Notes on the Niuean perfect

Lisa Matthewson · Heidi Quinn · Lynsey Talagi

1 Introduction

This squib presents preliminary findings on the semantics of the Niuean perfect. Niuean is a Polynesian language spoken in Niue and by Niueans in diaspora, the latter located primarily in New Zealand. Previous research has identified two elements which separately or together mark the perfect aspect in Niuean: a pre-verbal particle kua, and a post-verbal particle tuai (Seiter 1980, Massam 2009). However, the semantics of the perfect have not been fully investigated in prior research.

We will show that the Niuean perfect is partially similar to an English perfect, in that it induces present relevance effects and disallows certain past adverbials. However, it diverges from the English perfect in other ways. As noted by Bauer (1997) for the related language Māori, the Niuean perfect can induce inchoative readings; it also allows present in-progress readings. In these latter respects it displays similarity with perfects in some Salish languages (Davis 2006, Kiyota 2008, Turner 2012), and with the Japanese teiru construction (Ogihara 1998, Nishiyama 2006, among many others).

Unreferenced data in this squib represent the third author’s judgments as a native speaker of Niuean, from the village of Lakepa.

2 Prior research

According to Seiter (1980:7), the pre-verbal particle kua ‘indicates perfect aspect, i.e. expresses a completed event whose relevance continues into the present, or a past or future point of reference.’ Perfect aspect can also be rendered by the post-verbal tuai, or by kua and tuai together (Seiter 1980:8). These basic facts are illustrated in (1-3).  

1 Many thanks to the participants in the 2012 Field Methods class at the University of Canterbury, and to Henry Davis. This research was supported in part by a College of Arts Pacific Language Consultant award at the University of Canterbury, a University of Canterbury Erskine Fellowship awarded to Lisa Matthewson, and by SSHRC grant #410-2011-0431.

2 Data are presented in the Niuean orthography. g is a velar nasal, and t is pronounced [s] before front vowels (Seiter 1980:x). There is inter-speaker variation in vowel length; some vowels in our data have different lengths from those found in other sources. Abbreviations not covered by the Leipzig Glossing Rules: DIR1 = toward speaker; HAB: habitual; PERS: personal article; PRO: pronominal.

3 Data from Seiter (1980) do not always match our third author’s judgments. This may be due to language change in the intervening 30 years, or to dialect differences.
Notes on the Niuean perfect

(1) **Kua** oti lā ia e vahega
    PRF finish just 3SG ABS class
    ‘The class has/is just finished.’

(2) Hau **tuai** e tehina haau
come PRF ABS brother your
    ‘Your little brother has come.’

(3) **Kua** uku hifo foki **tuai** a au ke he toka
doive down also PRF ABS 1SG to bottom
    ‘I have dove down to the bottom before.’

Overt tense morphology is optional in Niuean. According to Seiter (1980:9), **tuai** is incompatible with tense marking, and the only tense marker **kua** can co-occur with is the rare past marker **na** (glossed by Massam 2009 as ‘past uncertain/ongoing truth’). Seiter writes that **na kua** gives an explicit past perfect, but past perfect readings arise even in the absence of **na**, as shown in (4).

(4) He mogo ne hoko mai au, **kua** fitā he kai he tau faoa e
time PAST arrive DIR1 1SG PRF already COMP eat ERG PL people ABS
tau kai ne fiafia au ki ai
food PAST like 1SG to PRO
    ‘When I arrived, the people had already eaten the food I like.’

A future perfect is shown in (5); we set past and future perfects aside from now on.

(5) Ka liu mai a koe, **kua** momohe **tuai** a mautolu
when return DIR1 ABS 2SG PRF sleep.PL PRF ABS 1PL.EXCL
    ‘When you return, we shall have gone to sleep.’ (Seiter 1980:8 / McEwen 1970:48)

In addition to the prototypical perfect uses illustrated so far, **kua** allows present state readings, as shown in (6).

(6) **Kua** ita mai a Pita ki a au
    PRF angry DIR1 ABS Pita to PERS me
    ‘Pita’s angry at me.’

Seiter characterizes this as an extension of the perfect meaning, ‘the state being viewed as the ongoing effect of some completed event’ (1980:8). Finally, Seiter observes (1980:9, following McEwen 1970) that in past narratives, **kua** may freely alternate with past marking.

From a syntactic perspective, the Niuean perfect has been investigated by Massam (2009), as part of her examination of the TAM system. We set the syntax of **kua** and **tuai** aside in this squib, although we would like to point out one interesting fact: **kua** appears to the right of epistemic modals (7), but to the left of deontic ones (8). (The first half of this generalization was noted by Seiter 1980:13.) This supports the frequently-advanced hypothesis that epistemic modals sit higher in the tree than root modals (Cinque 1999, Hacquard 2006, among many others).
3  Tuai is tei

Before beginning our semantic discussion, it is important to note that the _tuai_ discussed by Seiter and Massam is, in the speech of our third author, _tei_. This perfect _tei_ is distinguishable phonologically, syntactically, and semantically both from another _tuai_ (‘long ago’, as in (9)), and from the pre-verbal element _tei(tei)_ ‘almost’, as in (10). Unlike all other instances of the phoneme /t/ before front vowels – which are pronounced as [s] – the /t/ in the perfect _tei_ is pronounced [t].

(9)  Fā hī ika he vaha _tuai_
    HAB catch.fish fish at time _long.ago_
    ‘I used to fish a while back.’

(10) _Kua_ _tei(tei)_ oti _tei_ e _vahega_
     [sei(sei)] [tei] _PRF_ _almost_ finish _PRF_ ABS class
    ‘The class is nearly finished.’

The perfect use of _tei_ is not mentioned in Seiter (1980), Sperlich (1997), or Massam (2009), but Seiter’s grammar does contain a few examples of it (1980:52,180,191). Our third author has a prescriptive judgment that perfect _tei_ may not be strictly ‘correct’, but it is overwhelmingly preferred in her speech over _tuai_. Whether the _tuai/tei_ contrast reflects a dialect difference or language change remains a topic for future research.

4  (Non-)occurrence with past-time adverbials

PerfecTs in some languages, including English, disallow a subset of past-time adverbials, typically those which pick out a particular past time interval (Klein 1992, Giorgi and Pianesi 1997, Chung 2012, among others). The same is true of the Niuean perfect, as shown in (11-14). All these examples are good with the past tense marker _ne_ or with no TAM marking (in which case they receive simple past translations in English).

(11) **Kua** hau a **Tom i ne afi**
    _PRF_ come ABS **Tom on PAST day**
    ‘Tom has arrived yesterday.’
In contrast, a ‘since’ adverbial is fine with the perfect, just like in English.4

5 Present relevance and experiential readings

As briefly suggested by Seiter, and as is common for perfects cross-linguistically, the Niuean perfect has present relevance effects. These are illustrated in (16-18). (16a) is a current relevance situation; the perfect is offered and the past tense ne is rejected. In (16b), the opposite is true.

(16) a.  **Context: Breaking up with someone.**
   Kua oti tei e kapitiga ha taua
   PRF finish PRF friend POSS 1DU.INCL
   ‘Our relationship is/has finished!’

   b.  **Context: Telling a story about the past.**
   Ne oti e kapitiga ha taua ti fano au ki Sydney
   PAST finish ABS friend POSS 1DU.INCL so go 1SG to Sydney
   ‘Our relationship ended and I went to Sydney.’

In (17a), the perfect marking leads the hearer to expect that the little brother is still there. If the brother came and went while the husband was out, the non-perfect version in (17b) is more appropriate.5

(17) a.  **Context: I see a man coming up the front driveway and I call out to my husband who’s inside the house:**
   Kua hau (tei) e tehina haau!
   PRF come (PRF) ABS younger.sibling your
   ‘Your little brother has come!’

---

4 (15) is rejected with tei; see section 9 below.
5 Bauer (1997:87-88) similarly notes for Māori that if one says ‘The visitors have arrived’ using kua, it implies you should get ready to welcome them.
b. Hau e tehina haau i nī nei
come ABS younger.sibling your on earlier.on
‘Your little brother came earlier.’

Finally, (18) with perfect marking is only acceptable if the speaker is ready at the utterance time; this cannot be a report about having been ready earlier.  

\[
(18) \{\text{Kua}\} \text{ mau } \{\text{tei}\} \text{ au ke fano ke hī } \text{ ika}
\]
\[
\text{PRF} \text{ ready PRF} \text{ 1SG to go to catch.fish fish}
\]
‘I’m ready to go fishing.’

The Niuean perfect also allows experiential readings, as observed by Bauer (1997:118) for Māori. This is shown in (19).

\[
(19) \text{A: Kua } \text{ hī } \text{ nakai a koe tali mai he moui a koe?}
\]
\[
\text{PRF} \text{ catch.fish Q ABS 2SG since DIR1 at live ABS 2SG}
\]
‘Have you fished since you were born/since you’ve become alive?’

\[
\text{B: Kua } \text{ hī } \text{ tei } \text{ au}
\]
\[
\text{PRF} \text{ catch.fish PRF} \text{ 1SG}
\]
‘I have fished.’

Without the tali mai he moui a koe ‘since you were born’, (19A) can be a question about whether B has fished yet on a particular day. (19B) is similarly ambiguous between an experiential ‘ever’ reading, and being about a particular occasion.

So far, the Niuean kua …tei construction is looking like a garden-variety perfect (if there is such a thing). In the next sections we will see that there is more to the story.

6 Result state readings

As noted above, Seiter observes that kua allows present-state readings (as in (6)). Further examples from our own fieldwork are given in (20-24).

\[
(20) \text{Kua } \text{ malona e gutuhala}
\]
\[
\text{PRF} \text{ broken ABS door}
\]
‘The door is broken.’

\[
(21) \text{Kua } \text{ galo e talo}
\]
\[
\text{PRF} \text{ lost ABS taro}
\]
‘The taro is lost.’

\[
(22) \{\text{Kua}\} \text{ lolelole } \{\text{tei}\} \text{ a Tom}
\]
\[
\text{PRF} \text{ tired PRF} \text{ ABS Tom}
\]
‘Tom is tired.’

\footnote{If a sentence has been tested and accepted with kua, with tei, or with both (but is bad if neither is present), we mark this using curly brackets \{\}.}

\footnote{(19B) also has a present in-progress reading, which we discuss in section 8.}
Seiter expresses the intuition that in these cases, ‘the state [is] viewed as the ongoing effect of some completed event’ (1980:8). This idea is supported by data such as (25), where the predicate is eventive and the perfect gives a result state reading.

If (20-24) involve result state readings, they would be more accurately translated into English as perfects of changes-of-state. (20), for example, would correspond to ‘The door has broken,’ and (22) to ‘Tom has got tired.’ Our third author agrees with, and sometimes spontaneously produces, translations of this type.

How do these change-of-state readings arise? One possibility is that all the relevant predicates are inherently eventive, already denoting a change of state: ‘break’ rather than ‘broken’, and ‘get angry’ rather than ‘angry’. This analysis would enable a simple and unified analysis of kua ... tei as a perfect. It would also make Niuean similar to at least some Salish languages, in which stage-level states like ‘hungry’ and ‘tired’ have been argued to be inherently inchoative (Bar-el 2005, Kiyota 2008).

An alternative possibility is that it is the perfect itself which is inducing the change-of-state semantics. This idea is suggested by Bauer (1997), who explicitly states that similar cases with Māori kua involve inchoative/ingressive aspect.

Teasing these two ideas apart – that the result-state readings arise due to inherently change-of-state predicates, or to the semantics of the perfect – is difficult to do on the basis of stage-level states and result states of eventive verbs, since for example ‘Mary is angry’ and ‘Mary has got angry’ are true and appropriate utterances in very similar types of context. Individual-level states are a more fertile testing ground for the hypothesis that the perfect introduces a change-of-state semantics; we turn to these in the next section.

7 Inchoative readings with individual-level predicates

According to Seiter (1980:8), ‘kua and tuai are used only with states which are potentially transitory, not inherent.’ In our fieldwork we have found a slightly different result, namely that perfect marking actively coerces an individual-level predicate into having an inchoative, change-of-state interpretation. An initial example of this is given in (26). Kua is rejected in the non-inchoative situation in (26a), but offered in the inchoative situation in (26b).
(26) a.  *Context: A woman has just given birth to twins. The doctor says:*  
(#Kua) lalahi (#tei) e tau tama haau  
(#PRF) big (#PRF) ABS PL child your  
‘Your children are big.’  
*Comment:* ‘Kua and tei might only be possible if the babies were somehow measured in the womb before they were born, and they’ve come out bigger.’

b.  *Context: You haven’t seen a friend’s twins for a while, and when you see them again, you notice that they have got big.*  
{Kua} lalahi {tei} e tau tama haau  
{PRF} big.PL {PRF} ABS PL child your  
‘Your kids have grown / they’re bigger.’  
*Comment:* ‘Without kua or tei this would be ‘Your children are big’.’

Similarly in (27), kua and tei are infelicitous in the non-inchoative (a) context, and their presence causes the third author to picture the inchoative situation in (b). The same happens in (28) for the predicate kula ‘red’, and in (29) for malolo ‘strong’.

(27) a.  *Context: Complimenting a friend on her daughter’s intelligence.*  
(#Kua) ililo (#tei) e tama fifine haau  
(#PRF) intelligent (#PRF) ABS child female your  
‘Your daughter is intelligent.’

b.  *Context: Something has just happened; the daughter has become intelligent.*  
Kua ililo tei e tama fifine haau  
PRF intelligent PRF ABS child female your  
‘Your daughter is now intelligent; she has become intelligent.’

(28) a.  Kula e tau lau akau  
red ABS PL leaf tree  
‘The leaves are red.’

b.  {Kua} kula {tei} e tau lau akau  
{PRF} red {PRF} ABS PL leaf tree  
‘The leaves have turned red.’  
*Comment:* ‘It’s autumn. Or it could be you’re dyeing them.’

(29) *Context: Tom wasn’t fishing yesterday, and you were wondering about his health.*  
*But today you see him fishing.*  
Hī ika a Tom he aho nei …  
catch.fish fish ABS Tom on day this  
‘Tom is fishing today …’

a.  Liga malolo a ia  
EPISTEMIC strong ABS 3SG  
‘He’s probably well.’

b.  Liga {kua} malolo {tei} a ia  
EPISTEMIC {PRF} strong {PRF} ABS 3SG  
‘He’s probably better.’
The data in (26-29) reveal a clear difference between Niuean and languages like English when the perfect is applied to individual-level states. In English, ‘Your daughter has been intelligent’ does not have an inchoative reading (in fact, rather the reverse: it implicates that she is losing her intelligence).

In the next section we turn to a final interpretation allowed by the Niuean perfect: an in-progress one. This reading may initially appear surprising, but it has parallels in other languages, and may be able to be unified with the other readings seen so far.

8 In-progress readings with eventive predicates

The final reading of the Niuean perfect is a present-in-progress reading with eventive predicates. This interpretation is not mentioned by Seiter (1980), although his grammar contains some examples of it, as shown in (30-31).

(30) Kua kumi a taha i a koe
    PRF search ABS INDF at PERS you
    ‘Somebody is looking for you.’ (Seiter 1980:41)

(31) Kua kai ika mo e talo a mogo nei
    PRF eat fish with ABS taro ABS 1PL.EXCL at time this
    ‘We are eating fish and taro right now.’ (Seiter 1980:70)

Examples of in-progress readings from our own fieldwork are given in (32-34). In addition, (19B), which above received a present perfect translation, can also be uttered while the speaker is fishing.

(32) Kua teitei mate tei au
    PRF almost die PRF 1SG
    ‘I’m nearly dying.’
    Comment: ‘You can say this while you’re running’ (feels like you’re nearly dying).
    Comment: ‘Teitei mate au is more like saying it afterwards; ‘I nearly died’.’

(33) Mate tei au
    die PRF 1SG
    ‘I’m dying.’ or ‘I’m dead’ (e.g. if playing paintball, and having received too many hits, being out of the game).

(34) (Kua) kai tei au
    (PRF) eat PRF 1SG
    ‘I am eating.’ or ‘I’ve already eaten.’

In-progress readings are freely accepted by our third author with perfect-marked activity predicates, but dispreferred with accomplishments, as shown in (35). An in-

---

8 For Māori, Bauer (1997:118) writes that it is not clear whether kua can be used for a situation which began in the past and is still continuing.

9 This is one of a very small number of contexts where we have a judgment distinguishing kua from tei. Our third author finds Kua mate au fully acceptable only in the paintball context (with a gloss ‘I’m dead’), and judges it ‘not quite right’ in a situation where one is running (with a gloss ‘I’m dying’). See section 9 for further discussion.
progress reading with an accomplishment requires an alternate construction, as in (36).

(35) **Kua** faka-meā **tei** e au e motokā haau  
PRF CAUS-clean PRF ERG 1SG ABS car your  
‘I’ve cleaned your car.’ / # ‘I’m cleaning your car.’  
*Comment: ‘Sounds like you’ve completed it.’*

(36) **Ko e** faka-meā **(a)** au **he** motokā haau  
PRESENT CAUS-clean (ABS) 1SG at car your  
‘I’m cleaning your car.’

The in-progress readings in (30-34) can be assimilated to the data in the previous two sections, under the assumption that in both cases, ingression is signaled, whether into a state or an event. We expect that our eventual formal analysis of the Niuean perfect will involve the placing of the reference time within a post-transition interval. This will allow both completed and in-progress/current state readings.

This sketch of an idea bears similarity to various other proposals in the literature, including Kiyota’s (2008) analysis of the perfect marker in Sancias, the Saanich dialect of Northern Straits Salish (see also Turner 2012). And Davis (2006: chapter 18) proposes that the St’tál’imctes (Lillooet Salish) aspectual auxiliary plan foregrounds the state following a final transition. The final transition can be either a telic culmination, or an initial change-of-state. Plan therefore gives rise to stative readings with stage-level states, post-inchoation readings with individual-level states, in-progress readings with activities, and completed readings with achievements and accomplishments. The parallels with Niuean are striking.

The readings of the Niuean perfect are also reminiscent of the Japanese *teiru* construction. As discussed by Ogihara (1998), Nishiyama (2006), Kiyota (2008), among others, *teiru* predications typically receive ongoing process interpretations with durative verbs (activities and accomplishments, (37a-b)), and resultant state interpretations with instantaneous verbs (achievements and inchoative states, (37c-d)).

(37) a. **Jiroo-ga** odot-teiru  
Jiroo-NOM dance-TEIRU  
‘Jiroo is dancing (now).’  
(Kiyota 2008:16)

b. **Taroo-ga** kuruma-o naosi-teiru  
Taroo-NOM car-ACC fix-TEIRU  
‘Taro is fixing a/the car (now).’  
(Kiyota 2008:16)

c. **Ano-tegami-ga** todoi-teiru  
that-letter-NOM arrive-TEIRU  
‘That letter has arrived (and is here now).’  
(Kiyota 2008:16)

d. **Taroo-wa** tukare-teiru  
Taroo-TOP get.tired-TEIRU  
‘Taro is tired.’  
(Kiyota 2008:17)

Niuean *kua ... tei* differs from Japanese *teiru* in some respects; for example, the former freely allows completed readings for activities,\(^\text{10}\) and disprefers in-progress readings with all verb types, facilitated by certain adverbs.

\(^{10}\) *Teiru* does allow experiential readings with all verb types, facilitated by certain adverbs.
readings for accomplishments. However, it is notable that three such unrelated language families as Polynesian, Salish and Japonic all have aspectual morphemes which encode both perfect and in-progress interpretations. Our future research on Niuean will draw on the insights of work on similar elements in these other languages.

9 Summary and questions for future research

We have shown in this preliminary study that the Niuean perfect shares some core properties with perfects cross-linguistically. It displays present relevance effects, allows experiential readings, and disallows a similar range of past-time adverbials as the perfect does in languages like English. We have also shown that the Niuean perfect differs from the English one in important ways; it allows present stative readings with stage-level states, present in-progress readings with activity predicates, and coerces a change-of-state reading with individual-level states. We have speculated that all the interpretations of the Niuean perfect can be viewed as involving a reference time which follows some transition (including the initial transition into a state, or an event).

Many issues remain for future research. Most obviously, a formal analysis must be produced which accounts for the generalizations established here. The interaction of the perfect with tense marking also requires investigation: why can the perfect not co-occur with the past tense marker ne? Under what circumstances are past and future perfect readings licensed?

Another issue for future research concerns a possible additional interpretation of the Niuean perfect (not mentioned by previous researchers), namely an ‘about to’ usage. A sentence like (38) can be uttered right before one starts to sing. Similarly, (34) above can be uttered immediately before one begins eating.

(38)  Kua lologo tei au
      PRF sing PRF 1SG
      ‘I’m singing.’
      Comment: ‘You say it and then you start singing straight away.’

Whether this is an additional reading, or whether it is merely an extension of the in-progress reading (parallel to how an English present progressive can be used right before an event begins), is a topic for future research.11

Another issue which deserves further attention is the interaction of kua ... tei with accomplishment predicates. As noted in section 8, perfect-marked accomplishments seem to lack the in-progress reading allowed for activities. The discussion in Bauer (1997) also suggests a difference between activities and accomplishments with the Māori perfect. Bauer gives examples of perfect activities which receive ‘start to’ interpretations (1997:89), but an example of an accomplishment (‘wash the house’) which cannot (1997:128). And again there is a parallel with Salish, where accomplishments are the only predicates which resist inchoative readings, either without the perfect (as in Skwxwú7mesh; Bar-el 2005), or with it (as in Səncəθən; Kiyota 2008).

Finally, an important question concerns the relationship between the two elements kua and tei. Do these contribute different meanings which can be teased apart, and combined compositionally? In the majority of contexts which allow a perfect, kua and tei may either or both be present without affecting acceptability. However, there are some

---

11 The ‘about to’ usage is impossible for St’át’imcets plan, which is otherwise very similar to the Niuean perfect (Henry Davis, p.c.).
hints that there may be differences between the two elements. We have found that tei alone is preferred when the event is ongoing at the utterance time, whereas kua tends towards a completed action interpretation. One instance of this was noted in footnote 9 with respect to example (33), and the judgment that example (15) is bad with tei may be another instance of the same generalization. Furthermore, there are preliminary hints that something to do with certainty or evidentiality may be going on. Our third author judges that (39) is bad with tei in the context given, where there is no certainty or direct witness of the event.

(39) Context: You just assume Tom’s gone to Mary’s house, because he usually does.

Kua fano (###tei) a Tom ke he fale ha Mary
PRF go (#PRF) ABS Tom to house poss Mary
‘Tom’s gone to Mary’s house.’

Comment: ‘Probably would leave tei out here, because that’s more like a sure thing rather than an assumption; more when you know for a fact.’

Comment: ‘Maybe not with tei if you can’t actually see him go (even if you know for sure that he is going).’

Tei has interesting syntactic properties which also deserve further investigation. We have noticed that it is in complementary distribution with the adverbial lā ‘just’. (40a,b) are accepted with either lā or tei, but rejected with both (in either order). There is an additional difference between (40a) and (40b), which is the presence of the particle ia – obligatory with lā (cf. Seiter 1980:16) but impossible with tei. Whether these distributional facts will eventually provide clues to the meaning of tei is a question for future research.

(40) a. Kua oti lā ia e vahega
PRF finish just PARTICLE ABS class
‘The class has just finished.’

b. Kua oti tei e vahega
PRF finish PRF ABS class
‘The class is/has finished.’

References


Notes on the Niuean perfect


**Affiliation**

Lisa Matthewson  
Department of Linguistics  
University of British Columbia  
lisa.matthewson@ubc.ca

Heidi Quinn  
Department of Linguistics  
University of Canterbury  
heidi.quinn@canterbury.ac.nz

Lynsey Talagi  
University of Canterbury /  
Christchurch Niue Community  
lynsey.talagi@canterbury.ac.nz