

## *Yes-No Question Particles in Niuean*

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It is well-known that many languages form yes-no questions with a particle (Cheng 1997). Niuean (Polynesian: VSO) presents a puzzle because there are 3 such particles (*nakai*, *ka*, *kia*). Are they fully interchangeable or do they serve different functions? Are they all merged in the same syntactic position? In the first part of this paper we address the first question, demonstrating that the 3 particles each have distinct functions and behaviour. In the second part we address the second question, presenting a structural analysis of the left periphery of Niuean in which the particles appear in different heads, and attract different categories to their specifiers. The 3 particles are illustrated in (1).

- (1) a. Kua kai **nakai/ka/kia** e Moka e apala  
Perf eat Q1/Q2/Q3 ErgP Moka AbsC apple  
“Did Moka eat the apple?”

Through a study of question and answer data from two hour-long oral interviews, the written interview schedule, and the literature on Niuean questions (McEwen 1970, Seiter 1980, Sperlich 1997, Whittaker 1982, Kaulima and Beaumont 2002, Massam 2003), we see that *nakai* is used in post-predicate position, and cannot co-occur with Neg or Wh-questions. It is used in neutral, non-focused questions, in both written and spoken genres. A typical answer is the repeated predicate or sentence. *Ka* and *kia*, on the other hand, have a different distribution, as they can be post-predicate (as in (1)) or sentence-final, and can co-occur with Neg and Wh-questions. Both are more common in spoken contexts. They differ subtly in that *ka* is used for rhetorical questions, and *kia* in non-neutral confirmation contexts. In addition, *ka* is answered with yes-no particles, whereas *kia* is answered with predicates or sentences. *Ka* prefers sentence-final position, whereas *kia* prefers post-predicate position. We also compare particle questions to intonation-only questions, and discuss the functions of the particles with reference to relevant literature such as Farkas 2006, Groenendijk and Stokhof 1984, Gunlogson 2003.

In the second part of the paper, we present a structural analysis to explain the different behaviours of the particles. *Nakai*, the core Q-particle, appears on the far right of the complex of post-verbal particles (*x,y,z* in (2)), yet Q is argued to be a high left-peripheral category (Rizzi 1997). We posit that *nakai* is merged high on the left, but attracts the predicate and post-predicate particles to its specifier, thus accounting for *nakai*'s obligatory post-predicate position at the end of the entire predicate complex. We argue that *nakai* (Q) and *nākai* (Neg) are merged in the same head position, accounting for their complementary distribution and similar form, but that *nākai* does not attract the predicate, accounting for their different word orders (Neg-V/V-Q). We also discuss Wh-questions.

While *nakai* is in Neg/Q head, we argue that *kia* and *ka* are Q-particles in Focus head position, given their non-neutral interpretations. These two particles optionally attract either the predicate, or the PredP to their Spec, allowing for their post-predicate or sentence-final positions. The basics are shown in (2): Neg does not attract to Spec, Pred is moved to Spec of Q, and Pred or PredP is moved to Spec of Focus. Differences between *ka* and *kia* are argued to be lexical and not syntactic.

- (2) \_\_\_ Neg/Q \_\_\_ Focus [<sub>PredP</sub> Predicate-x-y-z Subject Object t<sub>Pred</sub>]

We conclude with a discussion of implications of our results for syntax, in particular for analyses of the left periphery, and for the discourse/syntax interface.