

Noun articles in Torres and Banks languages: Conservation and innovation

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1. Introduction

In his article “Common noun phrase marking in Proto Oceanic” (1985a), Terry Crowley described the various ways in which the common noun article **a/*na* evolved across the modern languages of Oceania. While some languages are conservative, others have lost all traces of the original NP marker, or have only retained it partially. Quite often, he showed, what was once a fully productive article became accreted to the noun root, progressively losing its syntactic status as an article.

The languages of Vanuatu are sometimes described as having essentially followed this evolution pattern of article loss, whether involving accretion to the noun root or not. Lynch (2001b) says: “Very few languages of North and Central Vanuatu have articles per se”, and Lynch, Ross and Crowley (2002: 38): “What was historically an article has in many of the languages of Vanuatu (...) been fused with the noun root, being morphologically inseparable in all, or at least most, morpho-syntactic contexts.”

While such statements are certainly true for other languages of Vanuatu, I will show in this paper that they hardly represent the two northernmost island groups of the archipelago, the Torres and Banks Islands (a province usually abbreviated as “Torba”). The seventeen languages spoken in this area (Figure 1), which were still little known until recently,¹ present diverse but essentially similar systems of noun articles. Overall, they show few examples of complete article loss, and only four genuine cases of article accretion. On the contrary, what I observed is that Torba languages still make regular use of noun articles in a way reminiscent of their POC ancestor, albeit in a different manner.

Remarkably, this was Terry Crowley’s own insight when he drew his map of article retention in Oceania (1985a: 162), despite terrible gaps in language documentation in those times. In a way, the present study can be seen as an occasion to confirm and refine his correct intuition, by making available the first-hand data he didn’t have access to twenty years ago. In addition, I will include here information on other articles, and describe certain patterns of innovation, whether

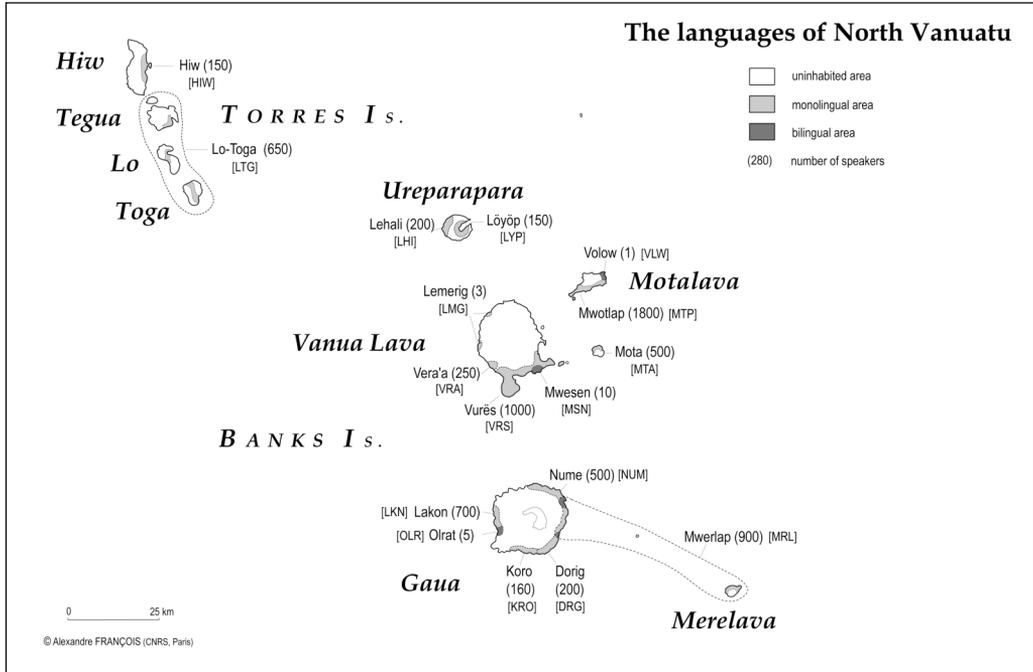


Figure 1. The languages of North Vanuatu

morphological or syntactic, that these Torba languages have gone through.

After describing the form of NP articles (section 2), I will analyse their distribution across noun categories (section 3), and finally discuss their syntactic functions (section 4).

2. The morphology of articles

The basic pattern attested in north Vanuatu, as in various other parts of Oceania, is for nouns—whether definite or not—to require a preposed article in order to form a valid NP (see section 4). Thus in Lo-Toga, common nouns must be preceded by the invariable article /nə/: e.g., *nə rəya* ‘a/the tree, Ø/the trees, Ø/some/the wood’.²

For reasons of length, I will choose to focus my study on major NP articles, that is, those shared by entire categories of nouns in each language, and made obligatory in most syntactic contexts.³ After an inventory of these articles (section 2.1), I will describe the diversity of their morphological statuses (section 2.2).

2.1 Inventory of articles across Torba languages

The choice of articles is governed by the semantics of the following noun, according to such criteria as *singular vs plural*; *common vs personal*; *directly possessed*

Table 1. Inventory of noun articles in the Torba languages

abbr.	language name	directly possessed common N	other common N	human personal singular N	human plural N
HIW	Hiw		nə	∅	təkɿ ^w a
LTG	Lo-Toga		nə	∅	hək ^w ərə
LHI	Lehali		n-	∅	k ^w ɔy
LYP	Löyöp		n-	∅	dɛ (?)
VLW	Volow		n(V)-	∅	iɣɛ
MTP	Mwotlap		nV-	∅ [i/]	iɣɛ
LMG	Lemerig		n-	ɪ	ɪrɣɛ
VRA	Vera'a		(i)n [n/]	ɛ	ɛ raɣa
VRS	Vurës	na	ɔ	i	i rɛɣɛ
MSN	Mwesen	ɔ		ɛ	ɛ ra
MTA	Mota	na	o	i	i ra(ɣai)
NUM	Nume	na-	u [w/]	∅	ra mɛl
DRG	Dorig	na	ɔ	i	i ra
KRO	Koro	na	ɔ	i	i rat
OLR	Olrät		∅ [n/]	∅	nɪy wu
LKN	Lakon		(i)n	i	ɣɪ: wɪ:
MRL	Mwerlap		nV-	i	rɛ

vs *non-directly possessed* nouns (see section 3). A comparative list of these articles is proposed in Table 1.⁴

As Table 1 shows, the number of articles in each language is variable. Olrat has basically no article at all, except for the plural marking on human nouns. Vurës, Mota, Dorig and Koro possess as many as four distinct articles. Other languages have either two or three.

The various forms listed here may be reduced to a small number of etyma (see Lynch, Ross and Crowley 2002: 71).

The POC article **a/*na* is reflected—always under its form **na*—in essentially all the languages of the area. Most often it is still a productive full-fledged article, whether a clitic or a prefix. In Olrat, it is only reflected as an accretion on certain nouns. Remarkably, Vera'a reflects it both as an accretion and as a free article (section 2.2.2). Only Mwesen has lost all traces of **na* (section 3.1).

Six languages make use of an article of the form *ɔ, o* or *u*. Available evidence suggests it should be reconstructed as **wo*.⁵ This article **wo* is obviously an innovation, both in formal and functional terms: see section 3.1.

The POC personal article **i/*e* is represented in as many as ten languages, reflecting either **i* or **e*. Out of these ten reflexes, nine are still productive, while one (Mwotlap) only exists as an accretion on certain nouns (section 2.2.2). Most languages have lost **i/*e* altogether: their personal NPs take zero article. Note that no language retains the other POC personal article **qa*.

Finally, the maximum formal diversity is found with human plurals. However, knowledge of the regular phonetic correspondences throughout the Torba

area (François 2005b) suggests all these attested forms—except HIW *təkɿʷa* and LYP *dɛ*—include a reflex of a syllable *ra, albeit in a hidden way (e.g., LKN *ɣɿ* < *ɣɿr < *kɿra). This obviously corresponds to POc *ra marking 3rd person (normally human) plural. In six languages (Volow, Mwotlap, Lemerig, Vera’a, Vurës, Mota), the form regularly reflects a phrase **i/e ra kai*, which can be analysed as Personal *i + plural *ra + POc *kai ‘native, person’ (Pawley 1976): e.g., VLW/MTP *iɣɛ* < *iɣɣɛ* < *iryɛ* < *i-rayai < *i ra kai.

2.2 Morphological status

2.2.1 From clitic to prefix

All the articles cited in Table 1 are immediately followed by the noun which is the head of the NP. Not surprisingly, the two morphemes together form a prosodic unit. The whole noun phrase follows a single intonational contour, whereby the article lacks its own primary stress, being prosodically integrated to the following noun: e.g., LTG *nə=ɣəʰuɰwə* ‘rat’. This status of noun articles as proclitics, which must probably be reconstructed also for POc (e.g., *na=kaʰsupe), is still well attested in Torba languages. For example, all the human articles—except obviously in their accreted versions—whether singular or plural, still behave as clitics; and so do the reflexes of *wo. But the situation is more complex regarding *na.

In six languages (Hiw, Lo-Toga, Vurës, Mota, Dorig, Koro), *na still shows all the properties of a clitic. In Vera’a and Lakon, this clitic has the basic form /n/, but undergoes inverse elision (aphaeresis) after a vowel-ending word: compare VRA *ɣen in mes* ~ LKN *ɣæn in məɕ* ‘eat a fish’ with VRA *lɛ n mes* ~ LKN *læ n məɕ* ‘take a fish’. Despite this rule of sandhi depending on the preceding word, the syntactic scope of this article /n/ is clearly the following noun: it can still be described as a proclitic.

In seven other languages (Lehali, Löyöp, Volow, Mwotlap, Lemerig, Nume, Mwerlap), the prosodic incorporation of the article eventually triggered also its phonological integration to the following noun, so that it must now be considered a prefix. There are three ways for the article to form a single phonological word with the following noun (see François 2000; 2005b):

1. VOWEL HARMONY [Volow, Mwotlap, Mwerlap]: the vowel of *na regularly undergoes partial or complete assimilation to the first vowel of the noun: e.g., *na kutu ‘louse’ > VLW/MTP *ni-yit*.
2. VOWEL ELISION [Lehali, Löyöp, Volow, Lemerig]: the vowel of *na is deleted, so that the article is reduced to the consonant *n-*. Whereas other languages only allow this elision before another vowel (e.g., *na ikan ‘fish’ > LTG *n’ iyə* ~ MRL *n-ɛay*), these four languages also allow it before a consonant (e.g., *na patu ‘stone’ > LMG *n-vɛʔ*).

3. PHONOTACTIC INTEGRATION [Mwotlap, Nume, Mwerlap]: *na is regularly followed by consonant clusters, which otherwise never occur word-initially in the language. Thus in Mwotlap, compare the form with article *na-ɣhɔw* ‘rat’ < *na kasupe with the bare noun *ɣhɔw* showing epenthesis.

If an article meets any of these criteria, then it is a prefix. Conversely, when the phonological form of the article and that of the noun are independent from each other (e.g., LTG *nə=ɣəhuwə* ‘rat’), one may still speak of a clitic.

Crucially, the change in morphological status—from clitic to prefix—doesn’t necessarily involve any change in syntactic behaviour. Thus, the prefix *nV-* in Mwotlap can still be analysed as a genuine article, just as much as its clitic ancestor *na. The lack of a clear distinction between the morphological and syntactic levels has led certain scholars to confusion. For example, Crowley (2002c: 591) had this erroneous analysis about Mwotlap: “There are no articles in Mwotlap. The original prenominal article /*na/ has been reanalysed as part of the citation form of the noun.”

Only syntactic properties should define the status of a morpheme as a productive article, such as:

1. its capacity to affect the whole noun lexicon, or at least entire, definable, categories of this lexicon (e.g., inanimate nouns), including new lexical items when they fall into these categories
2. the existence of productive rules governing the presence vs absence of this article, depending on the syntactic context.

Sections 3 and 4 of this chapter will demonstrate that these two requirements can be fulfilled by a prefix just as much as a clitic.

2.2.2 Article accretion

The historical phenomenon of “article accretion” brings about a different situation altogether. In this case, what was once a free article has been attracted not only to the following phonological *word*, but to the following *root* itself, to such an extent that it has lost its status as an article. While this process seems to have occurred quite often throughout Vanuatu (Crowley 1985a; Lynch 2001b) and in New Caledonia (Ozanne-Rivierre 1992), in the Torba area it is only attested in a few cases.

In Vera’a and Orlat, the article *na has been accreted to vowel-initial noun radicals. To take reflexes of POc *(na) quraŋ ‘lobster’, one must carefully distinguish between, on the one hand, such forms as MTP *n-ty* ~ MRL *n-ŭə̄r* where the article is still syntactically a free prefix; and, on the other hand, VRA *n/iri* ~ OLR *n/urriŋ*, where it has become an inseparable part of the noun radical.⁶ Examining such forms in the light of the two criteria stated above (end of section 2.2.1) makes it clear we are no longer dealing with articles. First, this

consonant /n/ does not affect productively any noun category that would be definable in synchrony, but is arbitrarily present in certain items of the lexicon. Second, there is essentially no syntactic context that allows for regular deletion of this /n/. These words now behave exactly the same as any **n*-initial noun. For example, and quite remarkably, Vera'a allows them to take the common article *m*, also a reflex of **na* —e.g., ***m n/iri*** 'a/the lobster'.

Similar cases of accretion occurred with other articles. In Nume, vowel-initial noun radicals also underwent article accretion, but this time with **wo*, under the form /w/: e.g., NUM ***wɛv*** 'fire' < POc **api*; ***wuw*** 'turtle' < PNCV **ʔavua*; ***wry*** 'fish' < POc **ikan*; ***wem*** 'mat bed' < POc **qebal*; ***wim*** 'earth oven' < POc **qumun*; ***wur*** 'lobster' < POc **quraŋ*; ***wak*** 'canoe' < POc **waga*. In this case too, the accreted /w/ may co-occur with the free article *u*, itself a reflex of **wo*: e.g., ***u wur*** 'a/the lobster'.

Finally, Mwotlap only reflects the personal article **i* as a fossil vowel at the beginning of about twenty human nouns, essentially kinterms and a few proper names (François 2001: 208-213): MTP ***ithi-k*** 'my brother' < POc **i taci-gu*; ***imam*** 'Dad' < **i mama*; ***Ikp^wet*** 'Iqet, name of a cultural hero' (MTA *i Kp^wat*)—see also ***iyɛ*** 'plural article' (section 2.1).

3. Noun categories and their articles

Section 2 has shown both the unity and diversity of articles across the Torba area, at least regarding their form. As for the distribution of articles across noun categories in each language, it also shows some variety, yet allows for a general description. I will first describe the contrast between **na* and **wo* in the languages that have both (section 3.1), and later will delineate the categories of common vs personal nouns (section 3.2).

3.1 *A specific article for inalienable possession*

Table 1 showed the existence of an article **wo* in six geographically adjacent languages. Not only is this form unknown outside this small "central Banks" area; but its functional distribution is also, to my knowledge, unusual both from an Oceanic and from a typological perspective. It clearly results from a local innovation, which either never took place in the neighbouring languages, or did and was later reversed.

In five of these languages (Vurës, Mota, Nume, Dorig, Koro), the article **na* has been restricted to only one category of nouns, namely, those [-human] nouns that are inalienably possessed, i.e., directly followed by a possessor (whether a suffix or an NP). The innovative article **wo* is used otherwise, that is, with [-human] nouns that are *not* directly possessed: contrast VRS ***na*** *ɣærvii-k* 'my house' vs ***ɔ*** *ɣøvür* 'a/the house'.

To be precise, a noun normally combines with *na* only if it has a specific human possessor. Thus compare for Dorig:

Dorig

- (1) a. *na ssa i vvi-k*
 ART.POSS name ART:PERS mother-1SG
 ‘my mother’s name’ (possessor [+spec] [+hum])
- b. *ɔ ssa rkp^wa*
 ART name woman
 ‘a woman’s name’ (possessor [-spec] [+hum])
- c. *ɔ ssa wasɲin neɲ*
 ART name place that
 ‘the name of that place’ (possessor [+spec] [-hum])

Likewise, when an inalienable noun is marked for a generic possessor, it must take the *wo article: e.g., MTA *na pane-ɲm^wa* ‘your hand’ vs *o pane-i* ‘one’s/a hand’.

Furthermore, each of these languages has between four and six possessive classifiers, which behave as a subclass of inalienable nouns. Since their function consists in indexing a possessor, they almost always occur with the article *na*: MTA *na ma-k* ‘my X (Drink possession)’; *na ɲm^wo-ɲm^wa* ‘your X (General possession)’. Remarkably, the noun X which is modified by this classifier, although it is semantically possessed, must bear the *wo article, because it does not receive itself the possessive morphology: it is *indirectly* possessed. In these five languages, this regularly results in quite paradoxical NP structures, where the noun combines with *wo while its classifier takes *na:

Mota

- (2) *o tkp^vei na ɲm^wo-ra*
 ART garden ART.POSS POSS.CLF.general-3PL
 ‘their garden’

Vurës

- (3) *na ka-ɲ ɔ ak*
 ART.POSS POSS.CLF.vehicle-2SG ART canoe
 ‘your canoe’

Obviously, the languages that only retain *na have no such asymmetry. Thus the equivalent of (2) in Volow would be *n-tigb^wɪ nɔ-yɔ-y*, with two instances of *na.

In summary, these five languages allow *na only with a suffixable word—whether a noun or a classifier—that is directly possessed, either followed by a personal suffix or a semantically [+human] [+specific] NP possessor. In all other cases, the article is *wo.

Finally, out of the six languages that reflect *wo, Mwesen is original in having lost all traces of *na, and generalised *wo to all contexts. Thus Mwesen has $\text{ɔ } \widehat{\text{ijm}}^w$ ‘a house’; $\text{ɔ } \widehat{\text{ijm}}^w\text{-k}$ ‘my house’; $\text{ɔ } \text{sa-n } \varepsilon \text{ ritnɔ-k}$ ‘my mother’s name’; $\text{ɔ } \text{pini-m}$ ‘your hand’; $\text{ɔ } \text{mɔɔ-nir } \text{ɔ } \widehat{\text{tukp}}^w\text{I}$ ‘their garden’.

3.2 *Personal vs common articles*

Another functional notion that proves relevant for the description of NP articles in Torba languages, as indeed elsewhere in Oceania (Pawley 1972: 32), is the contrast between *personal* and *common* NPs. Formally speaking (Table 1), personal NPs are either marked by *i/*e or by *zero*; they contrast with common NPs, which take *na or *wo.

On the semantic level, a “personal” NP normally has a *human specific* referent. This is typically the case with proper names, kinterms, pronouns or deictics with human reference. Thus one finds MSN $\varepsilon \text{ Tevit}$ ‘David’; KRO $\text{i } \text{mam}$ ‘Dad’; VRS $\text{i } \widehat{\text{kp}}^w\text{ælyæ-k}$ ‘my father-in-law’; MTA $\text{i } \text{nau}$ ‘I (1sg pronoun)’; VRA $\varepsilon \text{ si}$ ‘who?’; DRG $\text{i } \text{at } \text{nɛɲ}$ ‘the one there’. The plural articles given in Table 1 often include the personal article *i/*e, because they are only used with human referents: MSN $\varepsilon \text{ tɛɛ-n}$ ‘his brother’ → $\varepsilon \text{ ra } \text{tɛtɛɛ-n}$ ‘his brothers’. Non-human nouns never take a personal article, except in stories where animals or objects are personified: MSN $\varepsilon \text{ yusuw } \text{min } \varepsilon \text{ yutu}$ ‘Rat and Hermit-Crab’.

To be precise, the contrast personal vs common somehow constitutes a semantic continuum, of which only the two ends are clearly defined. On the one hand, proper names, or kinterms with individual reference, must be treated as personal; on the other hand, non-human NPs must be treated as common. The situation is less clearcut in the intermediate zone—that is, non-kin human noun phrases. As a tendency, a given noun will be treated as personal if it points to a definite individual in the given context—e.g., MRL $\text{i } \text{vatɔy}$ ‘the teacher’, DRG $\text{i } \text{maytɛ}$ ‘the (aforementioned) old lady’, MSN $\varepsilon \text{ maranay}$ ‘the chief’, VRS $\text{i } \text{birɲi-k}$ ‘my partner’—but as common if it points to a generic or indefinite referent, or to the notional quality of the noun (e.g., predicate ‘be a N’):

Dorig

- (4) $\text{na } \text{m-tek } \text{ɔ } \text{maytɛ } \text{s-rɔ}$.
 1SG PRF-see ART old.woman NUM-two
 ‘I saw two old ladies.’

Mwesen

- (5) $\varepsilon \quad \text{si } \text{ɔ } \text{maranay } \text{ɛlilɛ?}$
 ART:PERS who ART chief here
 – $\varepsilon \quad \text{maranay } \varepsilon \quad \text{nɔ}$.
 ART:PERS chief ART:PERS 1SG
 ‘Who’s (the) chief here? – The chief, that’s me.’

No clearcut principle can really be asserted here. First, discrepancies are common, whereby the same noun can equally be treated as personal or common—including in the same sentence (e.g., MRL *i* *bulsala-n* ~ *nu-bulsala-n* ‘her boyfriend’).

Second, certain human nouns appear to be just incompatible with the personal article, whatever their actual reference. This is especially the case of the four common nouns ‘person’, ‘man’, ‘woman’, ‘[non-relational] child’, perhaps because these lexical items are statistically most often used with non-referential or qualitative value—whether as a generic NP, a predicate or an attribute. These nouns are systematically treated as common in all Torba languages, including when they clearly designate a specific individual:

Dorig

- (6) *i* *ntu-ŋ* *neŋ sa,* *ɔ* *ŋm^werat sa...*
 ART:PERS son-2SG that there ART man there
 ‘that son of you there, the boy there...’

In other languages, this structural asymmetry takes the form of a contrast \emptyset (personal) vs *na (common):

Volow

- (7) (\emptyset) *niti* *na,* *gb^wε* *n-taŋm^wan na...*
 (ART:PERS) son:2SG there that.is ART-male there
 ‘that son of you there, the boy there...’

Although these four exceptional nouns always take a common article in the singular, they become compatible again with personal marking in the plural: e.g., VRS *ɔ* *ŋm^wirŋm^wiar* ‘a child’ → *i reye* *ŋm^wirŋm^wiar* ‘children’. Finally, a similar paradox can be illustrated with the phrases meaning ‘my wife’. When a language possesses a dedicated kinterm, then it is encoded as Personal: VRS *i* *yünø-k*; MTA *i* *rasoa-k*; MRL *i* *rənətu-k*. Otherwise, a periphrasis will be used with the noun ‘woman’—in which case common articles are required: KRO *na mu-k* *ɔ* *raḵp^wa*; HIW *nə* *yək^wen əkiə* (lit. ‘my woman’).

In sum, personal articles (*i/*e or zero) are restricted to highly individuated human referents. Common articles (*na or *wo) are required in all other cases: that is, for non-human, non-specific, poorly individuated referents; and by extension, with certain nouns that are statistically seldom referential—even when they actually are.

3.3 Synthesis

This section has delimited the various noun categories that are relevant to explain the distribution of major articles (*na, *wo, *i/*e, zero) in Torba

languages. One particular semantic class deserves attention here, namely that of *human specific, highly individuated referents*, as opposed to all the rest (François 2005a). Not only does this feature account for the contrast between personal and common articles; but it also helps define the type of possessor that requires *na vs *wo in those languages that possess two common-noun articles. The architecture of the article system in Torba languages—or better, of those systems with the maximum number of distinctions—is summarised in Figure 2.

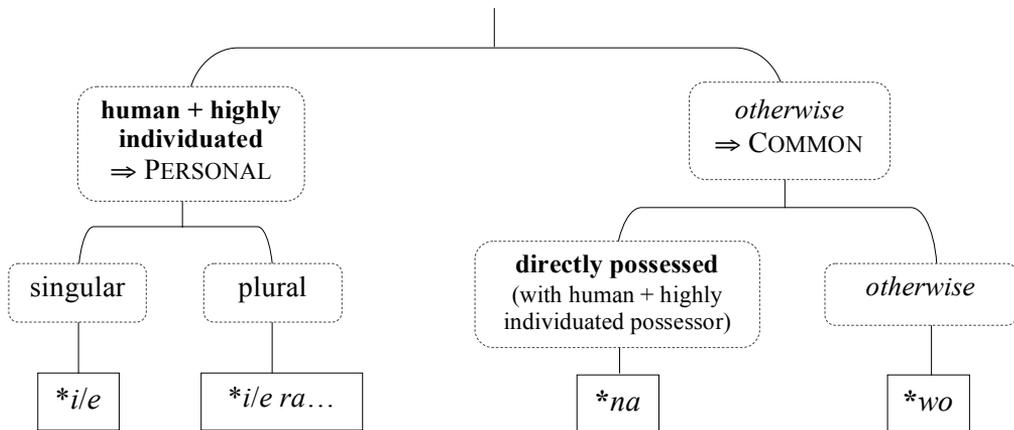


Figure 2. The maximal architecture of Torba article systems

4. The syntax of noun articles

The preceding sections have examined the form and nature of noun articles attested in the Torba area, as well as the semantic properties of nouns that are canonically associated with them. Each NP was cited with its article, as though it just had to be there. In reality, the status of these morphemes as true articles entails the possibility of observing which contexts require their presence vs their absence (see section 2.2.1). This issue should help work out the syntactic *raison d'être* of these articles.

4.1 *Syntax of the personal article*

Even if a noun fulfills all the semantic requirements to be compatible with a personal (rather than a common) article, this doesn't mean this article will always be there.

First, most languages seem to treat the *i/*e article as more or less optional, even in those contexts where its presence would be expected. For example, in

Dorig, ‘their grandfather’ in subject position is normally *i tbi:ar:*, but my oral corpus shows several instances of just *tbi:ar:* without the article.

Furthermore, while most syntactic functions require—or at least are compatible with—the personal article (subject, direct object, object of a preposition, possessor, predicate), at least one excludes it: the vocative. Following the framework developed by Lemaréchal (1989: 37) based on Tagalog data, one could analyse these patterns in terms of change in syntactic status (François 2001: 209):

1. Considered in its bare form, the status “personal phrase” is compatible with just one function—**address**: KRO *tsi-k!* ‘brother!’, MSN *mam!* ‘Dad!’, MTA *Teri!* ‘Terry!’.⁷
2. The personal article **i/*e* then has the power to “transfer” (Fr. “translater”) this phrase towards a new status, that of a **referential** phrase: KRO *i tsi-k* ‘my brother’, MSN *ε mam* ‘Dad’, MTA *i Teri* ‘Terry’. This status allows it to play all the syntactic functions that are open to referential phrases (subject, object, possessor, etc.).

4.2 *Syntax of the common articles*

Establishing a similar rule for the common articles (**na/*wo*) is slightly more difficult, due to the diversity observed from one language to another. Especially, languages appear to vary again as to how optional the presence of the article is in those contexts where it is allowed. For example, LYP *n-*, NUM *u*, VRA/LKN (*i*)*n*, MRL *nV-* are dropped at will in spontaneous speech, even when they could be present. In contrast, the rules regarding HIW/LTG *nə*, MTP *nV-*, MSN/VRS/DRG *ɔ...* are much more constraining: basically, if the article is allowed by the context, then it must be there. Obviously, the latter languages are a more reliable source of observation regarding rules for the presence/absence of the common article.

4.2.1 *When is the article excluded?*

For the sake of consistency, I will cite here data from one language, Mwotlap (François 2001: 187-214), taking it as essentially representative of the whole area. Incidentally, this choice constitutes a belated response to Crowley’s regret (1985a: 161), that “there is no evidence concerning the separability of this prefix [*nV-*] in Motlav [Mwotlap]”.

I will choose the word *ni-bi* ‘fresh water, river’ as illustrative. Although corpus-based statistics (François 2001: 204) show that 73% of this word’s occurrences—as well as its citation form—include *nV-*, many syntactic contexts actually require the noun in its bare form.

X modifies another noun

- (8) a. X indicates the contents or the substance of N₁:
na-plastik bɪ ‘bottle of water’; *na-kp^wlis bɪ* ‘water puddle’
 b. X is a distinctive property of N₁:
na-mya bɪ ‘river eel’; *na-pnu bɪ* ‘river island’
 c. X is the “possessor” of an alienable noun N₁:
na-mne bɪ ‘the taste of the water’; *nu-tuti bɪ* ‘the river’s source’
 d. X is a “possessed” noun following its classifier:
ne-me-k bɪ ‘my water (to drink)’; *minɔ bɪ* ‘my water (for non-drink uses)’
 e. X complements a dependent noun N₁:
na-matheɣ bɪ ‘thirst’ (literally, craving for water)

X modifies a dependent morpheme

- (9) a. X complements a prenominal element:
babahne bɪ ‘the last river’; *na-han bɪ* ‘which river?’;
ni-tiy bɪ ‘genuine water’
 b. X complements a preposition (free or prefixed):
lelɔ bɪ ‘inside the water’; *taval bɪ* ‘across the river’;
(sisɣɔ) li-bɪ ‘(fall) in the water’; *(vɣɣil) bi-bɪ* ‘(argue) about water’
 c. X complements the linker /nɛ/ ‘of’:
na-mtehal nɛ bɪ ‘the course of the river’
 d. X complements the partitive /tɛ/ ‘some’:
nɔk sɔ in tɛ bɪ ‘I want to drink some water’

X modifies a verb or a predicate

- (10) a. X is a non-referential incorporated object within a verb:
inin bɪ ‘drink water’; *haha bɪ* ‘draw water (from a well)’
 b. X is a non-referential incorporated object in a noun compound:
tɣtɣ-bɪ ‘healer’ [lit. ‘water-holder’];
ne-mɛn inin-bɪ ‘dragonfly’ [lit. ‘water-drinking insect’]
 c. X is the (non-patient) internal complement of a verb:
vihi bɪ ‘be changed into water’
 d. X is the internal complement of an existential predicate:
tateh bɪ ‘there’s no water’; *takp^wse bɪ* ‘there are many rivers’

Others

- (11) X is a TAM-marked predicate noun:
n-ais mal bɪ lɔk ‘the ice has [become] water again’

4.2.2 *Function of the common noun article*

The syntactic contexts listed above share certain essential properties. Typically, the noun appears unprefixes when it constitutes a phrase-internal modifier,

pointing semantically towards a generic notion ('water') or a quality ('watery') rather than designating a referential entity.

In contrast, the article is required whenever the noun is syntactically the head of an autonomous constituent, whether a verb's argument, a noun predicate, etc. Semantically, the function of this article consists in embodying the noun's quality into a discrete, specific referent: *ni-bi* 'some/the water: a specific quantity of water, a river...'

Following the analysis I proposed for the personal article (section 4.1), common-noun articles may be described as a device used to transform **qualifying** noun phrases (MTP *bi*) into **referential** noun phrases (MTP *ni-bi*). Interestingly, this means that personal and common articles operate upon different input entities (respectively vocative NP vs qualifying NP), but make them converge into the same output (referential NP).

5. Conclusion

Overall, Torba languages essentially agree in having kept noun articles alive and productive, as a syntactic device to form referential noun phrases. In each language, selecting the proper article ultimately depends on the syntactic, semantic and pragmatic properties of the NP in its specific context.

The various structures described in this paper may be of some interest to two communities of linguists. Oceanists in quest of historical evidence will notice the retention of several inherited features that have been lost elsewhere in Vanuatu. On the other hand, these formal structures delineate certain cognitive categories that may be of interest to typological linguists, whether they sound universally familiar (e.g., human specific referents) or more unusual (inalienable nouns possessed by a human specific referent). Building bridges between Oceanists and typologists was precisely one of Terry Crowley's major achievements, and a perspective we shall hopefully continue to bear in mind.

Notes

1. The data cited in the present paper were collected by the author during four field surveys: May–July 1998 for Mwotlap, Vurës and Mwesen; July–September 2003 for Volow, Vera'a, Nume, Dorig, Koro, Oirat, Lakon and Mwerlap; July–August 2004 for Mota, Lehali and Lotoga; January 2006 for Lemerig, Löyöp and Hiw. Note that I use here the term "languages" in the broad sense of "speech varieties", regardless of whether some can be grouped together as dialects of a single language.

2. Throughout this article, forms are transcribed phonemically rather than using standard orthographies, to enable comparison. Note that /v/ = [β], and that all voiced stops are prenasalised: /b/ = [mb], etc.

3. I will therefore leave unmentioned here certain (quasi) articles with a more limited scope. For example, (1) certain proper names and kinterms reflect a vestigial feminine "article" *ra/ro;

(2) Mwotlap has a partitive *tɛ* < *tewa ‘one’; (3) four Gaua languages possess an indefinite article, grammaticalised from *tuara ‘other’; (4) Torres languages have a set of human markers, used both as pronouns and as articles; etc.

4. Hyphenated forms indicate prefixes, otherwise the article is a clitic. Forms in square brackets and followed by ‘/’ correspond to reflexes that are only vestigial, taking the form of a phoneme that is now incorporated into certain noun roots (see section 2.2.2).

5. The reasons for reconstructing an initial consonant *w include: (a) the accretion of /w-/ to certain roots in Nume (section 2.2.2); (b) the existence in Mwotlap of an article-like prefix forming honorific nouns or nicknames, with the form *wɔ-* (François 2001: 242); (c) the form of the noun article *wɛ* ~ *wu* in the Banks “song dialect” (Codrington 1885: 309), an archaic poetic language common to the whole area.

6. Other examples include: VRA *nɛv* ‘fire’ < POc *api; VRA *nɛr* ‘Casuarina’ < POc *aRu; VRA *nuwɔ* ~ OLR *nɔw* ‘turtle’ < PNCV *ʔavua; VRA *niŋmwi* ‘house’ < POc *Rumaq; VRA *nɔn* ‘sand’ < POc *qone; VRA *nur* ‘Spondias cytherea’ < POc *quRis; OLR *num* ‘earth oven’ < POc *qumun; VRA *naka* ~ OLR *nak* ‘canoe’ < POc *waga.

7. These bare noun radicals precisely confirm that KRO *i* and MSN *ɛ* are still synchronically productive articles. In contrast, the fossilised *i of Mwotlap (section 2.2.2) cannot disappear: e.g., *ithi-k!* ‘brother!’; *imam!* ‘Dad!’; *Ikp^wet* ‘Iqet’.