Two centuries of describing Tahitian: From Latin-based to emic categories*

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Tahitian was the first Oceanic language endowed with a writing system, developed by missionaries in the early 1800s. Since then, it has been the object of an abundant descriptive effort, with almost twenty grammars published in the last two centuries. The first missionary descriptions borrowed most of their grammatical categories – such as the 'nine parts of speech' – from familiar European languages, and projected them onto Tahitian. Until the 1960s, some grammars would also display tables of nominal and verbal "inflections" calqued on Latin – even though Tahitian is typologically isolating. It was not until the 1970s that, inspired by the linguistic descriptions of New Zealand Māori, grammarians attempted to analyse Tahitian categories from a language-internal, 'emic' perspective. Our chapter proposes an epistemological analysis of Tahitian's history of "grammatisation", here understood as the process of being endowed with a descriptive grammatical apparatus. As observers progressively drifted away from the inherited European model, they adjusted their tools to describe peculiarities of Polynesian languages – including word-class flexibility, omnipredicativity, omniaspectuality, and the prominence of aspect over absolute tense.

1 Introduction

Among the 500 languages of the Oceanic family, Tahitian was the first to have a standardised writing system, developed by missionaries of the London Missionary Society (LMS) in the early 19th century. After they settled in Tahiti in 1797, they aimed to use Tahitian as a language of Christianisation, by translating the scriptures. In order to achieve an accurate translation, the missionary team formed around John Davies needed to master not only the language's vocabulary, but also its grammar.

Published in 1838, the Tahitian version of the Bible has remained, to this day, a major reference for what "classical Tahitian" was like. Without being a

* This work forms part of the project *Héritages linguistiques, Cultures orales, Éducation en Océanie* (HéliCéO), funded by CNRS and the ANR (ANR-24-RRII-0001).

grammatical description per se, it has been a frequent source for citing language facts in several grammatical descriptions up to this day.

During the preparation of that early Bible translation, in 1823, the team of missionaries published a major dictionary – commonly known as "John Davies' dictionary" – including a grammatical sketch of Tahitian. This publication, along with some letters exchanged between the missionaries and their hierarchy based in London, constitutes a valuable record of the translators' metalinguistic activity.

Since this foundational step, Tahitian has been described several times, with up to twenty grammars published. Admittedly, not all of these works are true grammars: some are more akin to conversation guides, with limited descriptive ambition; moreover, many publications until the mid-20th century were simply inspired by those of the missionaries, and did not really bring new knowledge or new descriptive concepts. Yet compared to the rest of the Pacific, Tahitian is a language where "grammatisation" – the historical process of providing a language with a grammatical descriptive apparatus (Auroux 1994) – was both early and abundant. More modern grammars, gradually building on concepts from general linguistics, were published from the 1970s onward. These also benefited from a general surge in Polynesian studies, particularly those focused on the Māori of Aotearoa–New Zealand (Biggs 1961, 1969).

The present study will begin with a presentation of the Tahitian language (section 2) – including a grammar sketch that will focus on its most prominent typological features. Our main discussion (section 3) will observe how the description of certain grammatical domains evolved over the last two centuries, as linguists progressively moved away from the Latin model, and acknowledged the linguistic specificities of Tahitian.

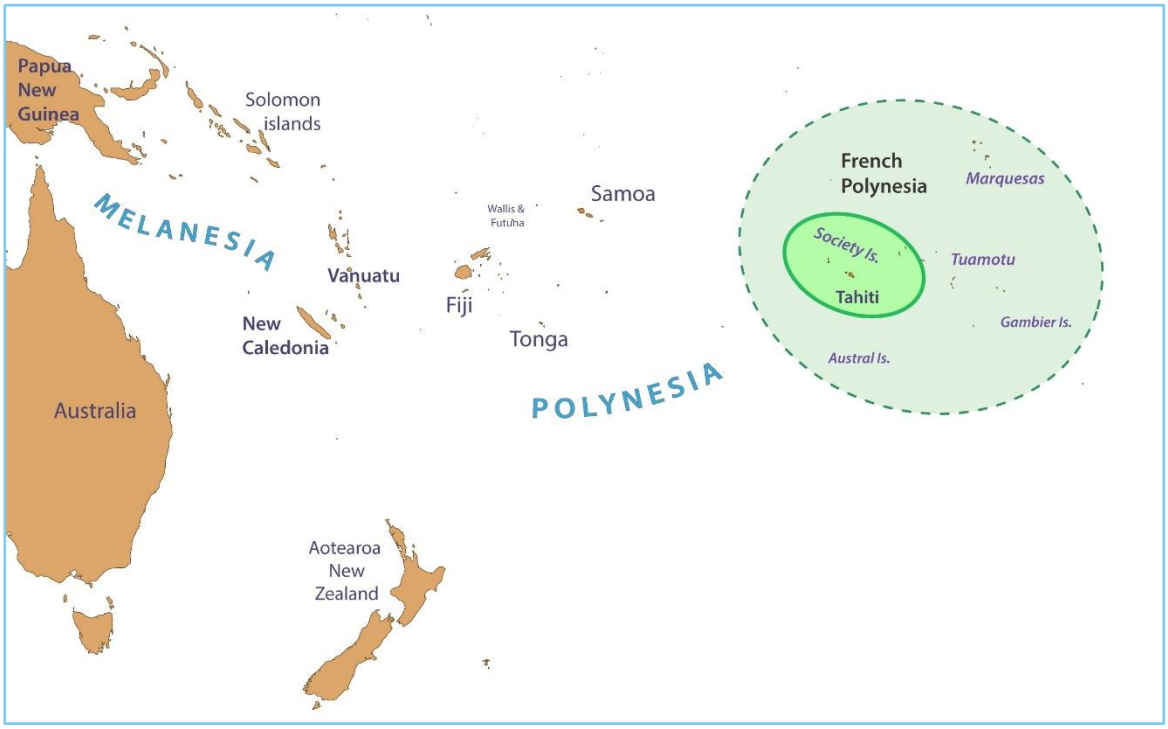
2 The Tahitian language

2.1 Geography and vitality

Tahitian is spoken in French Polynesia, in eastern Pacific (Map 1). Its endonyms are *reo tahiti* or *reo māʼohi* (liter. 'indigenous language'). With about 46,000 speakers today – 23% of the total population – it is the strongest among the seven languages of the territory (Charpentier & François 2015); yet its intergenerational transmission shows signs of erosion (Salaün, et al. 2016).

The original area of Tahitian is the archipelago of the Society Islands; Tahiti is the name of the largest and most populated island in that group, and also the one where the territory's capital, Papeete, is located. Like the other indigenous languages of French Polynesia, Tahitian belongs to the Polynesian branch of the Oceanic family, within the broader Austronesian phylum. Despite the geographi-

cal distance to Aotearoa–New Zealand, Tahitian is also linguistically close to NZ Māori: as we will see, this similarity has had an impact on the way the two languages have been described over time.



Map 1: The area of Tahitian in the Pacific.
The smaller circle locates its original area, the Society Islands;
the dotted line shows its maximal area of influence.

Since the 19th century, historical contingencies have led Tahitian to gradually dominate the linguistic landscape of surrounding archipelagos – as shown by the dotted line in *Map 1*. After they settled on Tahiti in 1797, the missionaries of the London Missionary Society chose this language in their efforts to build literacy and to Christianise the population – starting in the Society Islands, the Australs, and in western Tuamotu. The French colonial powers would later also communicate in Tahitian. Interpreters, recruited from among the missionaries and the "demi" (mixed-blood), helped administrate the French Protectorate during the Kingdom of Pōmare (1842–1880), and later in the *Établissements français de l'Océanie* (EFO, 1880–1957) – finally renamed "French Polynesia" in 1957. Along the 20th century, several factors contributed to the expansion of Tahitian as a lingua franca throughout the entire territory (Charpentier & François 2015; Vernaudon 2025).

2.2 Typological overview

Tahitian has 9 consonants /p t ʔ m n f h v r/ and 5 vowel qualities /i e a o u/, which can be short or long. Its syllabic structure is (C)V: all syllables are open, and consonant clusters are forbidden.

It is an isolating language without grammatical morphology, the only exception being sporadic cases of partial reduplication to indicate number. The canonical phrase order is {*Predicate – Subject – Object – (Adjuncts)*} as in (1):

(1) ⟨*Tē* *inu* *ra*⟩ *mātou* *i* *te* *taofe.*
PRG drink DX3 1EX.PL OBL ART coffee
'We are drinking coffee.'

The predicate phrase – which we will indicate using pointy brackets ⟨…⟩ throughout this study – is the only obligatory constituent of the clause. Besides the lexical head – *inu* 'drink' in (1) – it usually includes particles – e.g. the discontinuous TAM marker *tē… ra* in (1), which encodes the progressive aspect (§4.4.2).

The predicate head does not need to be a verb like in (1). For instance, in (2) it is a noun in an ascriptive predicate:

(2) ⟨*E* ***'apu***⟩ *te* *ra'i.*
ASC shell ART sky
'The sky is a shell.' (ANT: 340)

In (3), the predicate is a locative phrase:

(3) ⟨*Tei* ***uta***⟩ *te* *fare.*
PREP inland ART house
'The house is inland.'

Tahitian exhibits a high degree of lexical flexibility. This is best captured by distinguishing two types of flexibility, as proposed by François (2017). On the one hand, many lexemes are *multicategorial*, i.e. they can be assigned to several word classes. For example, the word *taofe* can be a common noun 'coffee' as in (1), but also a verb 'to have coffee' as in (4):

(4) ⟨*Tē* ***taofe*** *ra*⟩ *mātou.*
PRG have.coffee DX3 1EX:PL
'We are having our coffee.' (lit. 'We are coffeeing.')

On the other hand, the word classes themselves (noun, verb, etc.) are *multi-functional*: i.e. they can access several syntactic functions. In particular, verbs,

nouns, and adjectives in Tahitian are compatible, without prior derivation, with both predicate and argument functions. Thus in (5), the noun *fenua* 'land' appears as the head both of the predicate phrase and of its argument. In our understanding, it is a noun in both positions:

(5) ⟨*'Ua* ***fenua*** *a'e ra*⟩ *te* ***fenua***.
PRF land DIR DX3 ART Land
'The territory was restored.' (lit. 'The land was land again.') (ANT: 338)

As for the verb *inu* 'drink', which headed the predicate in (1), it appears in argument function in (6), without ceasing to be a verb.

(6) ⟨*E mea varavara*⟩ *'ōna i te* ***inu*** *i te taofe.*
ASC thing rare 3SG OBL ART drink OBL ART coffee
'He rarely drinks coffee.' (lit. 'He is rare at [the] drinking coffee.')

The ability for nouns to head a predicate, as in (2) or (5), has a corollary: Tahitian does not have a verb *be*.

When the predicate encodes an event, it generally inflects for aspect or mood – e.g. *'ua* 'perfect', *'ia* 'optative', *tē* 'progressive':

(7) ⟨***'Ua*** *reva*⟩ *te pahī i teienei.*
PRF leave ART ship OBL Now
'The ship has left now.'

(8) ⟨***'Ia*** *reva*⟩ *Te pahī.*
OPT leave ART ship
'Let the ship leave.'

The marker *tē*, which we saw in (1), is systematically accompanied by a deictic particle: *nei*, *na* or *ra*, corresponding respectively to three deixis circles ('DX1' ≈ proximal, 'DX2' ≈ medial, 'DX3' ≈ distal). That combination (see also §3.4.2) can be analysed as a discontinuous (bipartite) marker of progressive {*tē*… DX}:

(9) ⟨***Tē*** *reva* ***ra***⟩ *te pahī i teienei.*
PRG leave DX3 ART ship OBL now
'The ship is leaving now.'

For the ensuing discussion on the evolution of grammatical ideas about Tahitian (section 3), it is important to understand that these aspect-and-mood markers do not encode tense. Thus, the progressive marker *tē*… *ra* indicates that the event is unfolding at a specific moment in time; but that moment – somehow indexed by the deictic *ra* – may be current, or past, or future. The exact temporal

location of that moment can be specified by an adjunct, or simply has to be inferred from the context.

(10) *I teienei, ⟨**tē** taofe **ra**⟩ ïa mātou.*
OBL now PRG drink.coffee DX3 ANA 1EX:PL
'Now, we are (busy) drinking our coffee.'

(11) *I tōna taera'a mai, ⟨**tē** taofe **ra**⟩ ïa mātou.*
OBL his arrival hither PRG drink.coffee DX3 ANA 1EX:PL
'When he arrived, we were (busy) drinking our coffee.'

(12) *'Ia tae mai 'ōna ananahi, ⟨**tē** taofe **ra**⟩ ïa mātou.*
OPT arrive hither 3SG tomorrow PRG drink.coffee DX3 ANA 1EX:PL
'When he arrives tomorrow, we will be (busy) drinking our coffee.'

Finally, example (5) illustrated another essential typological property of Tahitian: it is an "omniaspectual" language. That is, nouns or adjectives in predicate function can inflect for aspect and mood, with no need to be turned into verbs (see section 3.2.3).

2.3 A rich grammatical tradition, initially influenced by Latin

Tahitian has a rich tradition of grammatical and lexicographical description spanning over two centuries. It also has a written corpus of significant size, with diverse productions, both ancient and contemporary, religious and secular.

Since the first studies by missionaries in the early 1800s up to the present day, almost twenty grammatical descriptions have been published. To these grammars, one can add some unpublished theses, as well as more recent scholarly articles.

As we will see in more detail below, grammatical descriptions until the 1970s largely relied on the descriptive categories of inflected European languages. This ethnocentrism of grammatical categories was not well adapted to the study of Tahitian, but it was pervasive in the first descriptions of many languages. In principle, the discovery of new languages after the 16th century could have led to an increased awareness of the world's grammatical diversity; yet this awareness was hindered by the persistent tendency to base grammatical descriptions on categories originally conceived for languages then considered more prestigious, such as Greek or Latin (Auroux 1994). In 1632, for example, Diego Collado (ca. 1587–1638) attempted to describe Japanese using the linguistic categories of Latin. The same is true for the grammar of Chamorro (Guam), completed in 1668 by the Spanish cleric Diego Luis de Sanvitores (1627–1672) – in fact the first

grammar of an Austronesian language spoken in Oceania (Sanvitores 1668). The 1795 grammar of English by Lindley Murray was no exception. The constant reference to the Latin paradigm lasted, in some cases, until the early 20th century. Yet the emergence of linguistics as an autonomous discipline in the mid-19th century, rooted in the innovative works of Alexander von Humboldt and the Grimm Brothers, progressively brought about the structuralist idea that languages should be described in their own terms, based on their own language-internal – or 'emic' – categories (François & Ponsonnet 2013).[1]

This new approach was slow, however, to penetrate the reflection on Tahitian. The tables were finally turned with the work of Yves Lemaître (1973), soon followed by the grammar of Hubert Coppenrath & Paul Prévost (1975). Both publications broke away from Eurocentric grammatical categories – notably in the domain of word classes, and the expression of time – and did so consciously:

> The grammar of Polynesian languages differs significantly from that of Indo-European languages in the domain we are about to address. If one describes the grammar using terminology familiar from European languages (as all previous grammarians of Tahitian have done), one risks misleading the student and making it impossible for them to gain a deep understanding of the language. (Coppenrath & Prévost 1975: 171)

Coppenrath & Prévost (1975) identified classes of grammatical morphemes and syntactic structures specific to Tahitian; they also generalised the concept of aspect to describe the verbal system. Their analyses were to be largely taken up in the grammar of the Académie Tahitienne (1986).

More recently, Lazard & Peltzer (2000: 7) present their grammar as "the first scientific description of the main articulations of the structure of the Tahitian language", in accordance with "the requirements of modern linguistics".

3 The evolution of ideas about Tahitian

The grammatical description of Tahitian thus extends over two centuries, and yielded about twenty monographs. A complete, chronological description of these works would take us beyond the limits of this study. Instead, we propose to retrace the evolution of linguistic ideas about this language, by focusing on four questions essential to its grammar:

- How is its phonological system organised?
- How are words distributed into word classes?
- What are the types of predicates?
- How does Tahitian express time and aspect?

3.1 Understanding phonology

The earliest metalinguistic studies for which we have records are those of the LMS, present in Tahiti since 1797. Four years later, the arrival of John Davies (1772–1855) gave the impetus for a dual effort: while the missionaries' first objective was to spread the Christian faith, they also made considerable progress in building literacy among the local population. In 1823, Commander Duperrey thus reported to the French Minister of the Navy and Colonies: "All the natives of Tahiti can read and write" (Nicole 1988: 1).

In order to use Tahitian as a language of Christianisation and literacy building, a necessary step was the standardisation of its orthography. This was also a prerequisite for any future efforts of lexicography and grammaticography. Like other Pacific languages (with the possible exception of Rapa Nui), Tahitian had always been a language of oral tradition, and had never had any writing system. In 1805, the missionaries held a meeting to discuss the best way to provide Tahitian with a stable orthography:

> Messrs Jefferson and Davies having had several conversations about forming a Tahitian Alphabet, there being a great confusion in the manner of spelling then used by the brethren, and an absolute necessity of fixing some uniform mode in order to teach the natives, a meeting was held March 8th [1805] for the purpose of considering this subject, and it was agreed on all hands that the letters of the Common Roman Alphabet should be used, so many of them as were found necessary to express the different sounds in the language, and no more. (Newbury 1961: 77)

John Davies prompted the publication of a first literacy primer, published by the LMS in 1810 under the title *Te Aebi no Taheiti*. Historian Jacques Nicole highlights the importance of that publication:

> In spite of its low volume (about 700 copies) and its small format (47 pages), this booklet was a considerable event for the modern history, not just of Tahiti, but of the entire Pacific – as this was perhaps the first publication ever printed in any Oceanic language. (Nicole 1988: 103)

The alphabet system of Tahitian would later inspire the transcription of all other Polynesian languages (Schütz 1994: 134 *ff*.).

Coming up with a stable orthography was more than just a practical matter: it also meant that missionaries had to understand the phonological system of the language. This was many decades before the advent of phonology as a discipline – before the formulation of such structuralist notions as the *phoneme*, or *contrastive* (or *emic*) features. And yet, some of the early observations made about Tahitian show how John Davies and his colleagues turned some of their intuitions into a structured system, already foreshadowing principles of phonology.

In their design of a transcription system for Tahitian, missionaries had to deal primarily with three issues: vowel length; the voiced allophones of stops /p/ and /t/; and the glottal stop. The first two questions were resolved explicitly by John Davies. Here is what he writes about vowel length:

> [T]here are many instances where the same sounds in *quality*, are different in *quantity*, being much longer in some words, where the vowels ought to be marked with a circumflex. (Davies 1851: 2)

He also discussed the voiced allophones of /p/ and /t/:

> What is most remarkable in the pronunciation of the Tahitian consonants is the universal practice of confounding *b* and *p*, *d* and *t*, and it is a fact, that scarce a Tahitian can be found, who is able to distinguish between them. In spelling or pronouncing the letters singly, they run all the *p*s into *b*, and all the *t*s into *d*; but in speaking, they immediately turn most of them into *p* and *t*, and there is hardly a Tahitian word, in which it can be said, that *b* and *d* are universally used. These two letters *b* and *d* have, therefore, been rejected from the Tahitian Alphabet. (Davies 1851: 2)

As for the glottal stop, John Davies does not explicitly describe or discuss it. But at least he does transcribe it in his dictionary – albeit sporadically – using an apostrophe, as shown by some minimal pairs:

> *Moa*, *S.* a fowl.
> *Mo'a*, *A.* sacred.
> (Davies 1851: 143)

The notation of vowel length using a macron, and of the glottal stop using an apostrophe (known as *'eta*), would only become systematic after the publication of Yves Lemaître's lexicon (1973).

3.2 Classifying words

3.2.1 The "nine parts of speech"

One of the tasks of grammatical analysis is to classify the words of the target language according to explicit criteria, if possible formal rather than semantic. The lack of inflection in Tahitian words makes the task difficult, as it prevents the use of morphological criteria. In addition, the strong lexical flexibility of Tahitian (see 2.2) means that the distributional criterion cannot provide a simple solution either. Identifying the word classes of Tahitian – i.e. determining whether a word is a noun, an adjective, a verb… – remains, to this day, a difficult task.

It took a long time before the grammars of Tahitian – or of other Polynesian languages – would acknowledge their high degree of lexical flexibility. The first

descriptions by missionaries did not go into such lengths: what they did was simply to project onto the Tahitian language the parts of speech known from classical descriptions of European languages. This inadequate classification, which was simply taken for granted with no explicit criterion, persisted until it was challenged by Lemaître (1973).

In his *Short Grammar of the Tahitian Dialect*, John Davies has this explicit statement about word classes:

> The words in Tahitian, as in English, may be divided into nine different sorts, viz. the article, the noun, the adjective, the pronoun, the verb, the adverb, the preposition, the conjunction, and the interjection. (Davies 1851: 3)

No definition of these classes is given. Their existence is simply taken for granted, posited as the foundation of the grammar – and repeated as chapter titles: "Of the article." (Davies 1851: 3), "Of nouns." (p. 5), "Of the adjective." (p. 8)…

In his French description of Tahitian, Jaussen identifies the same nine parts of speech again:

> There are in Tahitian nine types of words : the article, the noun, the pronoun, the adjective, the verb, the adverb, the preposition, the conjunction and the interjection. (Jaussen 1886: 13)

He does attempt to define these classes, but with merely semantic criteria:

> The noun is a word referring to entities, whether animate, inanimate, spiritual, material or ideal. (Jaussen 1886: 16)[2]
> The verb is the word that states the existence. In a sentence, it is the word with the most importance to render well one's thought. (p. 31)[3]

The assumption of the "nine parts of speech" still prevailed in subsequent grammars, whose table of contents were organised according to that same layout. In 1934, Charles Vernier and Alexandre Drollet wrote in their *Grammaire de la langue tahitienne*:

> Just like French, Tahitian has nine species of words, namely: the noun, the article, the adjective, the pronoun, the verb, the adverb, the preposition, the conjunction and the interjection. (Vernier & Drollet 1934: 5)

Note, in passing, the constant reference to European languages in these citations: "as in English", "just like French".

In this unanimous context, one author stands out in the 19th century, as adopting an original view. Louis Gaussin (1821–1886), a water engineer who stayed four years in the Marquesas and Society Islands in the 1840s, was so intrigued by the languages of these archipelagos that he wrote a memoir of

284 pages, that would soon win the linguistics prize of the *Institut national de France* in 1852.

No established term existed that could serve as a hyperonym able to designate all lexemes of a language regardless of their class, as opposed to grammatical words. Yet this is evidently what Gaussin was after when he labelled all Tahitian lexemes "common nouns". He provided this explanation:

> Common nouns correspond to our substantives, our adjectives, our verbs, and even some of our adverbs. This simple statement is already enough to understand the general nature of this kind of noun in Polynesian. […] To understand the nature of the Polynesian common noun, it must be considered as serving only to name primary ideas [*nommer les idées premières*]. (Gaussin 1853: 42-44)

In a way, these lines foreshadow a conception that will be affirmed much later: namely, the idea of a particularly flexible Tahitian lexicon, where the same word can take on several grammatical categories. Gaussin's "common nouns" – more or less what we would today call *lexemes* – combine with what he names "utterance particles" [*particules énonciatives*], i.e. grammatical morphemes; these may yield "substantive utterances" [*énonciations substantives*] – i.e. noun phrases – or "verbal utterances" [*énonciations verbales*] – i.e. verb phrases.

Finally, Gaussin anticipates what will later be called "distributional analysis":

> The main distinctions come from the fact that a given noun may not, because of its meaning, combine with all utterance particles. For example, the idea of *tangata* (man) cannot be modified in the same way as that of *kai* (who eats). (Gaussin 1853: 156)

Insightful as they were, Gaussin's observations remained largely unnoticed, and had little influence upon the grammatical doctrine of Tahitian.

3.2.2 An opposition between verbal and nominal categories transposed onto grammatical words

In the 1970s, a novel view emerged of the economy of Tahitian word classes, influenced by Bruce Biggs's analysis of Māori (1961, 1969), itself strongly inspired by structuralism and the distributional method:

> Meaningful units, that is units above the level of the phoneme, are classified exhaustively according to the positions they may occupy with reference to other units on the same level. (Biggs 1969: 5)

Biggs distinguishes lexical words (*bases*) from grammatical words (*particles*). The *base* occupies the lexical nucleus of a phrase, while the *particles* are preposed or postposed to it. Biggs distinguishes two types of phrases: "All Māori phrases are either verbal phrases or nominal phrases" (1969: 19). Crucially, the verbal vs.

nominal nature of the phrase does not result from the class of its lexical nucleus, but from the category of its grammatical words, whether pre- or postposed to the nucleus. Typically, a phrase introduced by an article or a preposition is nominal; a phrase including a tense or aspect particle is verbal.

Although he did not explicitly acknowledge the influence of Biggs' works, the first author who imported his approach into the study of Tahitian was Yves Lemaître:

> Sentences are made up of successive word groups of two types: noun phrases (abbreviated NP) and verb phrases (VP). These phrases consist of a main word surrounded by grammatical particles. (Lemaître 1973: 15)

Lemaître classifies phrases based on their syntactic behaviour, identifying what he calls "functions". The same lexeme can sometimes take up the "function" of a noun, sometimes that of a verb, and so on:

> The same Tahitian word can have quite different functions, varying depending on the words; it can be the equivalent of a noun, a verb, an adjective, an adverb. (Lemaître 1973: 10)

Thus, the "centre of a nominal phrase" is the equivalent of a noun; the "centre of a verbal phrase" is the equivalent of a verb; an adjective is defined as "the lexical modifier in a nominal phrase"; an adverb is "the lexical modifier in a verbal phrase" (Lemaître 1973: 10).

A similar approach was later adopted by the grammar of the Académie Tahitienne:

> In addition to the parts of speech familiar from French grammar (noun, verb, adjective, etc.), Tahitian has particles. A very large number of words can fulfill two or several different functions; their position in the sentence indicates whether these words function as nouns, verbs, adjectives, etc. (Académie Tahitienne 1986: 8)

Authors thus gave up on systematically assigning lexemes to word classes at the lexicon stage. Instead, they chose to transfer the noun–verb distinction onto the hierarchical level of the phrase, based on the grammatical morphemes it is made of. This model is also applied by Lazard and Peltzer (2000):

> In a sentence, lexemes and grammatical morphemes form short sequences that we call *basic syntactic units* (BSU). (…) It is best to take not lexemes, but BSUs, as the elementary unit of syntax. (Lazard & Peltzer 2000: 21-23)

> Unlike many languages – but similar to other Polynesian languages – Tahitian is structured in such a way that it is not immediately possible to distinguish classes of lexemes such as verbs, nouns, adjectives, etc. On the one hand, lexemes do not bear morphological markers that would identify them as belonging to a specific class. On the other hand, the vast majority of them, if not all, are capable of forming various types of

> BSU (*basic syntactic units*). As a result, the same word, depending on the BSU in which it is integrated, will translate into French as a verb, a noun, an adjective, an adverb, etc. (p. 23)

> We call 'verbal form' (VF) any BSU consisting of a lexeme preceded by an aspectual, and 'nominal form' (NF) any BSU consisting of a lexeme preceded by an article. (p. 8)

In sum, all the descriptions mentioned above agree on one hypothesis: whether a phrase is verbal or nominal cannot be inferred from its lexical nucleus, but from the nature of its grammatical morphemes. Thus an article would be, *by definition*, a sign of nounhood; and an aspect particle would automatically indicate the nature of the following word as a verb.

3.2.3 Omniaspectuality and translation

Another characteristic of the early grammatical doctrine of Tahitian is the tendency to associate the expression of temporality – whether external (tense) or internal (aspect) – with the category "verb". This tendency is ultimately rooted in the grammars of European languages. Aristotle himself made it explicit in his Περὶ ἑρμηνείας (*On Interpretation*, 16a-16b), as early as the 4th c. BC. Basset has this account:

> Aristotle introduces a criterion both morphological and semantic which Plato had never suggested, and which, in its simplicity, will be definitively adopted to oppose nouns to verbs: the *onoma* 'noun' does not encode time, whereas the *rhema* 'verb' does. (Basset 1994: 62)

There are reasons to revisit this assumption, that the expression of time should be exclusively assigned to "verbs". François (2026) showed that, for most Oceanic languages, nouns and adjectives are "tamophoric" – i.e. compatible with TAM inflection – with no need to be analysed as verbs.[4] This is indeed the case in Tahitian.

This typological peculiarity correlates with an important property of Tahitian. While European languages use a copular verb *be* to carry TAM specifications with adjectives and nouns (e.g. *He was quiet*; *She'll be your teacher*.), most Oceanic languages do without such a copula. Instead, TAM is encoded directly on the adjective or noun, just like with verbs. For example, in (13), the growing anger of the character is encoded using the adjective *rahi* 'big' as a predicate, directly under the scope of the progressive aspect *tē… ra*:

(13) ⟨*Tē* ***rahi*** *noa atu ra*⟩ *te taehae o te pateaino.*
PRG big just thither DX3 ART anger POSS ART stepmother
'His stepmother's anger just kept growing.' (TAF: 10)

And in (14), a change in the nature of the subject is rendered by combining the Perfect aspect *'ua* with the noun *tamaiti* 'boy', with no copula:

(14) ⟨*'Ua* ***tamaiti*** *a'e ra*⟩ *Ta'aroa.*
PRF boy DIR DX3 T.
'Ta'aroa has turned into a young boy.' (TH: 343)

If we were following the approach by Lazard & Peltzer (2000) (§4.2.2), we would have to analyse both *rahi* 'big' and *tamaiti* 'boy' as verbs, merely by virtue of their combination with TAM. In fact, another approach is possible, once we accept the idea that aspect should not be exclusive to verbs, and can in fact affect other parts of speech. Thus, the description of Tahitian written in 2022 by Jacques Vernaudon (as yet unpublished) discusses examples similar to (13–14), and notes:

> On the contrary, we can consider that they remain respectively an adjective and a noun, but that they are compatible with aspect markers – which should not be viewed as verbal in essence. This is how nouns and adjectives in Tahitian can inflect for aspect, thereby taking part, just like verbs, in the construction of events. (Vernaudon 2022: 158)

In such a framework, (13) *tē rahi… ra* is an adjective inflecting in the progressive, and (14) *'ua tamaiti* a noun inflecting for perfect aspect; neither of them needs to be viewed as a verb.[5]

In the same spirit, one can challenge that the article *te* should automatically turn the following word into a noun. Thus in (6) *i* ***te*** *inu* 'at drinking', the lexeme *inu* 'drink' preserves the semantics and syntax of a verb, including by governing an object argument (*inu i te taofe* 'drinking coffee'): here one can propose that the article *te* combines directly with a verb – with no need of going through a process of nominalisation.

In 1959, syntactician Lucien Tesnière designed the theoretical notion of *la translation* ("transfer") to explain how certain morphemes, combined with a certain word class, had the power to provide it with access to new syntactic functions. His approach was further developed by Lemaréchal (1989) – and later applied to the Oceanic language Mwotlap by François (2001) and to Tahitian by Vernaudon & Rigo (2004). The article *te* has the function of "transferring" any lexeme – including verbs – to an argument function. Thus in (6) above, the sequence *i te inu i te taofe* 'at drinking coffee' modifies the predicate *e mea varavara* 'be rare'; that sequence is introduced by oblique *i* – commonly used to introduce arguments – and the particle *te*, necessary to access this syntactic position. This analysis questions the assumption that the 'article' *te* should necessarily flag a nominal phrase: it can equally well be analysed as a translative morpheme, turning different parts of speech (nouns but also verbs) into an argument phrase.

3.3 Delimiting functions and distinguishing types of predicates

3.3.1 Cases for describing functions

Beyond identifying word classes, one of the roles of grammatical analysis is to describe the syntactic functions filled by words and phrases in the clause. For this endeavour, the first describers of Tahitian used the concepts they were most familiar with: namely, the cases of Latin, such as *nominative*, *accusative*, *ablative*. Thus, even though he was describing Tahitian – a language without morphology, where syntax is mostly encoded by word order and prepositions – here is how John Davies represented the 'case system' of its nouns:

> NOM. *Te haavâ*, the judge.
> GEN. *No te haavâ*, of or belonging to the judge.
> ACC. *I te haavâ*, to the judge.
> VOC. *E te haavâ e*, o judge.
> ABL. *E*, *i*, or *na*, *te haavâ*, by the judge. (Davies 1851: 7).

Such a presentation was commonplace in the 19th c., at a time when grammars were still modelled based on Latin categories. Instead of identifying *syntactic functions* for themselves, grammarians would find it a suitable approximation to speak in terms of morphological cases, as used for classical languages. That said, Davies was quite aware of the limits of the classical model:

> If by 'case' be understood the different endings of the noun, the Tahitian nouns have no cases, that is nothing in the noun itself to distinguish its case. It has been said that English nouns have but one variation of case, viz.: the genitive or possessive, and therefore English cases of nouns are distinguished by the prepositions, *to*, *for*, *with*, *from*, *by*, &c, and by the same means the Tahitian cases of a noun may be distinguished, viz., by the little words *a*, *na*, *o*, *no*, *te*, *i*, *e*, and *ia*. (Davies 1851: 7)

In this model, the 'nominative' case is a shortcut to designate the function of subject, and the accusative the function of object. Thus, when Davies (1851: 37) writes "the nominative case commonly follows the verb", this is his way of explaining that, in Tahitian, the subject generally comes after the predicate (§2.2).

The habit of using a case-based approach for describing syntactic functions persisted in the descriptions that ensued, despite the reservations of the authors themselves about its adequacy. The grammar of Tahitian published in 1960 by George Burbidge is another telltale example of a description that criticises the system of classical cases, yet uses it to describe syntactic functions:

> CASE.
> As there is nothing in the noun itself to distinguish case, the different relationships that the noun assumes with respect to the other parts of speech are determined by the use of particles and prepositions.
> For the sake of convenience we may, however, assume the existence of three cases in Tahitian:
> (1) Nominative; (2) Objective. (3) Possessive;
> The *Nominative Case* is indicated in Tahitian either by the simple noun and its modifiers, or else by the addition of the verb substantive *o* placed before it; […]
> The *Objective Case* is expressed, before the direct object, by prefixing *ia* to persons, and *i te* to things […].
> The *Possessive Case* is expressed by prefixing one of the prepositions denoting possession, to the noun. (Burbidge 1960: 23-24)

Lemaître was the first grammar to drop the reference to classical cases, and refer to syntactic functions instead:

> More often, sentences involve at least two elements: a main element (the predicate, which is a VP [i.e. verb phrase] or an NP [i.e. noun phrase]) and a second element: subject (not obligatory) or complement (recognisable by the particles that precede it). (Lemaître 1973: 15)

Instead of resorting to a Latin-like case system, Lemaître refers to syntactic functions associated with the syntactic position of constituents in the clause, and to the specific prepositions that introduce them.

3.3.2 Acknowledging nonverbal predicates

Another innovation helped improve the analysis of Tahitian syntax: it had progressively become clear that the function 'predicate' should be decoupled from the lexical category of verbs.

Within the Polynesianist domain, the first signs of such an emancipation emerged in William Williams' 1862 work on Māori:

> The Subject in a sentence is that of which anything is said. The Prædicate is that which is said of the Subject. […] In affirmative sentences, the prædicate stands first, and the subject after it. (Williams 1862: 23-24)

Crucially, the author acknowledged the existence of non-verbal predicates:

> In English, when the prædicate is not a verb, the verb '*to be*', commonly called the substantive verb, is used to connect the prædicate with its subject. This verb has no equivalent in Maori, but its place is supplied by the relative position of the different words in the sentence. (Williams 1862: 24)

The idea of delinking the notions *predicate* and *verb*, and thus of acknowledging the existence of non-verbal predicates, was not immediately accepted in

the case of Tahitian. Étienne Jaussen (1815–1891) – a Catholic missionary who arrived in Tahiti in 1849 and whose Tahitian grammar was published in 1886 – would view the verb as an indispensable constituent of a Tahitian clause:

> The verb is the word that states and affirms existence; in a sentence, it is the word that is most important in conveying thought. (Jaussen 1886: 31)

This conception led him to consider several Tahitian grammatical words as avatars of a *be* verb – namely, the equative marker *ʼo*, the inclusive marker *e* and the TAM markers. Paradoxically, although there is no *be* verb in Tahitian, Jaussen seems to see it everywhere (even with verbs!):

> The keystone of this language is the verb *be*, used in front of proper nouns and common nouns, in front of personal pronouns, and in front of verbs, for which it is used to form the various tenses. (Jaussen 1886: 6)

This formulation allows him to solve, in his descriptive model, the apparent paradox of nonverbal clauses:

> The verb *be* is used to determine all proper or common nouns: ***O*** *Maria* [it is Mary]; ***E*** *ua* [it is raining]. (Jaussen 1886: 13)

The two examples cited by Jaussen are shown in (15) and (16), with our glosses:

(15) ⟨*E* *ua*⟩.
ASC rain
‘It is raining.’ [liter. ‘It is rain.’]

(16) ⟨*ʼO* *Maria*⟩.
EQ Mary
‘It is Mary.’

The particles *ʼo* and *e* are not verbal – neither in nature nor in origin. The ascriptive marker *e* finds its source in an ancient indefinite article **sa* in Proto-Polynesian (Clark 1976: 52): thus in (15), the predicate *e ua* would read originally as ⟨*SOME rain*⟩; later, that article was reinterpreted as a (nonverbal) copula, forming ascriptive predicates [‘be an N’].[6] As for the morpheme *ʼo*, it has been reconstructed as an equative marker **ko* since the early times of Proto-Central-Pacific – even before the formation of Proto-Polynesian. While it may be legitimate to analyse these particles as a type of copula (François 2026: 1045), there is no reason to view them as verbs (*pace* Carter 1996 for Hawaiian).

The first author to acknowledge the existence of predicates beyond verbs was Yves Lemaître, in 1973. For example, the passage we cited in 3.2.2 specifies that the predicate can be “a VP [i.e. verb phrase] or an NP [i.e. noun phrase]”.

More recently, Lazard & Peltzer (1991) proposed the first systematic inventory of predicate types in Tahitian. Besides verbal predicates, they identify four types of nonverbal predicates, which they call "inclusive" (i.e. ascriptive), "equative", "numeral" and "prepositional" predicates.

3.4 Describing time

3.4.1 Tense or aspect?

Finally, another field where Tahitian grammar has made significant progress is the study of the expression of temporality. In order to achieve an accurate description, grammarians first needed to distinguish absolute tense from verbal aspect. Only then would they be able to acknowledge that the Tahitian particles combining with predicates encode aspect rather than tense. In addition, they also had to understand that deictic markers, which are sometimes used to situate the event, can encode time as much as space.

A few preliminary definitions can help us appreciate the evolution among successive grammatical descriptions. The notion of TENSE corresponds to the position in time of an event with respect to the moment of utterance m_U. Depending on whether the event precedes, overlaps or follows m_U, we get respectively the three absolute tenses of past, present and future. As for ASPECT, we can distinguish at least two semantic values, perfective vs. imperfective: these depend on whether the event is viewed, respectively, as completed or as unfolding, at a moment of reference m_R. Crucially, this moment m_R is not necessarily the moment of utterance m_U, and can be any moment (real or fictitious, past or present or future) depending on context.

The first description by Davies (1851) did not contrast tense and aspect. His terminology effectively mixed the two domains together, with no clear distinction:

> There are four tenses or times, in which the verb speaks; viz., the present; as, *te papai nei au*, I write, or am now writing; the imperfect, *te papai ra vau*, I was (then) writing; the perfect, *i papai na vau*, I wrote or have written; the future, *e papai au*, I shall or will write. (Davies 1851: 16-17)

While the labels "present" and "future" pertain to the domain of tense, "imperfect" and "perfect" refer to aspect. These terms are influenced by the classical opposition, in Latin verbs, between the *infectum* and *perfectum* stems.

That said, Davies was evidently aware that the category "tense" alone was insufficient to analyse the organisation of the verb system in Tahitian – as shown in this passage:

> *Ua* is a particle of very frequent use, and may be considered as an *affirmation* or auxiliary verb of being, but not a distinctive mark of tense. It is prefixed to verbs to signify, that the action expressed by the verb has taken place, or is now existing, or shall exist or take place in connection with some act or circumstance, mentioned or implied, as for instance, *A vavahi na teienei nao, e ua rui toru anae ua tia faahou ïa ia'u* (John ii. 19).
>
> It is moreover used as a prefix to all kinds of adjectives *affirming* the present existence of the quality mentioned, and strongly implying its former absence, or the want of, as in (…) *Ua maitai*, it is now good. (Davies 1851: 28)

Here Davies describes the particle *'ua* as aspectual rather than temporal. He clearly states that it does not correspond to absolute time ("not a distinctive mark of tense"), and indeed acknowledges the temporal ambiguity of *'ua* ("the action… has taken place, or is now existing, or shall exist or take place"). In support for his statement, Davies cites a sentence where the event is represented as already completed, at a moment of reference which is clearly future:

(17) *'A vāvāhi na teie nei nao 'e 'ua rui toru*
INCH destroy DX2 DEM1 DX1 temple and PRF night three

*ana'e, **'ua** ti'a fa'ahou ïa iā'u.*
only PRF stand again ANA OBL.1SG
'Destroy this temple, and in three days I will have raised it up.'
[liter. 'in three days, it *will have risen again by me*'] (John 2: 19)

In (17), the verb phrase *'ua ti'a* encodes perfect aspect, as it refers to a completed action (literally 'have risen, be already raised'). However, instead of being calculated with respect to the moment of utterance (m_U), that event of "rising" is anchored at a different moment of reference (m_R), located in the future: 'If you ever destroy this temple, three days later it will have risen again'. In passing, note that an English phrase like *it will have risen* formally encodes the event's aspect (*have risen*) as well as its absolute anchoring in terms of tense (*it will…*); between these two dimensions, only aspect is formally encoded in Tahitian (here with *'ua*), while absolute tense is left unspecified, and inferred from the context.

3.4.2 The progressive aspect and its deictics

While he had noticed the temporal ambiguity of *'ua*, Davies and his successors failed to notice it in the case of the progressive markers *tē… nei* and *tē… ra*. These two bipartite morphemes (see 2.2) were then often described, respectively, as present and past – presumably due to the literal meaning of *nei* as a proximal demonstrative, and of *ra* as distal. In reality, both forms *tē… nei* and *tē… ra* are used interchangeably to encode the progressive aspect – a subtype of imperfective

aspect – with a temporal reference that can be past, present, or future: see our examples (10–12) in section 2.2.

The deictic meaning of particles *nei* and *ra* may indeed refer to time, with the proximal *nei* pointing to the moment of utterance m_U; yet along with its temporal reading ('now'), the same particle can also have spatial interpretation ('here'). As for *ra*, it typically points to a space-time that somehow contrasts with that of the utterance: another moment than now and/or another place than here. That ambiguity between time and space concerns not just their use as demonstratives, but also as elements of the aspect marker of progressive.

After Davies' initial observations – quite insightful for his time – none of the grammars published until the 1970s really challenged the traditional division *past–present–future*. Once again, Lemaître (1973) was the one to innovate, as he acknowledged *aspect* as an autonomous category:

> Unlike French, VPs generally do not include an indication of time, but only 'aspects' that inform about the unfolding of the action without specifying whether it is situated in the past, present, or future. The indication of time, which is optional, is given independently in an NP. (Lemaître 1973: 19)

Since then, the concept of aspect has been systematically taken up in grammatical descriptions.

4 Synthesis

Ever since missionaries endowed it with a stable spelling system in the early 1800s, Tahitian has been extensively described. Although this is an isolating language, early studies tended to project onto it categories of analysis used for inflectional European languages. Whether they were listing word classes, analysing morphosyntax, or describing verbal semantics, they would use Latin as their model and reference.

The only exception to these early tendencies was the original work by Gaussin (1853); however it remained isolated, and left no legacy in the grammatical doctrine about Tahitian. It was not until the 1970s that new descriptive tools were introduced, better adapted to the specific features of Polynesian languages in general, and Tahitian in particular. Among the most striking adjustments, in the absence of grammatical morphology, observers gave up trying to classify words in the lexicon; instead they decided to shift the noun–verb opposition to the hierarchical level of the phrase, based on the nature of its grammatical morphemes. The same lexeme could thus be a noun or a verb – depending on whether it was heading a phrase introduced by an article or by a TAM particle.

The latter analysis has the merit of acknowledging the multicategorial nature of lexical words; yet it continues an Aristotelian assumption, whereby the encoding of time would be exclusive to verbs. More recent work revisits this restriction: once tense–aspect–mood are freed from their exclusive ties with verbs, Tahitian can be reanalysed as an "omniaspectual" language – so that nouns and adjectives, as much as verbs, can directly inflect for TAM when used as predicates (Vernaudon 2022).

Another major advance in the grammatisation of Tahitian was the introduction of the concept of *predicate*, and the delinking of the predicative function from the verb category. This was an essential step in the recognition of non-verbal predicates. To quote a pair of concepts introduced by François (2017) in order to model lexical flexibility (cf. 2.2), we can say that Tahitian words exhibit *multicategoriality* – i.e. the same lexeme can belong to different word classes – but in addition, each of these word classes shows *multifunctionality*: that is, a given word class can fill a whole array of syntactic functions, and the same function can be played by different word classes.

In terms of future grammatical research, the existence of digital text corpora of Tahitian – whether written texts or transcribed recordings – now makes it possible to refine the study of lexical words and their multicategoriality, based on statistical analyses. Such a study could even be carried out diachronically, benefitting from two centuries of historical depth. It might well reveal that words in modern Tahitian – under the influence of French in the brains of mostly bilingual speakers – do not show today the same flexibility as they used to have in the early 1800s, when speakers were still strictly monolingual.

Finally, while the empirical basis of older and modern grammars of Tahitian relies mainly on written corpora, future generations of describers should also study spoken forms, paying particular attention to the links between prosody and syntax.

Abbreviations

ANA	anaphoric	EX	exclusive	POSS	possessive linker
ART	article	IN	inclusive	PREP	preposition
ASC	ascriptive	INCH	inchoative	PRF	perfect
DEM	demonstrative	NEG	negative	PRG	progressive
DIR	directional	OBL	oblique	SG	singular
DX	deictic	OPT	optative	TAM	tense-aspect-mood
EQ	equative	PL	plural		

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[1] Derived from the contrast *phonemic* vs. *phonetic*, the terms *emic* vs. *etic* target a more abstract level, namely that of all linguistic categories in a language – whether in phonology, morphology, lexical semantics, and so on. An *emic* category is one that can be shown to be a functional, contrastive unit within the system of a language, when analysed in its own terms – rather than viewed through the lens of other languages. Since it was coined by Pike (1954), the concept has been used in linguistics, but also in anthropology and other social sciences.

[2] “Le nom est un mot qui désigne les êtres animés, inanimés, spirituels, matériels, idéaux.”

[3] “Le verbe est le mot qui énonce et affirme l’existence ; dans une phrase, c’est le mot qui a le plus d’importance pour bien rendre la pensée.”

[4] For typological discussions of this topic, see Nordlinger & Sadler (2004), Bertinetto (2020).

[5] For a similar approach applied to Hiw, an Oceanic language of Vanuatu, see François (2017).

[6] See also example (2) in 2.2 above.