

Definiteness and specificity in Kove  
Hiroko Sato  
University of Hawaii‘i at Mānoa

1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Kove is an Oceanic language spoken in the West New Britain Province of Papua New Guinea. Kove is primarily spoken in the Kove area, which is located in the northwest of New Britain. There are about 9,000 people living in the area, but many are not fluent speakers of Kove.

The basic order is SV or AVO. The language does not have a case marking system, so grammatical relations are identified by the position of the constituents. In addition, a topic may be also marked by its position. Like many Oceanic languages, Kove does not have a passive construction. Instead, to focus on an element, topicalization is used. Topicalization in Kove employs left-dislocation. Any kind of grammatical relation can be topicalized. Here is a pair of examples. In (2), *liu-ra* is the direct object, and it is topicalized before the subject, *Anam*.

(1) Kokoako,                      Anam                      i-vulo                      liu-ra.  
       cock.a.doodle.doo        Anam                      3SG.SBJ-kidnap        sibling-2PL.POSS  
       ‘Cock a doodle doo, Anam kidnapped your sister.’

(2) Kokoako,                      liu-ra                      Anam                      i-vulo.  
       cock.a.doodle.doo        sibling-2PL.POSS        Anam                      3SG.SBJ-kidnap  
       ‘Cock a doodle doo, as for your sister, she was kidnapped by Anam.’

Focus is usually marked by a pitch accent. For example, in (3-b), *karoki* receives a pitch accent in speech.

(3-a) U-ani                      sawa                      vongivongi              hanninga                      ai-a?  
       2SG.SBJ-eat              what                      morning                      food                      3SG.POSS-A.POSS  
       ‘What did you eat for breakfast?’

(3-b) Nga-ani                      **karoki**.  
       1SG.SBJ-eat              crab  
       ‘I ate a crab.’

Thus, Kove does not have a morphological marking for topic and focus referents. However, it has a grammatical marking for indentifiability, which is one of the information structure categories. The distinction between identifiable and non-identifiable referents is marked by articles. In this paper, I will discuss the features of articles in Kove, focusing on the correlation with indentifiability.

---

<sup>1</sup> In addition to the Leipzig Glossing Rules, the following conventions and abbreviations are used in

## 2. Articles

There are three articles in Kove: *to*, *tona*, and *eta*. The distinction among them is in definiteness and specificity. I will first discuss the definitions of definiteness, specificity, and referentiality, and then examine each article of Kove.

### 2.1. Definitions

Definiteness, specificity, and referentiality are semantic properties that determine how to “adapt speakers’ utterances to the context, including the addressee’s presumed mental state” (Payne 1997:261). Different scholars define them in different ways. Some combine definiteness and specificity. Others categorize specificity and referentiality together. However, it is important to separate specificity from definiteness and referentiality in the usage of articles in Kove.

Definiteness, sometimes called identifiability (Payne 1997:263), is defined as the property by which the speaker judges an entity to be identifiable to the hearer. That is, the speaker assumes that the hearer can identify the referent, either (1) because the referent was previously mentioned in the context of discourse, as in (4); (2) because the referent is part of the interlocutors’ shared knowledge, as in (5); or (3) because there is an association with something identified in the sentence, as in (6) (Givón 1978:296–297; Gúerin 2007:538–553; Lambrecht 1994:79–93; Payne 1997:263–264). Definiteness in English is marked by the determiner *the*.

(4) She bought **the** car (I previously talked about).

(5) The earth revolves around **the** sun.

(6) She bought **the** car she wanted.

Specificity is a property of the knowledge state of the speaker (Ionin 2006:191). In a specific expression, the speaker has a particular referent in mind, but there is no specific individual being referred to, so the referent may not be identified by the hearer. It states only the speaker’s view of what is noteworthy, and not the state of the listener’s knowledge or ability to identify the referent. In contrast, an unspecific expression indicates that the speaker does not have an individual or a particular referent in mind. This property is sometimes called objective referentiality (Payne 1997:264). English does not have a grammatical distinction between specific and non-specific, and marks both semantic categories with the article *a*.

(7) **A man** just proposed to me in the orangery (though I’m much too embarrassed to tell you who it was).

(8) **A man** is in the women’s bathroom (but I haven’t dared to go in there to see who it is).

(Fodor and Sag 1982:359)

(7) is an example with a specific referent, where the speaker has a particular referent in mind. It also indicates that there must be something important about the individual that

the speaker is talking about, but this “something important” may not be directly related to the identity of the individual. On the other hand, (8) is an example with a non-specific referent: the speaker does not have any particular person in mind.

While a specific expression can be marked by *a* in English, it is sometimes marked by *this*. Usually, in a specific expression with *this*, the sentence is followed by a separate statement about the referent or the referent is something unexpected. This is sometimes called discourse referentiality (Payne 1997:266). In (9), the sentence with a specific expression is followed by a separate statement.

(9) I want to see **this new movie. It’s one that my friends have been recommending to me for ages.**

(Ionin 2006:185)

In (10), the word *this* indicates unexpectedness because we usually do not expect apples to be blue.

(10) I found **this blue apple** on my plate!

(Ionin 2006:185)

The last property is referentiality. Referentiality is a category in which “the speaker assumes the existence of a particular referent in the universe of discourse” (Gúerin 2007:540). Referential expressions refer to entities that exist in the world, as in (11), but in non-referential expressions, the speaker does not commit to the existence of a particular entity, as in (12). Since English does not have a distinction in referentiality, both referential and non-referential noun phrases are marked by *a*.

(11) Arlyne wanted to marry **a Norwegian, but he refused.**

(12) Arlyne wanted to marry **a Norwegian, but she couldn’t find one.**

(Guérin 2007:539)

In Kove, the grammatical marking is based on a combination of definiteness and specificity. However, there is no morphological distinction in referentiality. Table 1 shows the articles of definiteness and specificity in Kove.

Table 1: Articles

	Definite	Indefinite
Specific	to	tona
Unspecific	-	eta

Articles in Kove can occur both with common nouns and proper nouns, except for *eta*, which cannot occur with proper nouns. As described above, articles follow the noun head, except for a place name. They can occur with both singular and plural nouns.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, they can occur with numerals. However, they cannot occur with non-

<sup>2</sup> However, I have not found an example of *tona* with a plural.

numeral quantifiers such as *some* and *a few*. Both *tona* and *eta* can occur with nouns in any grammatical position. However, *to* has some constraints; it occurs with nouns in the subject position, but not in any other grammatical position.

## 2.2. Definite + Specific: *to*

*To* is an article that encodes definiteness and specificity. When a speaker marks a noun phrase as definite and specific, the referent is identified both by the speaker and hearer. In (13), the referent, *kaua* ‘dog’, was previously mentioned by the speaker, so both the speaker and hearer can identify which dog the speaker is talking about.

- (13) *Kaua to ai-era sei?*  
 dog ART 3SG.POSS-name who.SG  
 ‘What is the name of the dog (that I was talking about)?’

It is possible for *to* to occur with other noun modifiers such as possessives, numerals, or adjectives.

- (14) *Le-ghu malo to tolu i-takai-ri.*  
 LE.POSS-1SG.POSS clothes ART three 3SG.SBJ-be torn-3PL.OBJ  
 ‘My three clothes (that I talked about) got torn.’

If *to* occurs with the degree word *salai* ‘many’, the combination lexicalizes to ‘all’: *to* + *salai* → *tosalai* ‘all’. However, I did not find other non-numeral quantifiers occurring with *to*. Thus, *to* can occur with quantifiers and encode either singular or plural. If it occurs without quantifiers, it does not indicate plurality. In other words, in (13), the referent ‘dog’ could be one dog or more than one dog.

As mentioned above, the definite specific article can occur with common nouns and proper nouns. However, interestingly, a noun phrase with the definite specific article has a constraint in that it has to occur in the subject position. It is ungrammatical for it to occur in non-subject positions. In the following examples, a noun phrase with *to* occurs as the subject in (15) and as the object of a preposition in (16); the latter is ungrammatical.

- (15) *Paul to i-pa-ghau moni.*  
 Paul ART 3SG.SBJ-give-1SG.OBJ money  
 ‘Paul (who I talked about previously) gave me money.’

- (16) \**Nga-pa-ni moni pa Paul to.*  
 1SG.SBJ-give-3SG.OBJ money PREP Paul ART  
 (‘I gave money to Paul [who I talked about previously].’)

Instead of *to*, the indefinite specific marker *tona* is used with the object of a preposition. In this context, while the indefinite specific marker is used, the referent is definite.

- (17) Nga -pa-ni                      moni                      pa                      **Paul**                      **tona**.  
 1SG.SBJ-give-3SG.OBJ      money                      PREP                      Paul                      ART  
 ‘I gave money to (a certain) Paul (who I talked about previously).’

### 2.3 Indefinite + Specific: *tona*

An indefinite specific expression is a category where the referent is not identifiable by the hearer, but the speaker has it in mind. It is marked by *tona*. In the following example, *tona* is used with *lusi* ‘mountain’. In this context, the mountain was never mentioned previously. Therefore, it is an indefinite expression. However, because the speaker has this mountain in mind, although the hearer cannot identify it, it is specific.

- (18) I-eulughu                      gha                      i-nama                      i-ghunu-i  
 3SG.SBJ-go down      SVU                      3SG.SBJ-come                      3SG.SBJ-stand.up-INTR
- pa                      lusi                      **tona**                      sae                      tau.  
 PREP                      mountain                      ART                      big                      very  
 ‘He came down and stood on a very big mountain.’

Here is one more example. As with (18), the referent has not been mentioned previously. However, the speaker has the individual in mind. Since the noun is a proper noun, the hearer may be able to identify it, but whether the hearer identifies it or not does not matter for the choice of specificity.

- (19) Paul                      **tona**                      i-kea                      vula                      gha                      i-nama.  
 Paul                      ART                      3SG.SBJ-bring                      shell.necklace                      SVU                      3SG.SBJ-come  
 ‘Paul brought shell necklaces.’

### 2.4. Indefinite and non-specific: *eta*

*Eta* is the indefinite and non-specific article. It is used only for common nouns. In the following example, *eta* follows two nouns, which are the object of a preposition and the object of a transitive verb.

- (20) I-la                      pa                      tuanga                      **eta**,                      i-panaho                      tamine                      **eta**.  
 3SG.SBJ-go                      PREP                      village                      ART                      3SG.SBJ-steal                      woman                      ART  
 ‘He went to a village and kidnapped a woman.’

In the next example, *eta* occurs with the noun in the object position of a verb *ka* ‘work’,<sup>3</sup> but also with a noun in the subject position of a serialized verb *murai*.

- (21) Ta-ka                      linge<sup>4</sup>                      **eta**                      gha                      i-murai                      mina.  
 1PL.INCL.SBJ-work                      action                      ART                      SVU                      3SG.SBJ-hide                      NEG  
 ‘We should not do anything in secret.’<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> *Ka* is a shortened form of *karo*.

<sup>4</sup> *Linge* has several meanings such as ‘personality’, ‘behavior’, ‘habit’, ‘characteristics’, and so on.

<sup>5</sup> This is a free translation.

As with the other articles, *eta* can occur with other modifiers. In (22), the noun is modified by a possessive construction.

- (22) ...tahua      ta-karo                      mota    ne      [Varau      ai-a  
           1DU.INCL    1PL.INCL.SBJ-work    snake    PTC      Varau      3SG.POSS-A.POSS
- linge]            **eta.**  
           behavior      ART  
           ‘We should do something about the behavior of this snake, Varau.’

As stated above, *eta* can occur both with singular and plural nouns. However, if the plurality is unmarked, *eta* marks a singular. The difference is shown in (23), where the noun *vongi* ‘night’ is marked as plural, in contrast to (24), where the noun is unmarked for plurality.

- (23) Sele<sup>6</sup>                      mate                      ai-a                      ta-polu                      mina,  
           place of a corpse    dead.body            3SG.POSS-A.POSS    1PL.INCL.SBJ-remove    NEG
- i-mororo                      gha                      **vongi**                      **tolu**                      **eta.**  
           3SG.SBJ-stay                      SVU                      night                      three                      ART  
           ‘We should not remove the corpse for three days.’ (lit., ‘We should not remove the location of the corpse, and it stays for three days.’)

- (24) Sele                      mate                      ai-a                      ta-polu                      mina,  
           place of a corpse    dead.body            3SG.POSS-A.POSS    1PL.INCL.SBJ-remove    NEG
- i-mororo                      gha                      **vongi**                      **eta.**  
           3SG.SBJ-stay                      SVU                      night                      ART  
           ‘We should not remove the corpse for one day.’ (lit., ‘We should not remove the location of the corpse, and it stays for one day.’)

Thus, *eta* marks an indefinite non-specific referent. However, there seems to be another condition on its usage. In a discourse with *eta*, there are several candidates from which to choose. For example, in (20), there could be many villages, and there could be many women in each village. The referent could be any woman in any of the villages among the candidates. Similarly, in (22), *Varau* has several behaviors, and the speaker talks about one of his habits in this discourse. In (23) and (24), the speaker does not indicate a specific day. It could be anytime. Thus, I generalize that *eta* is used only when there are several candidates. This notion can be further explained by the following pair of examples. In (25-a), the noun occurs with *eta*, and this indicates that there are several foreigners and the agent went to see one of them. By contrast, (25-b), where the noun is bare, implies that there must be only one foreigner in the universe of the story.

---

<sup>6</sup> *Sele* refers to a location where people keep a dead body and conduct funeral rites.

(25-a) I-la                    i-kona                    **pura**                    eta.  
 3SG.SBJ-go            3SG.SBJ-see            foreigner            ART  
 ‘He went to see one of the foreigners.’

(25-b) I-la                    i-kona                    **pura.**  
 3SG.SBJ-go            3SG.SBJ-see            foreigner  
 ‘He went to see a foreigner.’

Here is one more pair of examples. In (26-a), the noun *boto* ‘boat’ occurs with *eta*. The sentence without *eta* is shown in (26-b). In (26-a), the sentence implies that the speaker has some boats, and chose one of them to ride. In (26-b), the sentence implies that the speaker has only one boat.

(26-a) Ya-rae                    pa                    **boto**                    **eta**                    ne                    ya-laro.  
 1PL.EXCL.SBJ-get.on    PREP    boat                    ART                    PTC                    1PL.EXCL.SBJ-run  
 ‘We got on one of the boats and rode it.’

(26-b) Ya-rae                    pa                    **boto**                    ne                    ya-laro.  
 1PL.EXCL.SBJ-get.on    PREP    boat                    PTC                    1PL.EXCL.SBJ-run  
 ‘We got on a boat and rode it.’

Thus, in addition to marking non-specificity, *eta* also indicates that there are some candidates from which the referent is chosen. These features explain why *eta* cannot occur with proper nouns, unlike the other articles.

(27) ?\*I-la                    i-kona                    **Beti**                    eta.  
 3SG.SBJ-go            3SG.SBJ-see            Beti                    ART  
 ‘He went to see one (of Betis).’

The example above is unnatural unless there are several people who are all named Beti, and one of them was chosen in this context.

## 2.5 Unmarked nouns

There are some cases where nouns are not marked by articles. First, nouns are bare when they are indefinite and plural. In the following example, the bare noun *iha* ‘fish’ is indefinite, non-specific, and plural because we do not know how many fish might be caught.

(28) Ti-la                    ti-ka-karo                    **iha.**  
 3PL.SBJ-go            3PL.SBJ-RED-work            fish  
 ‘They went fishing.’ (lit., ‘They went and were working for fish.’)

Here is one more example. In this sentence, it is clear that the referent, *vua* ‘betel nut’ is plural because the verb carries the plural marker *-ri*, which denotes the plurality of an object.



Table 2: Articles and their features

	<i>to</i>	<i>tona</i>	<i>eta</i>
Function	Definite	Indefinite + specific	Indefinite + non-specific
Types of nouns	Common, Proper	Common, Proper	Common
Plurality	Singular, Plural	Singular, Plural	Singular, Plural (If unmarked, it denotes singular)

Given that *to* is a definite article, it is usually used for old (=given, familiar) information. On the other hand, *tona* and *eta* are used for new (=unfamiliar) information. However, there are some specific conditions for their usage.

Reference:

Fodor, J. and I. Sag. 1982. Referential and quantificational indefinites. *Linguistics and Philosophy* 3: 355-398.

Givoón, Talmy. 1978. Definiteness and referentiality. In *Universals of human language*, vol. 4, ed. by Joseph Greenberg, 292–330. Stanford and California: Stanford University Press.

Guérin Valérie. 2007. Definiteness and specificity in Ma'vea. *Oceanic Linguistics* 46: 538-553.

Ionin, Tania. 2006. This is definitely specific: specificity and definiteness in article systems. *Natural Language Semantics* 14:175-234.

Lambrecht, Knud. 1994. *Information structure and sentence form*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press.

Payne, Thomas E. 1997. *Describing morphosyntax: a guide for field linguists*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press.