this kind of assessment and description is also found in English and other Indo-European languages, they are significantly more pervasive in Samoan discourse across different speech genres. Some other recurrent cases include:

(i) utterances with the predicate *ta'i* (or *ka'i*) 'each,' as shown in (23):

(23) ("Pastor and Deacon")  
101 A; *'ae ga fai maiaa e laakou*  
but PST DO DX EMP ERG they  
'but they did (it) themselves'  
102 → *ia' e ka'i faa masi a le kagaka.*  
so TA each four biscuit of ART person  
(lit. 'so it's each four biscuits of a person')  
'(and) each person got four biscuits.'

(ii) Existential clauses:

(24) *e iai sau sui?*  
TA EXIST your change  
(lit. 'is there your change?')  
'do you have change?'

- (25) ("Pastor School")  
 Pastor; *e iai se si e 'ese sana tali?*  
 TA EXIST ART other TA different his answer  
 (lit. is there any other (who) his answer is different?)  
 'Does anyone have a different answer?'

(iii) Nominalizations (which in Samoan are relatively common both in casual and formal speech and are a way of focussing on the action as a whole or on its consequences rather than on the human participant who initiated the action or change of state):<sup>10</sup>

- (26) ("Matai in Saleapaga")  
*see 'o le leaga o kagaka la e faia le-*  
 EXCL PRED ART bad of person there TA do+Cia ART  
 (lit. hey, the badness of people who do the-')  
 'Man, people who do the- ... are really bad!'

(27) ("The watch") (The chief F. arrives to the house and is invited to sit next to the researcher (A.), he replies jokingly that he doesn't want to because he is afraid of the European)

- 17 F; *laga ou ke fefe i le paalagi.*  
 bec. I TA afraid PREP ART European  
 'because I am afraid of the European.'
- 18 P; *ai oo i kalaku o le paalagi.*  
 'maybe there next to the European'
- 19 A; (LAUGH) *hhhh.*  
 20 T; (LAUGH) *hehehe.*
- 21 P; *le aka a le ali'i.*  
 ART laugh of ART fellow  
 (lit. the fellow's laughing')  
 '(look at) the fellow laughing'
- (28) ("Watch") (titled men talking about speechmaking)  
 377 F; *e ke iloa 'oe*  
 you TA know you  
 'do you know (about)'
- 378 *le maa ooga i Giusila?*  
 ART we-DU-EXC go(PL)+NOM IO New Zealand  
 (lit. 'our going to New Zealand?')  
 'me going to New Zealand with someone else?'

- 379 (.8) *maa oo ma le kagaka lea,*  
 our go(PL) with ART person that  
 'I go with this person'

380 T; *mm.*  
 'mm.'

- 381 (3.5)  
 → 382 F; *'o le makuaa kupea o le kamalooa legei mea*  
 PRED ART very money+Cia of ART man this thing  
 (lit. 'the extreme money making of the man (in) this thing'  
 'the man made a lot of money (in) this thing')

#### 4.2.1 A linguistic schema

We would like to summarize these findings by means of an interpretive schema of the following type:

(29) Given an activity A which includes {I, II, X} — where I is the Affected Object (or Undergoer) and II is a participant with potential volition and potency —, if no Agent is expressed either anaphorically or as a full major NP constituent (viz. ergative NP), then the syntactic structure VC + NP, where NP = {Gen II, Nom I}, is interpreted as follows:

Gen = Agent/Actor

{Gen II, Nom I} is an unordered pair and "VC" includes a predicate which expresses an action, a property, or a state of affairs which is part of the situation. We tentatively propose that the relationship of causation that sometimes is established between the Human participant and the state of affairs expressed by the predicate can be understood on the basis of an interpretive rule of the following type:

CHANGE(x,STATE(x)) & RELATION(x,y) & HUMAN(y) <=>  
 CAUSE(y,CHANGE(x,STATE(a)))

That is, if a property or change of state is mentioned in which a human is said to be involved, then the human participant could be the Agent of an actual, albeit not explicitly expressed, causation.

#### 4.2.2 A cultural account

We suspect that this schema is but a linguistic correlate of a more general cultural disposition which tends to prefer descriptions and assessments that focus on the result or consequences of an event or action rather than



on the human actor/initiator (cf. Duranti and Ochs 1985; Duranti 1988a; Mead 1937; Shore 1982). This is perhaps best illustrated by examples in which Samoan speakers frame events in radically different ways from what we are accustomed to in languages like English. Thus, both in (30) and line 42 in (31) the event is framed by taking the perspective of the object, viz. the dish and the taperecorder respectively. In line 20 in (25) we find another example of the use of the genitive pronoun with a nominalized verb (*alofa* 'love, show compassion') in place of a subject pronoun, as we prefer in the English translation:

- (30) ("Women eating," conversation)  
*'ua alu ma V. ma F.\* la'u 'ipu.*  
 TA go with V. and F. my dish  
 '(lit.) my dish has gone with V. and F.'  
 'V. and F. took my dish'  
 (\*V. and F. are names of people)
- (31) (from a letter, "Father")  
 19 *P. fai ia K.*  
 P say to K.  
 'P., tell K.'
- 20 *ua leai lava sona alofa maii inei ia matou*  
 TA NEG EMP his love DX in here to us  
 'He has shown no love for us here'  
 '(lit.) there has been no love of his to us here'
- 21 *e leai se tusi ua aumai*  
 TA NEG ART letter TA bring  
 'there is no letter (that) has been sent'
- 22 *leai se tupe e lafo mai.*  
 NEG ART money TA send DX  
 'there is no money (that has been) sent (to us).'
- (...)
- 41 *aumai sa matou la'au pese lapo'a*  
 bring ART our deck song big  
 'send us a big taperecorder'

- 42 *ona ua laititi le la'au lea sa sau ma Soi*  
 because TA small ART deck that TA come with Soi  
 '(lit.) because the taperecorder that came with Soi is small.'  
 'because the taperecorder that Soi brought is small'

The tendency for adult speakers of other languages to describe human participants in manipulative activity scenes as Subject or Agent NP's is less apparent in Samoan discourse, where what Slobin (1985) calls the "Result Perspective" is implemented in cases that seem peculiar in their English translation. Thus, for instance, as shown in line 56 in example (32), an event like the killing of a chicken can be represented as its "dying":

- (32) ("Pastor and Deacon") (Two men are talking about the food that each family had prepared for the researchers the night before)
- 54 *F; fai ai le maakou mea'ai.*  
 make PRO ART WE-EXC food  
 'we made our food.'
- 55 (1.)
- 56 *P; pee mai le moa i le maakou paa-moa*  
 die DX ART chicken in ART our fence-chicken  
 '(we) killed one of the chickens in our chicken fence'  
 '(lit. the chicken in our chicken fence died)'
- 57 ?; -hh.
- 58 *F; uaa e le'i alu se si 'i Apia*  
 because TA NEG GO ART other to Apia  
 'because no one else went to Apia'
- 58b *e fa'akau mai se mea'ai.*  
 TA buy DX ART food  
 'to buy food.'

In this case, a conscious and premeditated act (the killing) carried out by a human participant (the speaker) against an animate being (a chicken) is presented as an apparently accidental event (the death of a chicken).<sup>11</sup> As suggested by the violation of Grice's Maxims of Quantity and Quality, this construction could be seen as an attempt at attenuating what may be a potential face-threatening-act.<sup>12</sup> In this view, Samoan would seem to favor, for negative politeness, the strategy of impersonalizing speaker or hearer by

not encoding them as the overt Agent of the action expressed or implied in the verb (cf. Brown and Levinson 1987: 190).

## 5. Conclusions

Although often mentioned in contemporary typological studies, genitive constructions have not been studied for the richness of their semantic and pragmatic implications. In our case, the importance of genitive constructions was imposed upon us by the nature of our data. When we looked at spontaneous verbal interaction, we found genitive constructions used so often and with such a variety of meanings that they warranted special attention.

In this paper, we have briefly discussed the use of genitive constructions in Samoan and we have compared their meaning with the meaning of transitive clauses expressing similar, albeit not necessarily identical, information. We have suggested that in a language like Samoan, we must pay close attention to the internal structure of the NP if we want to understand the expression of agency and transitivity. We have also proposed a culture-specific justification for the frequent choice of genitive phrases vis-a-vis ergative or other prepositional phrases.

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## NOTES

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*Note on transcription and data sources:* All the examples with a source (e.g. "Pastor and Deacon") are either taken from transcripts of audio-recorded spontaneous interaction or from personal letters written to or received from family members abroad (e.g. "Ma'i"). The rest of the examples have been elicited from native speakers. We have tried to use Samoan orthography as consistently as possible with two exceptions: (i) for the spoken data, we have transcribed each long vowel with two identical vowels rather than with a macron on a vowel; (ii) the written material (viz. letters) has been left in the original written version, which often leaves out glottal stops and long vowels. The letter g stands for a velar nasal and the inverted apostrophe (') for a glottal stop. The large amount of speech with no "t's" or "n's" ("bad speech") in our examples from Spoken Samoan is quite characteristic of our corpus (see note 7 below).

*Abbreviations:* AFF=affect particle; ART=article; DU=dual; DX= deictic particle; ERG=ergative marker; EXIST=existential particle (probably of pronominal origin); EXC=exclusive; INT= intensifier; PL=plural; PST= past tense; PREP=preposition; pro=unemphatic pronoun; TA=tense/aspect marker.

2. Lyons (1967; 1977) proposed to consider possessives as a subclass of locatives: "a phrase like 'X's Y' means no more than "the Y that is associated with X"; and the kind of association holding between Y and X is frequently one of spatial proximity or attachment. It can be argued that so-called possessive expressions are to be regarded as a subclass of locatives (as they very obviously are in terms of their grammatical structure, in certain languages)" [1977:474]. This "localistic" view, based on developmental and crosslinguistic evidence, has been popular among a number of scholars, but places the emphasis on a different dimension from what we have been noticing in our Samoan data, where location is only one of the possible semantic relations expressed by genitive constructions and not necessarily the most frequent or salient one.
3. The term "Verb Complex," which is quite established in other language families such as Bantu and Australian Aboriginal languages, has been extended to the analysis of Polynesian languages by Seiter (1982). The VC contains a number of syntactico-semantic markers in addition to the verb stem, including tense aspect markers, Auxiliary verbs, adverbial particles, deictic particles and clitic pronouns.
4. Abbreviations: AFF= affect particle; ART= article; DX= deictic particle; PREP= preposition; PRO= clitic pronoun; TA= tense/aspect marker; PST=past.
5. The use of one marker over the other is determined by a number of semantic, pragmatic, and idiosyncratic factors pertaining to the relation between the referent of the genitive phrase and the referent of the head noun. The distinction between *a* and *o* in Polynesian languages is generally characterized as that between alienable/inalienable, controlled/non-controlled, or dominant/subordinate possession (cf. Biggs 1969; Chapin 1978; Chung 1973; Comrie and Thompson 1985; Wilson 1976).
6. From a preliminary investigation, it appears that from an informational point of view, the alternation between prenominal and postnominal genitives follows the same distribution of pre-verbal (pronominal) and lexical Subjects and Agents. New information tend to be expressed via full NP's and given information tend to be expressed via (clitic) pronominal forms (as well as via zero anaphora).

7. What in Written Samoan is spelled with a 't' or an 'n' is often realized as /k/ and /g/ (representing here, as in standard Samoan orthography, a velar nasal) in Spoken Samoan. Ample discussion of this sociolinguistic phenomenon, which, *pace* Milner (1966), is not a function of formality, is provided in a number of sources, including Duranti (1981), Duranti and Ochs (1985), Ochs (1985; 1988), Shore (1982).
8. To simplify matters, I have edited out a repetition in this utterance. The actual utterance is as follows: *e leai ma se isi o le kou- o le kou Falelua e koe gofo* 'there is no one of your- of your Two Subvillages (Falelua) who stays back.'
9. We should probably say "Standard English" or "in some dialects of English," given that, as shown by Foster (1979), in Ozark English (as probably in other dialects of English) there seems to be an emergent ergative pattern which distinguishes between instruments and true agents. According to Foster (1979: 493), "[in Ozark English,] the surface slot of transitive active subject is coming to be associated with the semantic notion of willful and/or responsible agency, and (...) nouns denoting things believed in that culture to be incapable of that kind of agency are not appropriate subjects of such transitive active verbs."
10. Nominalizations do in fact play an important role in some of the phenomena mentioned here and we hope to return to them on another occasion (cf. Chung 1973; Duranti 1981; Ochs 1988).
11. Background ethnographic information is here particularly useful. One of the authors of this article witnessed the reported event, where the speaker F. in (32) actively chased the chicken, actually a rooster, for several minutes and only after several attempts managed to kill it by throwing a heavy stick at him. When asked about the phrasing of this event, the Samoan speaker said that it would have been inappropriate to say that he killed the chicken (using the ergative marker) because it would have given too much importance to the event and to his role in it. This comment reinforces the claim that pragmatic factors such as politeness or respect for the addressee may be important in the choice of intransitive vs. transitive clauses or of genitive vs. ergative marking (cf. Brown and Levinson 1987).
12. The relevant information for this claim is available in the ethnographic and conversational context of the sequence in (32), which is taken from a much longer transcript of a spontaneous conversation recorded in Western Samoa in 1978.

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