

**The Department of Linguistics
is pleased to present**

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speaking on

Competing argument privileges in Niuean

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1:20 PM (PST) via Zoom

Zoom Information: Will be emailed on Thursday, December 10, 2020

Abstract:

Grammatical “subjects” have long been shown to have a privileged linguistic status, as compared with other arguments, in the processing of long-distance dependencies (e.g., Holmes & O’Regan, 1981), in the resolution of ambiguous anaphoric pronouns (Gordon et al., 1993; Grosz et al., 1995, a.o.) and in formal syntactic operations (cf. Keenan & Comrie, 1977). In this talk, I unpack “subjecthood” into two components: semantic agentivity (connected with structural superiority in the thematic domain of the syntax) and case unmarkedness (defined as the case with the widest syntactic distribution), and show how these two factors can independently influence the outcome of syntactic and pragmatic operations. This focus is on two experimental studies of the ergative-absolutive Polynesian language Niuean. The goal of these studies is to investigate operations in which the “subject” of a sentence has previously been shown to be privileged, based upon findings from nominative-accusative languages in which agentivity and unmarkedness align: first, the “subject advantage” in the processing of long-distance dependencies and second, the preference for subject antecedents in the interpretation of anaphoric pronouns. Niuean reveals that, in the formation of long-distance dependencies – where the task is to link a filler with a gap site and form the relevant dependency – syntactic information about argument distribution (i.e., unmarkedness) is most crucial because it maximizes chances of correctly locating the gap site. Meanwhile, in the resolution of ambiguous anaphoric pronouns, agentivity plays a more prominent role: the more agentive argument of a preceding clause is preferred as the referent of a pronoun as compared with a less agentive one. These studies demonstrate the underlying factors which often cluster together to derive the grammatical function of “subject”.