12. From feelings to grammar: a Samoan case study

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Introduction

In 1822, after traveling throughout the Pacific, the Reverends Tyerman and Bennett reported a certain problem that many Christian families were experiencing. Writing to London, they referred to the head of one such family:

As a Christian parent, he [Mr. Chamberlain] is naturally very anxious to preserve the minds of his offspring from the moral contamination to which they are liable from the inevitable exposure to the society (occasionally at least) of native children of their own ages, whose language they understand, and whose filthy talk they cannot but hear at times. The abominable conversation (if such it may be called) of infants as soon as they begin to lip out words, is such a jargon of grossness and obscenity as could not be imagined by persons brought up even in those manufacturing towns of our country where manners are the most depraved. And, so far from reprobating the little reprobates, their fathers and mothers, both by voice and example, teach them what they are most apt to learn, the expression and indulgence, at the earliest possible period, of every brutal passion. The subject is one of great delicacy and perplexity to faithful Missionaries in all stations among uncivilized heathen, but particularly in these islands. (1822:465–6)

Without the particular moral interpretation of the good Reverends Tyerman and Bennett, emotional intensity among Pacific peoples, particularly among Polynesians, has been noted and expressed in art, literature, and numerous ethnographic descriptions. The Pacific has often been treated as a haven of passion, a romantic alternative to Victorian repression and morality.

When I began a longitudinal study of language acquisition in a Western Samoan village, I had in mind a documentation of the morphologically and syntactically interesting features of Samoan as they emerged in children's speech over developmental time. I was concerned with those features that have been described for adult Samoan, such as the ergative case-marking system and a word order of verb–subject–object. I had an idea of the concep-
have argued for the universality of a core set of emotional states, including fear, anger, grief, and embarrassment (Scheff 1977). Other research has focused on the expression and conceptualization of emotions within particular cultures. All human beings experience a core set of emotions sometime in their lives, but how they interpret and manifest those experiences differs across cultures. Levy (1984), for example, suggests that certain emotions may be objects of considerable attention and knowledge. They are what Levy calls "hypercognized," richly expressed within the culture. Other emotional responses may be underplayed or "hypocognized." Often a hypocognized emotion will be repressed and/or reinterpreted as some other experience such as physical illness.

The concern with expression of emotion has led to an interest in a wide range of emotional processes, structures, and concepts; for example, feelings, moods, dispositions, attitudes, character, personality, masking, double binds, cutting, and the like (see Irvine 1982 for a review of this domain). To generalize, this semantic domain is often referred to as affect, and this is the term I will be using in the remainder of this discussion. My particular concern will be with linguistic conventions associated with affect in Samoan and how young children acquire knowledge of these conventions over developmental time. To pursue this question, let us turn to Samoan itself and consider those dimensions of affect that are richly encoded or, as Levy would say, hypercognized.

Affect: child development

In the introduction to this chapter, I indicated that Samoan caregivers are concerned with the child's affective competence, particularly with the child's capacity to produce and recognize conventional expressions of emotions, both verbal and nonverbal. This concern is of course not limited to Samoan society, as is evidenced by the current literature on socialization and social development (Bowby 1969; Bretherton & Beeghly 1982; Dunn & Kendrick 1982; Eibl-Eibesfeldt 1970; Heath 1983; Hoffman 1981; Levy 1973; Lutz 1981; Much & Shweder 1978; Scheffelin 1979; Seymour 1980; Super & Harkness 1982; Zahn-Waxler, Radke-Yarrow & King 1979). The concern is universal, and apparently children quite early in their lives attend to, recognize, and act on displays of emotion by others in their social environment. Klinnert et al. (1983) report that by 9 months of age infants can monitor the facial expression of affect of mothers and will act differently towards some third object according to the affect displayed. Through this type of monitoring, termed social referencing (ibid.), infants are socialized into associating particular events (e.g., the co-presence of a particular object, a change of state, etc.) with particular feelings on the one hand and particular expressions on the other.

Infants come to know for particular situations what they should feel and how to display or mask that feeling (Scheffelin 1979). These frames lay the groundwork for attitudes, opinions, values, and beliefs that evolve in one's lifetime.

EVENT → AFFECT 1 → DISPLAY AFFECT 1
→ DISPLAY AFFECT 2 (MASK AFFECT 1)

Recognition and use of lexical and grammatical structures for conveying feelings are a more sophisticated extension of this early form of production and appraisal of affect expression. The work of Bretherton & Beeghly (1982), Dunn & Kendrick (1982), and Zahn-Waxler, Radke-Yarrow & King (1979) demonstrates that verbal competence in this domain is regularly displayed before the age of 3 (as early as 18-20 months). This research concerns primarily children's acquisition of lexical terms of emotion (in English only). If we include prosody, we can see conventional linguistic expression of affect through intonation even before a child's first words, and it is certainly widely in evidence throughout the single-word stage (Cruttendorn 1982; Halliday 1973; Peters 1977).

An important difference between the use of lexical terms of emotion and intonation is that typically the lexical terms assert or predicate a quality of self or others whereas intonation presupposes or implies that quality. Relative to intonation, the adjectives of affect such as "afraid," "angry," "mad," "happy," etc. indicate more explicitly the nature of the affect communicated. These adjectives have considerable interest for developmental psychologists, because their use displays to a high degree an awareness among young children of their own and others' feelings. Dunn & Kendrick (1982), for example, have documented the capacity of 2- and 3-year-old children to notice and even anticipate the feelings of their younger siblings:

The important point on the issue of perspective-taking is that the children commented on the baby's behavior in a way that certainly did not always represent a projection of their own feelings about their own situations. Sometimes the difference between the perspective of the child and the baby was made quite explicit. One boy watching his baby brother playing with a balloon, commented to the observer: "He going pop in a minute. And he going cry. And he going be frightened of me too. I like the pop." (p. 46)

The interest in affect among development psychologists is growing by leaps and bounds, for it seems that a great deal can be learned about children's cognition from observing affective behavior of children and others engaged in face-to-face interaction. These behaviors indicate the extent to which children can take a sociocentric perspective, their understanding of cause and effect, and their concept of person as distinct from other entities in their environment. It is apparent from existing studies that attitudes, emotions, moods,
1982). As discussed by Gerber (1975), Samoans have no word exactly corresponding to the English term "emotion," but rather refer to the notion of "feeling" (lagafa). Certain feelings corresponding to emotional feelings originate inside the chest (itu). The concept of feeling is bound to the concept of self in all societies. As discussed in considerable detail by Shore (1977, 1982), Samoans see persons as not having much control and as often not responsible for their feelings and actions. Feelings are seen as reactions. This is encoded in the morphology of constructions using verbs of feeling. The objects of these verbs are marked with the preposition i, which also is a case marker indicating instrumental semantic role. Thus, a sentence such as Fiafa Sina i le mea alofa, lit. "happy Sina instrument/middle verb object proposition the gift," can be loosely understood as "Sina is happy because of the gift." These constructions are also translated as "Sina likes the gift," but this captures more the English than the Samoan concept of affect. In line with the orientation towards external origins of feelings, in Samoan conversation there is explicit talk about the origins of a feeling in some person. However, there does not appear to be much talk about feelings as origins of behavior. One's actions are seen as evidence of one's feelings rather than as consequences of one's feelings. Thus, for example, from the Samoan point of view generosity, the giving of food and money and labor, indicates alofa 'love' more than it follows from alofa. Indeed, the meaning of verbs of feeling is more action- (or reaction-)like than in a language like English. Caregivers will often control small children by warning them that they or others will not love them (if they act in some undesirable way). This is usually understood as meaning that they will not give things to or do things for the child. Withdrawal of love means in the most fundamental sense withdrawal of goods and services. In English-speaking Western communities, withdrawal of love is seen more as the origin or reason for withdrawal of goods and services. The latter behaviors are usually seen as indicators that a change of affective state has taken place.

In household interactions with small children, four major feelings dominate Samoan talk and behavior. These are the feelings of alofa (love), ta (anger), fa'a alofa (respect), and tautala (impudence, disrespect). These affects are topics of talk in themselves, as discussed earlier, and are associated with a range of grammatical structures. When put to use, these structures signal or key that a particular affect or intensity of affect is in play much the same way as do body postures and facial gestures. Indeed, a semiotic grammar would specify the ways in which nonverbal and verbal expressions of affect systematically cooccur in Samoan.

**Linguistic encoding of affect**

Table 12.1 displays some of the ways in which Samoan encodes affect. There are special affect particles, affect first person pronouns, and affect determiners. In addition, there are interjections, affect-loaded terms of address and reference, and a long list of affect descriptors. Like many other languages, Samoan uses prosody as well to encode feelings, e.g., loudness, intonation. More language-specific, as noted by Shore, is the use of the front and back of the oral cavity to convey distinct affects, namely delicacy/properness (in a Christian sense) versus earthiness/coarseness. Additionally, Samoans may switch back and forth between two different phonological registers and two lexical registers (respect vocabulary and unmarked vocabulary) to indicate a shift in mood or in intensity of feeling.

**Pragmatic functions**

**Affect specifiers and affect intensifiers.** I have found it useful to analyze the linguistic features that encode affect in terms of two semantic roles. The first role is that of indicating the nature of the affect being conveyed. When a feature carries out this role, I will refer to it as an affect specifier. The second role is that of indicating the intensity of the affect being conveyed. Linguistic features that carry out this role are affect intensifiers. All of the features listed in Table 12.1 are affect intensifiers in the sense that they are affect-loaded alternatives to more neutral features. However, the features differ in the degree to which they function as affect specifiers as well. For example, the particles a, ia, and fo'i are unmarked with respect to type of affect. They can be used to intensify over a range of positive and negative affects. On the other hand, the affect particle e is more specifically associated with negative feelings such as anger, irritation, disapproval, or disappointment. Other features even more narrowly specify affect, such as the first person pronoun ka 'ika 'poor me' and the determiner sō 'the dear', both of which denote sympathy for the referent.

**Speech-act function.** In many cases, the affect specifier or intensifier may color the interpretation of the sentence as a whole, much like a sentence adverb. Among other effects, the feature may indicate to the hearer which speech act is being performed. For example, the particle e, as just discussed, typically denotes anger, disapproval, displeasure, or irritation. Adding this particle to an assertion or imperative utterance usually signals that the utterance is a threat or warning. For example, the imperative Fa'a kali! 'Wait!' constitutes a neutral directive out of context. When the particle e is added, as in Fa'a kali e 'Wait + neg. affect', the utterance is interpreted as a warning, with a gloss something like "You just wait!" Similarly, the declarative utterance Laku i 'oo 'I'm going over there' is a neutral assertion out of context. The utterance with the particle e, Laku i 'oo e 'I'm going over there + neg. affect', will usually be heard as a warning or a threat that the speaker is going to the specified location. We can also carry out this analysis...
for the first person sympathy pronouns. When the neutral first person is used in
the imperative utterance Mai ma a’ul ‘Give (it) for me!’, the utterance will
usually be heard as a demand. When the sympathy pronoun is used, as in Mai
ka ‘ika ‘Give (it) for dear me!’, the imperative will usually be heard as
begging.

I have introduced here only the bare bones of the system. As more of the
same types of affect specifiers appear, with or without affect intensifiers, the
interpretation of the speech act changes. For example, warnings become
threats and acts of begging become acts of pleading.

Speech-genre function. At this point, I suggest that affect features function
to signal not only speech acts but speech genres and speech events as well.
The use of these features over continuous discourse (indeed, their absence as
well!) defines that discourse as a type of talk. Certainly in Samoan the
extended use of respect vocabulary is a key (Bauman 1977; Duranti 1983;
Hymes 1972) to the fact that the speaker is delivering a formal speech rather
than engaged in some other type of activity. Similarly, the use of affect
features in narrative discourse distinguishes that discourse as personal nar-
native rather than as a narrative that might appear in a newspaper article.
These features are not incidental to the genre or event. The use of affect
in personal narrative, for example, is tied to the purpose of these discourses.
They are primarily told to express a feeling and, if possible, to secure an
empathetic response from the audience (Langness & Frank 1981). For Samoans
at least (and I suspect for most people in most societies), a telling of a
personal experience without affect is a story without a point and a speaker
without competence.

Constraints across turns and speakers. In examining personal narratives
exchanged among adult speakers of Samoan, I have found that the domain of
influence of affect features extends even beyond the discourse of a single
speaker. To put this more precisely, there is a sequential organization of
affect across turns and speakers. A narrator will use one or more affect
features that will indicate the attitude or feelings of the narrator toward the
events discussed. These features clue the addressee as to the appropriate
feedback response. Thus, in the course of a personal narrative, one can isolate
sets or pairs of affect-linked turns. The existence of such an organization
reinforces the notion that the point of telling stories is to express feelings and
elicit sympathy. The selection of the appropriate empathetic response will be
guided by the narrator’s initial selection of affect specifiers and intensifiers.
An illustration of the sequential organization of affect is provided in Ex. 8.

(8) Women weaving and talking about another woman’s mother
F: uhhmm [pause] sa’i le mea ga ka popole
right emph. ART thing that I-dear worry

In this example, one woman is telling two other women about a funeral. In the
narrative, several features associated with feelings of sympathy are used. The
narrator refers to herself with the first person sympathy pronoun ka in the
phrase le mea ga ka popole ai ‘the thing that poor me worried about’. The
narrator refers to the woman whose mother had died with the sympathy
reference term lo’omakua ‘dear old woman’. The intensity of this feeling is
heightened by the narrator switching phonological register on the word tagi
‘cries’. This word is spoken in the register that uses /l/ in contrast to the
previous discourse, which is in the register /kf/.

All of this conveys to the hearers what the narrator’s attitudes are and
suggests the appropriate response. The first response by L is a more intensive
repetition of the narrator’s description. L uses the sympathy determiner si as
well as the sympathy reference term lo’omakua in referring to the grieving
woman. The crying is emphasized not by code switching, which the narrator
had used, but by the use of the adverbial intensifier kele ‘a lot’. The narrator
subsequently paraphrases what L has just said, using the intensifier particle ia
to emphasize the crying of the woman. This particle typically occurs in
escalations or second sayings of utterances. After three utterances that focus
on the poor woman’s crying, L responds with the appropriate interjection of
pity and sympathy Kalofa e! In these lines and subsequently, the turns are
through phonological code switching, through a referential term of positive affect for self (ka ika ‘dear me’), or through a vocative of endearment (sole ‘mate/brother’, suga ‘lassie’, etc.).

I note here that the children predicate feelings associated with their own and others’ physiological conditions (hunger, thirst, tiredness, etc.) far more often than they predicate/assert affective feelings. These predications are formed by prefixing the verb fia ‘want/feel like’ to a verb denoting a physical action or activity, such as ‘ai ‘eat’ (fia ‘ai’ = ‘want to eat’ or ‘hungry’), ‘i nu ‘drink’ (fia ‘i nu = ‘want to drink’ or ‘thirsty’), and so on. The predication of these feelings begins at 25 months among the children in our study.

Speech-act context

Somewhat parallel to the results of the section “Presupposition and Predication,” children use the grammatical forms of affect first and more often in directives than in assertions. In the domain of sympathy/love, for example, first person sympathy pronouns first appear in the course of begging for objects. Whereas the affect pronoun is used in begging at 19 months (when our recording began), this pronoun is not used in assertions until 29 months.

Just as an adult uses these affect pronouns to obtain sympathy from the audience in the telling of a narrative, young children use them to obtain sympathy from someone who has some desired good. As discussed earlier, from a Samoan perspective sympathy/love is manifested when the audience-addressee offers the desired good (in the case of begging) or the desired verbal expression of support and appreciation (in the case of a narrative about “poor me”; see Ex. 8).

Referents and subjects

Despite the sociocentric orientation of socialization, Samoan children show a decided egocentrism in their use of affect terms, determiners, and adjectives. Looking at Table 12.2, we can see that young children acquire or at least produce terms referring sympathetically to ego (first person pronoun of affect) before terms referring sympathetically to others (third person reference terms such as koeiga ‘old man’) and before noun-phrase constructions that contain the sympathy determiner si ‘the dear’ (e.g., si kama ‘the dear boy’, si kei ge ‘the dear girl’). When children first use these third person forms, they use them to refer to themselves and much later apply them to other referents. For the domains of both anger and sympathy/love, reference to addressee, i.e., vocatives, precedes third person forms of reference. Finally, the egocentric bias is seen in subject referents of predicate adjectives. These predicates all refer to the speaker, i.e., the child, in our corpus of children under the age of 4.

Affect-marked versus neutral constructions

Perhaps the most interesting developmental pattern is that there is a strong tendency for affect constructions to be acquired before the corresponding neutral constructions. With the exception of the acquisition of determiners, whenever there are two alternative forms of carrying out a semantic function, the affect-marked form is acquired before the neutral form.

The best example of this is seen in the acquisition of first person full pronoun forms. As noted earlier, Samoan has an affect full pronoun ta ita (‘poor I’, ‘poor me’). In addition, it has a neutral full pronoun a’u (‘I’, ‘me’). Both terms can appear in a variety of syntactic roles. As possessive and genitive constituents, they may both be inflected for what may be roughly called inalienable and alienable possession. The two systems are presented in Table 12.3.

The first uses of the first person pronoun in the children’s speech are as benefactives (‘for me’), corresponding to indirect objects in adult speech, and as possessive adjectives. In both roles, the affect pronoun appears in children’s speech several months before the neutral pronoun appears. For example, for one child the affect pronoun appeared as a benefactive at 19 months, whereas the neutral first person benefactive appeared four months later at 22 months. For a second child, the possessive affect form appears at 21 months, whereas the neutral first person possessive forms appear at 24 months. Examples of the affect pronoun taken from a child at the single-word stage and a child at the multiword stage are presented below.

(9) K, 1;7, asking mother for food
K
[Crying] /'mai/ bring
[Calls name of mother]
'O le a topic ART what
"What is it?"

(10) P, 2;5, asking mother for water
P: mai ua vai deika [= ta ita or ka ika]
bring water poor me
"bring water for dear me!"
matter to what use you put words — whether to request, to assert, or to question — you need to get the hearer to recognize your disposition with respect to those elocutionary acts and their propositions. All languages have conventional means of encoding this information. We can turn to the historian, the drama critic, and the clinical psychologist to tell us this. But we can also turn to our transcripts and our recordings of infants, small children, and caregivers. These materials reveal the patterned and conventional ways in which affect pervades both form and meaning in language.

Notes

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1. I am grateful to Dotsy Kneubuhl for discussing the role of affect in the lives of Samoan children and for sending me this excerpt.

2. For a description of the field research methods used in collecting these data as well as an overview of Samoan social organization, see Platt paper in this volume.

References


