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# *Non-verbal predication in Oceanic languages*

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## Abstract

Oceanic languages, much like the rest of Austronesian, show a propensity to do without any copula when construing their non-verbal predicates. Most of their word classes (adjectives, nouns, pronouns, numerals, prepositions, locatives...) are capable of heading a predicate – a property known as *omnipredicativity*. Many classes can even inflect for Tense–Aspect–Mood, with no need to be converted into a verb. The present overview focuses on Mwotlap (Vanuatu), a radical example of these grammatical tendencies; and other Oceanic languages are cited whenever they show different structures. Despite the omnipredicative pattern pervasive in the family, some languages have innovated copulas, or other verbal strategies, to encode certain types of non-verbal predicates.

## 1. Non-verbal predicates in Oceanic languages: introduction

This overview of non-verbal predicates in the Oceanic family will follow the general approach outlined by Creissels, Bertinetto, and Ciucci (Position Paper, this volume).

Among the 1,270 languages of the vast Austronesian phylum, about 500 belong to the Oceanic family (Lynch, Ross, and Crowley 2002). Although they are today spoken across the whole Pacific, they all emerged from the diversification of what was once a single language, Proto Oceanic (POc), spoken about 3,200 years ago, off New Guinea. Oceanic languages are more or less diverse depending on the domain. For example, they are unanimous in encoding clusivity in their personal pronouns, and in providing them with at least three numbers. Yet their typical word order varies: SOV dominates in Western Oceanic, SVO in Vanuatu, VOS in New Caledonia, VSO in Polynesian.

When it comes to non-verbal predicates, Oceanic languages resort to different strategies. Thus, Lelepa (Central Vanuatu) has a verbal copula *pi*:<sup>1</sup>

- (1) *Lelepa* (Lacrampe 2014: 163)  
<E=*pi* naure kiki nae>.  
3SG=COP island small 3SG.POSS  
'It was his small island.'

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this chapter, the limits of the predicate constituent will be indicated, whenever relevant, using pointy brackets <...>.

The Dorig language of north Vanuatu forms its non-verbal predicates merely through juxtaposition (François forthcoming *a*):

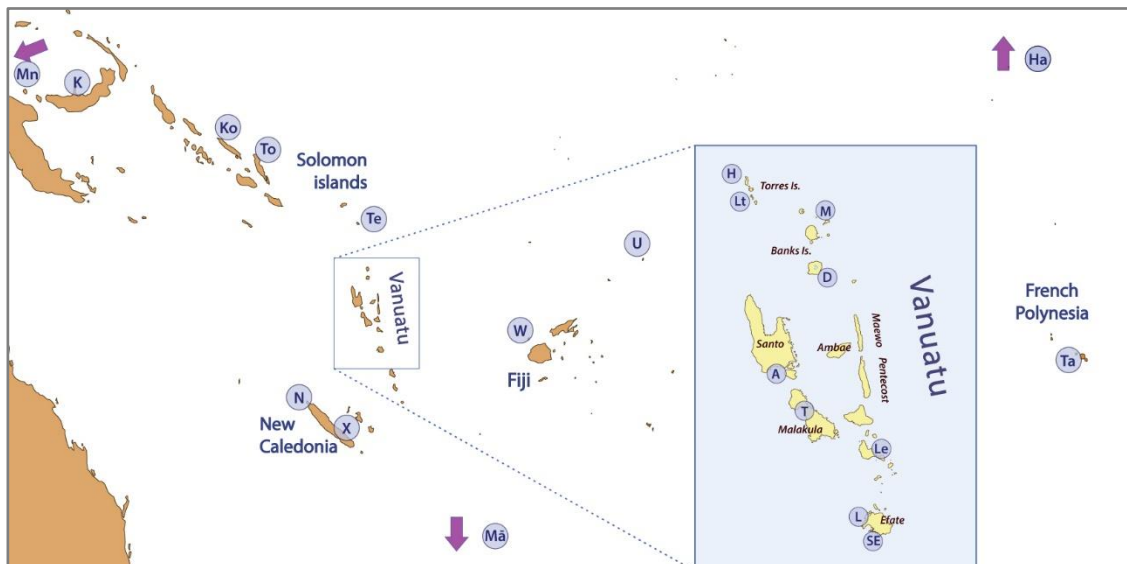
- (2) *Dorig* <<https://doi.org/10.24397/pangloss-0003197#S35>>  
 Ni {o *tdun vi-lwo nami kma*}.  
 3SG ART person ATTR-great POSS 1EXCL:PL  
 ‘He is a major figure for us.’

These two syntactic patterns are not equally distributed across Oceanic. The existence of a verbal copula as in (1) is a rarity in Austronesian: the default pattern is for non-verbal predicates to lack any copula, as in (2). Indeed, in most Oceanic languages, all major word classes can head a predicate phrase – whether they are nouns, pronouns, adjectives, numerals, possessive classifiers, prepositions, locatives or other adverbials. This property of being *omnipredicative* [§4.3] is crucial to understand non-verbal predicates in Oceanic languages.

The main grammatical overviews of the Oceanic family (e.g. Pawley 1973; Lynch, Ross, and Crowley 2002; Ross 2004) tend to focus on nominal and verbal morphology, and say little about non-verbal predicates per se. Few publications deal explicitly with non-verbal clauses in Oceanic: e.g. Ross (1998) and van Lier (2017a) on adjectives and property words; Moysse-Faurie (2019) on locative and existential constructions.

For reasons of space, it is impossible to fully describe the grammatical diversity of non-verbal predicates across all segments of the Oceanic family. This chapter will address as many construction types as possible, in a broad sample of languages. The languages mentioned in the present study are shown in Figure 1, and listed in (3).

Figure 1 – Location of the Oceanic languages cited in this study



- (3) The 21 languages mentioned in this study :
- Papua N. Guinea:* Mn – Manam; K – Kove
- Solomons:* Ko – Kokota; To – Toqabaqita; Te – Teanu
- North Vanuatu:* H – Hiw; Lt – Lo-Toga; M – Mwotlap; D – Dorig; A – Araki
- Central Vanuatu:* T – Tape; Le – Lewo; L – Lelepa; SE – Nafsan
- New Caledonia:* N – Nêlêmwa; X – Xârâcùù

<i>Fiji:</i>	W – Wayan Fijian
<i>Polynesian:</i>	U – East Uvean ; Ha – Hawaiian; Ta – Tahitian; Mā – Māori

Sources from the literature will be cited along this study. For the languages underlined in (3), the sources are my personal fieldwork: this includes my handwritten notes and my text corpora in 24 languages, totalling 250,000 words. Since 1997, I have collected data in three areas: on the Araki language of Santo (François 2002); on the 17 languages of the Torres and Banks islands, in north Vanuatu (François 2005a, 2011), including Mwotlap (François 2001, 2003a, 2005b); and on the four languages of Vanikoro in the Solomons, particularly Teanu (François 2009, 2021). All my recordings are archived in the open-access *Pangloss* archive (François 2022); in this study, I will always strive to cite my text corpora, by providing the relevant DOI link at the sentence level.

Among the languages of our sample, one example of a pure omnipredicative grammar is Mwotlap, a language of north Vanuatu. Because it treats virtually all its word classes as potential predicates, Mwotlap shows a syntax where non-verbal clauses are built without a copula: this constitutes a radical illustration of the most canonical structures found across Oceanic. For that reason, this chapter will take Mwotlap as the backbone of our areal typology. Every subsection will begin by examining the syntactic patterns in that language, before situating them in the broader Oceanic context.

After a presentation of verbal clauses [§2], the next sections will examine different subtypes of non-verbal predicates: property words and adjectives [§3]; nominal predicates, both equative and ascriptive [§4]; numerals [§5]; possessive predicates [§6]; locative and adverbial predicates [§7]; existential predicates [§8]; and ostensive clauses [§9].

## 2. Verbal predicates

Mwotlap’s default order for all clauses, whether verbal or non-verbal, is *Subject–Predicate*.<sup>2</sup> Case is not marked morphologically, but by the position of arguments in the clause. Word order is highly constrained, and consistently SVO; alignment is accusative. The subject of non-verbal predicates is always coded in the same way as S, the sole argument of intransitive verbal clauses.

The internal syntax of verbal clauses in Mwotlap revolves around a constituent that the Oceanic tradition (e.g. Durie 1988; Evans 2003) calls the *verb complex* [VC]. The VC consists minimally of a verb (the head), optionally followed by one or more postverbal modifiers (François 2004b): e.g. a second verb in a serial pattern, or a lexical “postverb” (a modifier specialised in the postverbal position). The VC in (4), shown here between pointy brackets (<...>), includes a verbal head *van* ‘walk’ and a postverb *yeghuquy* ‘casually’:

- (4) *Mwotlap* <<https://doi.org/10.24397/pangloss-0007411#S123>>  
 N-et <tit= **van** *yeghuquy* *vēhte*><sub>VC</sub> van lē-vētan en.  
 ART-person NEG:POT<sub>1</sub>= walk casually NEG:POT<sub>2</sub> DIREC LOC-land DEIC  
 ‘One cannot walk casually into that piece of land.’

<sup>2</sup> We’ll discuss an exception in §4.1.3.

By definition, lexical postverbs are restricted to that head-modifying function (François 2011; Rangelov 2022); they are the only lexical word class of Mwotlap that cannot head a predicate.

Markers of tense, aspect and mood are affixes or particles attached to the lexical elements of the VC. A characteristic of North Vanuatu languages (not general in Oceanic) is that negative polarity is incorporated in the TAM paradigm – which must thus be renamed “TAMP” (tense, aspect, mood, polarity).<sup>3</sup> Thus, (4) shows a discontinuous TAMP marker, the Negative potential<sup>4</sup> *tīt=... vēhte* ‘cannot’. TAMP morphemes constitute a single paradigm of unanalysable, portmanteau forms that encode TAMP semantics in a single morpheme, whether simple or discontinuous. The TAMP paradigm of Mwotlap has 26 members (François 2003a: 37, 2005b: 133).

TAMP morphemes surface in two slots in the clause, labelled here TAMP<sub>1</sub> and TAMP<sub>2</sub>, which surround the lexical elements of the VC:

- (5) Structure of a verbal clause in Mwotlap:  
*subject* { **TAMP<sub>1</sub>** VERB (postverbs) **TAMP<sub>2</sub>** }<sub>vc</sub> *object adjuncts*

One slot TAMP<sub>1</sub> follows the subject, and opens the VC; the second slot TAMP<sub>2</sub> closes it, preceding the object and other complements. Some morphemes fit in TAMP<sub>1</sub> (e.g. perfect *me-*, future *te-*); others in TAMP<sub>2</sub> (e.g. presentative *vatag* in (107)); some are bipartite, with one element in each slot, as in (4). As we shall see later, the slot of the predicate’s lexical head in (5) need not be a verb: it can equally be filled by a noun, an adjective, a numeral, or other major classes (except lexical postverbs).

In Mwotlap, a verb can only head a predicate if it inflects for TAMP – e.g. the iamitive *mal* in (6). This requirement is also shared by adjectives [§3.1].

- (6) *Mwotlap* <<https://doi.org/10.24397/pangloss-0002300#S116>>  
 \**Tita qañyis.* Tita {**mal** qañyis}.  
 mother cook mother IAM cook  
 \**Mum cook.* ‘Mum has cooked already.’

Even though Tahitian is a VSO language, the verb complex in (7) shows an internal syntax (TAM *verb* postverbs) that is rather parallel with (5) above:

- (7) *Tahitian* (Lazard and Peltzer 1991: 11)  
 {Nō ‘ite noa atu ra}<sub>vc</sub> vau iā-na.  
 REC.PST see only DIREC DEIC SBJ:1SG OBJ-3SG  
 ‘I have just seen him.’

<sup>3</sup> See Schnell (2011: 31) for Vera’a; Malau (2016: 461) for Vurès; François (forthcoming *a*) for Dorig. From now on, I will use the term TAMP when dealing with North Vanuatu languages, and TAM otherwise.

<sup>4</sup> Following conventions advocated by Haspelmath (2010: 674), this chapter will capitalise the names of grammatical categories when they are specific to a particular language.

### 3. Adjectival predicates

#### 3.1. Adjectives vs. verbs: similar but different

Oceanic languages vary in the way they treat property words. A frequent configuration is to have two distinct classes (Ross 1998; Lichtenberk 2005): a few “pure adjectives”, used only as noun modifiers; and an open class of “adjectival verbs”, which can be either attributes or predicates. Mwotlap only has the latter type: all its property words are predicative.

So-called adjectival verbs contrast with other verbs in their ability to modify a noun in a noun phrase, with no need of a relative clause. Compare the Mwotlap adjectival verb *d[i]lig* ‘murky’ with the stative verb *m[i]tiy* ‘sleep, be asleep’:

- (8) *Mwotlap*
- |           |                |   |             |                   |
|-----------|----------------|---|-------------|-------------------|
| nē-bē     | dilig          | ≠ | *nē-nēt̄mey | mitiy             |
| ART-water | murky          |   | ART-child   | sleep             |
| [ADJ]     | ‘murky waters’ | ≠ | [V]         | *a sleeping child |

This grammatical behaviour is sufficient to contrast two word classes. We might see them as two subtypes of verbs – as proposed by several authors – or decide to label them “adjectives” vs. “verbs”, as proposed in François (2003a:52, 2017:314). Because Mwotlap lacks a category of *pure adjectives*, it is more economical to analyse its “adjectival verbs” simply as a class of “adjectives”.

Although Mwotlap’s adjectives and verbs form two separate classes, their contrast is neutralised in predicate position. As van Lier (2017a: 1275) puts it: “[P]redicatively used Oceanic property words typically adopt the grammatical features associated with event-word predicates, without needing a copula.” This observation knows few exceptions [see §4.3.2].

In Mwotlap, a predicative adjective implies the presence of a TAMP marker, just like we saw for verbs. Thus, the adjective *d[i]lig* in (9) can take the same aspect prefix as the stative verb *m[i]tiy* in (10) – namely, the Stative *ne-*:

- (9) *Mwotlap*      <<https://doi.org/10.24397/pangloss-0007411#S49>>
- |                           |                  |
|---------------------------|------------------|
| Nē-bē                     | <b>ne-</b> nlig. |
| ART-water                 | STA-murky        |
| ‘The water is/was murky.’ |                  |
- (10) *Mwotlap*      <<https://doi.org/10.24397/pangloss-0002298#S60>>
- |                           |                  |
|---------------------------|------------------|
| Ēgnō-n                    | <b>ne-</b> mtiy. |
| spouse-3SG                | STA-sleep        |
| ‘His wife is/was asleep.’ |                  |

Given clauses like (9)–(10), the only way to identify the word class of the predicate head is to run a syntactic test such as (8). If we accept my proposal to assign *d[i]lig* to a category of “adjectives” (rather than “adjectival verbs”), then (9) qualifies as a non-verbal predicate, but (10) does not.

In terms of etymology, the stative markers of northern Vanuatu (Mwotlap /nɛ-/ , Löyöp /nyɛ/...) reflect a former dummy noun *\*na ɣai* (ART thing).<sup>5</sup> Thus, a structure like (9) was originally based on an NP predicate {N+Adj}, literally “The water (is) *thing* murky”, with an underlying syntax parallel to the nominal clauses we’ll see in §4.1.2. The same path was followed by Tahitian with the construction *mea* +Adj: what was originally a noun *mea* ‘thing’ used as a predicate has grammaticalised into a stative aspect (Vernaudon 2011; 2023: 208).

- (11) *Tahitian* (Vernaudon 2011: 327)  
 ⟨E **mea** *rahi* te fare.  
 INC thing/STAT big ART house  
 ‘The house is big.’

### 3.2. When adjectives inflect for TAM

The Stative aspect corresponds to the default situation, when a property is assigned to the subject at a given point in time (past or present),<sup>6</sup> without any reference to a change of property. For example, (9) may describe the temporary state of a pond gone murky for a moment (Spanish *estar*), but it may as well correspond to a permanent property (Spanish *ser*).

Mwotlap’s property words are compatible not just with the Stative aspect as in (9), but with any of the 26 morphemes that constitute the TAMP paradigm (François 2003a:47–53). Combining an adjective with a non-stative TAMP marker triggers a dynamic reading. Thus, while the Stative *ne-* (surfacing as *na-* through vowel harmony) in (12) assigns the property ‘red’ without implying any change of state, the Perfect *me-* (*ma-*) in (13) explicitly construes the property as a resultant state, and thus refers to a change-of-state event ‘turn red’:

- (12) *Mwotlap* <<https://doi.org/10.24397/pangloss-0002511#S12>>  
 Nō-yōtēnge **na-lawlaw**.  
 ART-leaf STA-red  
 ‘The leaves *are red*.’
- (13) *Mwotlap* <<https://doi.org/10.24397/pangloss-0007414#S17>>  
 Na-naw geh e kē **ma-lawlaw** qeso na-day.  
 ART-wave PL TOP 3SG PFT-red as.if ART-blood  
 ‘The waves had *turned red*, as though it was blood.’

Whether the property word receives a stative reading (*be P*) or a dynamic one (*turn P*), most Oceanic languages simply inflect the head word using their TAMP morphology – the same one they use with verbs. Their class of adjectives is therefore not only predicative, but also *tamophoric* (to borrow a term from Tournadre 2004), i.e. capable of hosting Tense–Aspect–Mood inflection. As a corollary, typical Oceanic languages not only lack a copula ‘be’ as in (12), but also a verb ‘become’, as in (13).<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Dummy nouns will be mentioned again in §6, for the language Lo-Toga, under the form *na* (<*\*na ɣai*>).

<sup>6</sup> Mwotlap does not encode tense (François 2003a: 39–43): thus (9)–(10) may translate ‘is’ or ‘was’.

<sup>7</sup> Some dictionaries of Austronesian languages gloss their property words using such English .../...

The combination of an adjective with a dynamic TAMP marker sometimes correlates with a different translation in English. Thus, taking *het* ‘bad’, compare the readings of the Stative *ne-* with those of the Apprehensive mood *tile*:

- (14a) *Mwotlap* [AF.AP2.055]  
 Na-trak mino **ne**-het.  
 ART-car my STA-bad  
 [Lit. ‘my car (is) bad’]  
 a) ‘My car is of poor quality.’ [PERMANENT STATIVE]  
 b) ‘My car is out of order.’ [TEMPORARY STATIVE]
- (14b) Na-trak mino **tile** het.  
 ART-car my APPR bad  
 [Lit. ‘my car might (turn) bad’]  
 ‘My car might break down.’ [EVENT]

In Mwotlap, negating an adjectival predicate involves the same negation as verbs (e.g. the realis negation *et=... te*), following the structure in (5):

- (15) *Mwotlap* <<https://doi.org/10.24397/pangloss-0003282#S33>>  
 lkē wun (<*et=malaklak te*> so kamyō so leg.  
 3SG maybe NEG<sub>1</sub>=happy NEG<sub>2</sub> COMP 1EXCL:DU PROSP marry  
 ‘Maybe she’s not happy that we’re getting married.’

In sum, even though their behaviour inside the NP defines them as a separate word class, the adjectives of Mwotlap behave like stative verbs in all other respects; this is common in Oceanic. A less typical situation is found in Teanu (Temotu subgroup, Solomon Islands), where adjectives and verbs remain distinct even in predicative contexts.

### 3.3. Two separate word classes: the case of Teanu

In order to form a predicate, Teanu verbs require a prefix – a portmanteau form that combines modality (realis vs. irrealis) with subject indexing (François 2009: 115):

- (16) *Teanu* <<https://doi.org/10.24397/pangloss-0003351#S133>>  
 Daviñevi **li**-maliawo. \**Daviñevi* maliawo.  
 women 3PL:REAL-light.fire women light.fire  
 ‘The women light/lit a fire.’

Besides the subject-and-mood prefix, verbs can combine with other TAM particles, such as the Perfect *ka*:

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wording as “be or become happy”, “be or become red”... In fact, the ambiguity between stative and dynamic readings is not a characteristic of individual lexemes, but a general behaviour of all property words.



(17) *Teanu* <<https://doi.org/10.24397/pangloss-0003351#S76>>

Menuko ia-kia **ka** **li**-tomoe.  
 friend POSS-1INCL:DU PFT 3PL:REAL-disappear  
 ‘Our friends have vanished.’

Adjectives are incompatible with subject prefixes, and simply form direct predicates:

(18) *Teanu* <<https://dictionaria.cld.org/sentences/teanu-XV000981>>

Bele voro ini ⟨jiejie⟩. / \*i-jiejie  
 skin stingray 3SG rough 3SG:REAL-rough  
 ‘The skin of stingrays is rough.’

*Teanu* thus clearly distinguishes adjectives from verbs even in predicate phrases. The assignment of lexemes to these two classes is not always predictable based on their meaning: while the word *mimione* ‘dry’ is an adjective, its antonym *dobuo* is a verb ‘[be] wet’, because it takes a subject prefix in predicate position (François 2021).

Although they do not take the subject-and-mood prefix, adjectives remain compatible with other TAM particles. For example, *moso* ‘ripe’ can form a stative predicate (*moso* ‘it is ripe’), but it can also combine with the perfect, and receive a dynamic reading (*ka moso* ‘it has gone ripe’). (19) shows TAM markers (*ka*, *kata*, *kape*) both with prefixed verbs (*maili*, *vene*) and unprefixed adjectives (*kokoro*, *vitoko*, *moso*):

(19) *Teanu* <<https://doi.org/10.24397/pangloss-0003351#S108>>

Vongoro **ka** *kokoro* ponu, ka avtebe adapa **ka** **i-maili**  
 almond PFT dry TOP and taro their PFT 3SG:REAL-grow  
**i-vene** **kata** **ka** *vitoko* **kape** *moso*.  
 3SG:REAL-go.up IAM PFT close FUT ripe  
 ‘The almonds had dried up. As for their taros, they had grown  
 so much that they were almost ripe already.’  
 [Lit. ‘... their taros have grown<sub>VB</sub> up<sub>VB</sub>, it has already (become) close<sub>ADJ</sub>  
 that they will (be) ripe<sub>ADJ</sub>.’]

In sum, Oceanic languages usually have a class of adjectives (or adjectival verbs) that contrast formally with (other) verbs. That contrast manifests itself at least through their behaviour inside noun phrases (e.g. *Mwotlap*), but also, sometimes, in predicate position (e.g. *Teanu*). However, in spite of these distributional differences, adjectives can head a predicate, and even inflect for TAM – just like verbs.

## 4. Nominal predicates

### 4.1. Standard noun predicates

#### 4.1.1. A preliminary note on equative vs. ascriptive predicates

A few Oceanic languages distinguish formally between two sorts of noun predicates: ascriptive predicates (named “inclusion” in the Position Paper) vs. equative ones (“identity statements”). The Wayan variety of Fijian, for example, has two different copulas (Pawley 2000). *Tia* is used with ascriptive predicates:

(20a) *Wayan Fijian* (Pawley 2000: 312)

⟨Ei      *tia*      qasenivuli) o      Tevita.  
3SG:NPST   be:ASCR   teacher      PERS      (name)

'Tevita is a teacher.'

[ASCRPTIVE]

Its other copula *ni-* is reserved to equative predicates – i.e. clauses that state the identity between two referential expressions:

(20b) ⟨Ei      *ni-a*      na      qasenivuli) o      Tevita.  
3SG:NPST   be:EQUAT-3SG   ART   teacher      PERS      (name)

'Tevita is the teacher.'

[EQUATIVE]

The two type of predicates are also distinguished in some Polynesian languages (§4.3.2). That said, a more general tendency among Oceanic languages is to treat them syntactically in the same way – as we'll see now with Mwotlap.

#### 4.1.2. Direct noun predicates

In Mwotlap, a noun predicate takes the form of a bare noun phrase, with no extra morphological material. This construction, sometimes described in the literature as *zero copula* (Stassen 1994; Lemaréchal 1997: 23–25), is labelled "juxtaposition construction" in the Position Paper.<sup>8</sup>

(21) *Mwotlap*      <<https://doi.org/10.24397/pangloss-0002300#S132>>

Kē ⟨na-tbunbun⟩.

3SG   ART-fairy

'She (was) a fairy.'

(22) *Mwotlap*      <<https://doi.org/10.24397/pangloss-0003309#S66>>

Na-kaka   gōhkē   e      ⟨na-kaka   te-le-pnō   Qo⟩.

ART-story   DX1      TOP      ART-story      ORIG-LOC-land      pig

'This story (is) a story from Pentecost island.'

Because a predicate NP is formally identical to a subject NP, the only way to distinguish them is through their relative position, as per the standard order {SUB<sub>NP</sub> ⟨PRED<sub>NP</sub>⟩}.

Mwotlap uses this direct construction for its ascriptive predicates – whether a simple noun as in (21), or a noun phrase as in (23):

(23) *Mwotlap*      <<https://doi.org/10.24397/pangloss-0002531#S27>>

Imam   mino,   kē      ⟨n-et      maymay⟩.

father   my      3SG      ART-person      strong

'My father (is) a fierce man.'

[ASCRPTIVE]

The same juxtaposition strategy encodes equative clauses, as in (24):

(24) *Mwotlap*      <<https://doi.org/10.24397/pangloss-0002492#S3>>

lqet   e,      ēgnō-n      ⟨Rōlēy⟩.

(name)   TOP      spouse-3SG      (name)

'As for lkpwet, his wife (was) Rōlēy.'

[EQUATIVE]

<sup>8</sup> These constructions are reminiscent of example (2) we had seen for nearby Dorig.

When a human referent is topicalised or otherwise activated in discourse, it is indexed with a 3SG resumptive pronoun *kē*, as in (21) or (23). When it is [-human], it is indexed through zero anaphora. As a corollary, a well-formed Mwotlap declarative sentence may consist only of a [-human] noun phrase, preceded by a zero subject:

(25a) Mwotlap <<https://doi.org/10.24397/pangloss-0002298#S38>>

(∅)        ⟨*nē-qētqoqo*⟩.  
 3SG:INAN    ART-gecko  
 ‘(It) (is) a gecko [=kind of lizard].’

For such orphaned predicates, the label “juxtaposition construction” is less adequate; I prefer to describe all examples (21)–(25) as *direct nominal predicates* – where “direct” refers to the absence of any copula or overt predicator.

All examples so far showed nouns preceded by the article *na-* (or *nV-*). This article does not encode definiteness or specificity, but simply functions as an obligatory determiner (a “D” in a “DP”). Virtually all Mwotlap nouns<sup>9</sup> require the presence of the article to form a valid NP – whether it is used as an argument (subject, object...) or as a predicate. For common nouns that require *na-*, a predicate cannot consist of the noun alone:

(25b) \*⟨*Qētqoqo*⟩.  
 gecko  
 \*‘(It is) a gecko.’

An NP predicate may include the same modifiers as any NP argument: locative modifier (22), attributive adjective (23), possessor (31), etc. In addition, due to its status as a predicate head, a direct nominal predicate can also include so-called “postverbs” (modifiers of the predicate head) like the restrictive *ēwē* ‘just’ in (25c):

(25c) ⟨*Nē-qētqoqo ēwē*⟩.  
 ART-gecko        just  
 ‘(It is) just a gecko.’

In principle, any string that is well-formed as an argument NP can form a predicate. When the head is a personal pronoun (implying an equative reading: *it’s me*), it must belong to the set of independent pronouns, which generally have more phonological weight than argument pronouns. In Mwotlap, a light pronoun like 3SG *kē* can only be used as an argument; a direct NP predicate requires the heavier independent pronoun *ikē*, which is used in “tonic” contexts (stressed argument, topic, predicate):

(26) Mwotlap <<https://doi.org/10.24397/pangloss-0002492#S109>>

Na-mtig    e    ⟨*ikē*⟩!  
 ART-COCONUT    TOP    3SG:TONIC  
 [context: the enemy has turned into a coconut]  
 ‘The coconut, (that’s) him!’

<sup>9</sup> The only nouns that do not take the article *na-* are proper nouns, as well as a subset of [+human] nouns that behave like them (François 2005b: 122–126), such as kin terms: e.g. (23) *imam* ‘father’, (24) *ēgnō* ‘spouse’.

Direct NP predicates are not only found in affirmative statements. Certain content questions – whether in direct or reported speech – are NP predicates:

- (27) *Mwotlap* <<https://doi.org/10.24397/pangloss-0003310#S31>>  
 No et= ēal te so (∅) (na-hap).  
 1SG NEG<sub>1</sub>= know NEG<sub>2</sub> COMP 3SG:INAN ART-what  
 ‘I don’t know what it is.’ [Lit. ‘I don’t know that (it) (is) what.’]

NP predicates, both ascriptive and equative, can be negated using the bipartite negation *et=... te* [see (15)] – still with no copula:<sup>10</sup>

- (28) *Mwotlap* <<https://doi.org/10.24397/pangloss-0002298#S71>>  
 Nēk (et= qētqoqo te)!  
 2SG NEG<sub>1</sub>= gecko NEG<sub>2</sub>  
 ‘You (are) not a gecko!’ [NEGATIVE ASCRIPTIVE]

- (29) *Mwotlap* <<https://doi.org/10.24397/pangloss-0007436#S197>>  
 (Et= inēk te).  
 NEG<sub>1</sub>= 2SG:TONIC NEG<sub>2</sub>  
 ‘It (is) not you.’ [NEGATIVE EQUATIVE]

The negation of standard noun predicates (*It is not N*) is distinct from negative existentials of the type *There is no N* [see §8.1, §8.5].

#### 4.1.3. Anchored noun predicates

An alternative strategy for NP predicates in *Mwotlap* involves a deictic anchor in final position. This anchor is usually a demonstrative:

- (30) *Mwotlap* <<https://doi.org/10.24397/pangloss-0002298#S49>>  
 (Nē-qētqoqo) agōh.  
 ART-gecko DX1  
 ‘This (is) a gecko.’ [ASCRIPTIVE PREDICATE]

- (31) *Mwotlap* <<https://doi.org/10.24397/pangloss-0002298#S13>>  
 (Ēgnō-n) anen.  
 spouse-3SG DX2  
 ‘That (is) his wife.’ [EQUATIVE PREDICATE]

In (30)–(31), if the predicate were the deictic, these clauses would be a form of “ostensive” construction [§9], so (31) would translate ‘Here is his wife’ or ‘His wife is here’. However, this analysis does not work. In order to locate a referent in space, one would not use the person-anchored deictics (DX1, DX2),<sup>11</sup> but the ostensive deictic *gēn* (glossed ‘DX3’), optionally supported by the ostensive particle *ete* [§9]. In that case, the deictic is indeed the predicate:

<sup>10</sup> We’ll see that Lo-Toga, one of *Mwotlap*’s neighbours, requires a special negative copula in such contexts – see §4.2.1.

<sup>11</sup> *Mwotlap*, like many Oceanic languages, has a three-way demonstrative system. What I gloss DX1 refers to the speaker’s sphere; DX2 to the addressee’s sphere. As for the ostensive DX3, it is defined .../...

- (32) (Ete) ēgnō-n ⟨gēn⟩.  
 OST spouse-3SG DX3  
 'Here is his wife.' / 'His wife is there.' [OSTENSIVE PREDICATE]

Contrary to the ostensive clause (32), the function of (31) is not to locate a referent in space, but to define the nature of the subject, i.e. answer the question "What/Who is that?". This reading is also evident in (33):

- (33) Mwotlap <<https://doi.org/10.24397/pangloss-0003282#S119>>  
 Ba ⟨na-hap geh⟩ qele gōh?! – ⟨Yagnigni-mem⟩ anen!  
 but ART-what PL like DX1 spouses-1EXCL:PL DX2  
 'But what (are) these [creatures]?! – Those (are) our husbands!'

The correct analysis is thus to say that the predicate in (31) or (33) is really the initial noun phrase. This interpretation is confirmed by observing the syntax of the negation: the negator (*et=... te*) will affect not the final demonstrative, but the initial NP – another proof that this is indeed the predicate:

- (34) Mwotlap <<https://doi.org/10.24397/pangloss-0003272#S85>>  
 ⟨Et= imam nōnōm te⟩ gōh.  
 NEG<sub>1</sub>= father POSS:2SG NEG<sub>2</sub> DX1  
 'This (is) not your father.' [NEGATIVE EQUATIVE]

In sum, these constructions constitute another form of noun predicates, similar to the ones we saw in §4.1.2. However, they correspond to a different syntactic type, with properties of its own; I will label it *anchored noun predicate* (ANP), in contrast with the *standard noun predicates* (SNP) that lack the deictic anchor. The two constructions are semantically equivalent – being able to form ascriptive as well as equative clauses – yet they are formally distinct.

On the one hand, the SNP conforms to the standard constituent order {(topic) SUBJECT + PREDICATE} – knowing that the subject is realised as zero as in (25a), *iff* it is [-human]. The ANP, by contrast, is unusual in being the only construction of Mwotlap that systematically lacks an overt subject, and begins with the predicate:

- (35) Constituent order in an *anchored noun predicate*  
 → {PREDICATE + ANCHOR}

The presence of the clause-final anchor is incompatible with the expression of a subject, even when it is [+human] (which cannot be zero-encoded):

- (36a) Kē ⟨ēgnō-n⟩.  
 3SG spouse-3SG  
 'She is his wife.' [SNP]
- (36b) \*Kē ⟨ēgnō-n⟩ anen.  
 3SG spouse-3SG DX2  
 \*'She is his wife there.' [ANP]

In sum, the ANP construction (31) cannot be seen as a mere variant of an SNP: it is a different syntactic construction altogether. The clause-final demonstrative cannot be analysed simply as a postposed subject, or posttopic, because it is not a full NP; at best, it indexes the subject in space – a function that I propose to describe as a *deictic anchor*.<sup>12</sup>

Just like SNPs, ANPs can form ascriptive predicates as in (30), or equative ones as in (31). Only the latter interpretation is possible when the predicate is a personal pronoun:

- (37) *Mwotlap* <<https://doi.org/10.24397/pangloss-0002300#S83>>  
 Ba tita! <Ino> agōh!  
 but mother 1SG:TONIC DX1  
 ‘But Mum! This (is) me!’

Anchored noun predicates are common in Oceanic, even when presented under other names – see the “presentational identificational sentences” of Toqabaqita (Lichtenberk 2008: 941). They also occur in the English-based creole Bislama, where (31), (34), (37) would translate respectively as (31’), (34’), (37’):

- (31’) *Bislama*  
 <Woman blo hem> ia.  
 woman POSS 3SG DEIC  
 ‘That’s his wife.’
- (34’) <I no papa blo yu> ia.  
 PRED NEG father POSS 2SG DEIC  
 ‘This is not your father.’
- (37’) <Mi> ia.  
 1SG DEIC  
 ‘It’s me.’

In all these Bislama examples, the predicate phrase <...> ends with prosodic prominence, whereas the final deictic *ia* (<Eng. *here*) is systematically unstressed, and uttered with a down-step typical of post-focus position: /<sup>ˈ</sup>mi ˈja/ ‘It’s me’. This is reminiscent of a posttopic, with the peculiarity that the deictic *ia* is not a well-formed NP, and hence would be ungrammatical as an actual topic or posttopic: it only exists as a post-predicate anchor, in a subjectless ANP construction. In this respect, Bislama is strictly parallel with its Oceanic substrates.

Aside from demonstratives proper, the deictic anchor in Mwotlap can also take the form of a personal pronoun (always in its ‘tonic’, independent form):

- (38) *Mwotlap* <<https://doi.org/10.24397/pangloss-0002298#S72>>  
 <Igñi-k> inēk!  
 spouse-1SG 2SG:TONIC  
 ‘You’re my wife!’

<sup>12</sup> A similar construction in English would be the noun predicate <Tom> *here*, uttered on the phone, as an equivalent to *This is Tom ~ I am Tom*.

At first glance, one might think that *igni-k* ‘my wife’ in (38) is the subject, and *inēk* ‘you’ (being a tonic pronoun) is the predicate – with a literal reading ‘my wife, that’s you’ [cf. (26)].<sup>13</sup> The ambiguity can again be solved through the test of the negation, as shown by these corpus examples:

- (39) *Mwotlap* <<https://doi.org/10.24397/pangloss-0002298#S72>>  
 ⟨Et= *igni* te⟩ ino!  
 NEG<sub>1</sub>= spouse:2SG NEG<sub>2</sub> 1SG:TONIC  
 ‘I am not your wife!’

Occasionally, the anchor can be a noun phrase with its own deictic markers:

- (40) *Mwotlap* <<https://doi.org/10.24397/pangloss-0003262#S59>>  
 ⟨Et= *imam nōnōm* te⟩ imam mino en.  
 NEG<sub>1</sub>= father POSS:2SG NEG<sub>2</sub> father POSS:1SG DEIC  
 ‘My father (is) not your father.’

The position of the negation in (40) makes it clear that we’re dealing with an ANP construction: first the predicate, then its anchor – a sort of grammaticalised posttopic.

## 4.2. TAM-inflected noun predicates

Whether they were SNP or ANP clauses, the noun predicates examined so far involved aspectually and modally unmarked statements. But what happens with semantically dynamic NP predicates?

### 4.2.1. A copula for clauses marked in TAM or negated

Cross-linguistically, even when a language can do without a copula for its noun predicates, it often requires one when the statement involves other tenses and aspects than the simple present – as happens in Russian or Arabic. This typological tendency verifies in at least one Oceanic language: Lo-Toga (Torres islands, Vanuatu).

Lo-Toga does not need a copula when it deals with adjectival predicates, whether in the positive (Stative *na n̄wōdōl*) or in the negative (*tate pero*):

- (41) *Lo-Toga* <<https://doi.org/10.24397/pangloss-0003283#S35>>  
 Ne vegevage pi gerite ⟨*tate pero*⟩, ⟨*na n̄wōdōl* wereño⟩.  
 ART story about octopus NEG long STA short just  
 ‘The story of the octopus isn’t long, it’s very short.’

And just like Mwotlap, it uses the juxtaposition strategy for its standard noun predicates:

- (42) *Lo-Toga* <<https://doi.org/10.24397/pangloss-0003292#S45>>  
 Nike ⟨ne tēle⟩ hitē nike ⟨ne n̄wiē⟩?  
 2SG ART person or 2SG ART demon  
 ‘(Are) you a human, or (are) you a demon?’ [ASCRPTIVE]

<sup>13</sup> This ambiguity is reminiscent of the sort of “argument-predicate reversal” that the Position Paper identifies in the syntax of nominal predication generally.

However, Lo-Toga requires a copula *da* whenever the noun predicate inflects for TAM – like the Aorist in (43) – or is negated (44):

- (43) *Lo-Toga* <<https://doi.org/10.24397/pangloss-0003292#S20>>  
 Ni meñēni-e vē—n vēn vēn, ⟨ni **da** tēle luwō⟩.  
 AO:3SG feed-OBJ:3SG DUR:INTSF DUR DUR AO:3SG COP person big  
 ‘She raised him so well that he *became an adult*.’ [PHASAL ASCRIPTIVE]

- (44) *Lo-Toga* <<https://doi.org/10.24397/pangloss-0003283#S26>>  
 ⟨Tate **da** gerite⟩, ⟨megole mē⟩ pe!  
 NEG COP octopus child POSS:3SG now  
 ‘It was *not* an octopus, it (was) her child!’ [NEGATIVE ASCRIPTIVE]

This verb *da* comes from an etymon \**dayo* ‘do, make’ (François 2005a: 494), which has grammaticalised into an auxiliary forming causatives (François 2010: 528) [see (68)], and also into a copula ‘be, become’. In addition, the combination *tate da* [tətəʔʔa] ⟨NEG+COP⟩ in (44) has coalesced into a negative copula *deda* [tʔəʔʔa], which works as its synonym:

- (44′) *Lo-Toga* <<https://doi.org/10.24397/pangloss-0003283#S29>>  
 ⟨**Deda** gerite⟩.  
 NEG:COP octopus  
 ‘It was *not* an octopus.’ [NEGATIVE ASCRIPTIVE]

Through these innovations, Lo-Toga now has two copulas: *da* for TAMP-inflected NP predicates like (43)–(44), and a dedicated copula *deda* for negative NP predicates like (44′).

But while these facts of Lo-Toga are consistent with typological tendencies, they are not representative of its family. Only a minority of Oceanic languages have developed a verb *be* [see §4.3.1], and Lo-Toga is the only one to have done so in North Vanuatu.

#### 4.2.2. TAMP-inflected predicates: nouns or verbs?

We saw in §3.2 how Mwotlap adjectives are “tamophoric”, i.e. can combine with TAMP inflection. Its nouns behave essentially the same: whenever a nominal property is presented as temporally, aspectually or modally unstable, the noun will combine with TAMP particles, in the same slot as verbs or adjectives.

Sentence (45) shows a series of non-verbal predicates in the Perfect aspect, one headed by a noun (*lōmgep* ‘young man, youngster’), others by adjectives (e.g. *bōybōy* ‘sturdy’):

- (45) *Mwotlap* <<https://doi.org/10.24397/pangloss-0003282#S75>>  
 Na-taybe-n Vēnvēntey e kē ⟨mi-*lwo*⟩ ēgēn, kē ⟨mō-**lōmgep**⟩  
 ART-body-3SG (name) TOP 3SG PFT-big now 3SG PFT-youngster  
 a hēywē! Kē ⟨mō-*bōybōy*⟩, na-taybe-n ⟨mē-wē a mē-wē⟩!  
 SUB true 3SG PFT-sturdy ART-body-3SG PFT-good SUB PFT-good  
 ‘Vēnvēntey’s body has grown up, he’s really *become a young man*!  
 He’s become strong, his body’s got really healthy.’

A comparison between the semantically similar examples (43) and (45) confirms that Lo-Toga and Mwotlap, despite their closeness, show key differences in the way they combine



their nouns with TAM markers.<sup>14</sup>

In Mwotlap, nominals can combine with TAM inflection only when predicative. This differs from the languages which allow nominal tense also within argument noun phrases (e.g. ‘their former/future teacher’) – as in the Tupi-Guarani family (Bertinetto 2020). In theory, the “TAMP-inflected noun predicates” (TINP) of Mwotlap could be seen as another instance of “juxtaposition construction”; except, it is a construction where the NP predicate inflects for TAM, something which NPs cannot do when used as arguments.

With examples such as (45), one might be tempted to see a conversion from noun (‘youngster’) into verb (‘become a young man; grow up’) – in which case we would be dealing here with a verbal predicate after all. And yet, *lōmgep* in (45) continues to be a noun, even when combined with the morphology typically associated with verbs: indeed, all nouns in this language are tamophoric. Compared with direct noun predicates {X (is) N}, the “semantic increment” (Evans and Osada 2005: 371) inherent in this construction can always be compositionally calculated based on the semantics of the TAM morpheme. In sum, the most economical analysis is to consider that TINP clauses are still headed by a noun.<sup>15</sup>

In principle, TAM inflection can affect just any noun of Mwotlap; this is indeed an argument to regard this grammatical property as a feature of the word class Noun as a whole. That said, in a naturalistic corpus, some nouns lend themselves more readily to TAM inflection than others (François 2003a: 53–72).

TAM markers are mostly found with those nouns whose meaning is compatible with modal or aspectual instability. This is true, for example, of stages in life (‘child’, ‘adult’, ‘old man’, ‘old woman’...) as in (45). Other nouns referring to social status or occupation are eminently aspect-compatible, e.g. *wulus* ‘brother-in-law’, *mayanag* ‘chief’, *tēytēybē* ‘healer’:

- (46) *Mwotlap* [AF-AP09-48a]  
 Nok ⟨so *tēytēybē ne gatgat*⟩.  
 1SG PROSP healer of language  
 ‘I’d like to (become a) linguist.’

Another type of nouns that often combine with TAM inflection are the names of plants or animals when they evolve in time – e.g. the growth stages of a coconut:

- (47) *Mwotlap* <<https://doi.org/10.24397/pangloss-0002415#S321>>  
 Kē ⟨ni-*wōh*⟩, kē ⟨ni-*myot*⟩,  
 3SG AO-green.coconut 3SG AO-sour.coconut  
 kē ⟨ni-*wōmenmen*⟩ kē ⟨ni-*sisgoy*⟩.  
 3SG AO-ripe.coconut 3SG AO-fall  
 ‘It’ll (become a) green-coconut; it’ll (become a) sour-coconut;  
 it’ll (become a) ripe-coconut, and then it will fall down.’

<sup>14</sup> For a detailed analysis of these TAM-inflected noun predicates, see François (2003a: 53–72, 2004a) for Mwotlap; François (2017) for Hiw. For a general discussion of tensed nominals, see Nordlinger and Sadler (2004), Lecarme (2008) and Bertinetto (2020).

<sup>15</sup> Positing a conversion (zero-derivation) of a noun into a verb can only be justified when the semantics of the resulting predicate fails to be compositional. See, for example, the case of kinship terms in Mwotlap (François 2004a: 192).

Grammatically, (47) is a series of four clauses in the tense I call “Aorist” (François 2003a: 165–199), used among others for sequences of events, either in the past or in the future. While the final clause has a verb *sisgoy* ‘fall’, the three previous clauses employ nouns, which refer to the successive stages of the coconut.

In all the examples cited so far, TAM inflection corresponds to ascriptive predicates, in which the subject itself evolves in time. The predicative property N is presented as valid at a given date, but invalid at another date: for example, a person who was once a child becomes a young man or an adult. Although this is less frequent, a TINP can also correspond to an equative clause. This is clear when the predicate is a personal pronoun:

- (48) *Mwotlap* <<https://doi.org/10.24397/pangloss-0007414#S85>>  
 ⟨Et= *ikē* qete⟩ nen.  
 NONDUM<sub>1</sub>= 3SG:TONIC NONDUM<sub>2</sub> DX2  
 [watching out for her father, as several people come by]  
 ‘That (is) not him yet.’ [EQUATIVE TINP]

The predicative *ikē* we had seen in (26) was a simple SNP, equating two referential NPs (‘X=Y’) with no reference to time. But in (48), *ikē* inflects for the nondumitive TAM category *et=... qete* ‘not yet’,<sup>16</sup> which places the equative predication in a temporal perspective.

### 4.3. Copulas and their absence among Oceanic languages

#### 4.3.1. The lack of copula, a strong tendency in the Pacific

In sum, *Mwotlap* lacks any copula, and systematically forms its noun predicates using the juxtaposition strategy. *Mwotlap* is a perfect example of an *omnipredicative* language – to cite the concept coined by Launey (1994) for Classical Nahuatl: that is, a language in which all major word classes can head a predicate, with no need of extra morphology.

Omnipredicativity does not imply that the noun–verb distinction is blurred: languages can be omnipredicative and yet otherwise show clearcut contrasts between different word classes (Lemaréchal 1989: 25; Launey 1994: 284; Mithun 1999; François 2017: 329). Simply, these word classes, in spite of their differences, share the ability to head a predicate with no copula.<sup>17</sup>

The vast majority of Oceanic languages are omnipredicative too. To take random examples across the family [see the map in Figure 1], (49) illustrates an equative SNP in *Manam*, (50) an ascriptive SNP in *Tape*, (51) an ascriptive ANP in *Nêlêmwa*, (52) a TINP in *Kokota*:

- (49) *Manam* (Lichtenberk 1983a:451)  
 ŋe-∅ ⟨ategisi wauwau⟩.  
 this-3SG teacher new  
 ‘This is the new teacher.’

<sup>16</sup> The so-called *nondum* phasal aspect (Veselinova and Devos 2021), or nondumitive (François forthcoming *a*), is named after Latin *nondum* ‘not yet’.

<sup>17</sup> Our reasoning on nouns is thus parallel with the one on adjectives [§3.3]: adjectives and verbs may share the ability to head a predicate – and even inflect for TAM – and yet they can constitute two distinct word classes.

- (50) *Tape* (Crowley 2006: 166)  
 Netite vës esen (tëvëlëkh).  
 child little POSS:3SG girl  
 ‘Her little child was a female.’
- (51) *Nêlêmwa* (Bril 2017: 221)  
 (Caan) hoona.  
 Lethrinus dx2  
 ‘That (is) a Lethrinus [fish species].’
- (52) *Kokota* (Palmer 2009: 273)  
 Ġetu (n-e-ke mane datau).  
 (name) REAL-3SG-PFV man chief  
 ‘Getu was the chief [at that time].’

The omnipredicative profile of Oceanic languages has given rise to a debate about the limits of the noun/verb distinction in this family (Broschart 1997; Moyse-Faurie 2005; van Lier 2016, contributions in van Lier 2017b; Bril 2017). The consensus is that verbs and nouns do form separate word classes after all, yet they often share more properties together than in Indo-European languages – notably, the ability to head a predicate, and to inflect for TAM.

These qualitative observations are confirmed by the GramBank typological database (Skirgård et al. 2023). Table 1 analyses GramBank’s feature GB117: “*Is there a copula for predicate nominals?*”,<sup>18</sup> and focuses on the languages for which an answer (yes or no) is provided. At the global scale, copulas are preferred by the majority of the world’s languages, namely 56.8% of the sample for which GramBank has data (1152/2029); and 66.6% if we remove Austronesian languages. Pacific languages show the opposite tendency: this is true at the level of the macro-area “*Papunesia*” (77.8%), and of the Austronesian linguistic family (81.1%). The Oceanic section of Austronesian shows similar results, with 77.0% of copula-less languages.

Table 1 – Languages with vs. without copulas, according to GramBank (Skirgård et al. 2023)

<i>area</i>	<i>#lgs on GramBank</i>	<i># w/ info on copulas</i>	<i>copula present</i>	<i>copula absent</i>	<i>% with copula</i>	<i>% without copula</i>
world	2407	2029	1152	877	<b>56.8 %</b>	43.2 %
world minus AN	1896	1612	1073	539	<b>66.6 %</b>	33.4 %
“Papunesia”	726	599	133	466	22.2 %	<b>77.8 %</b>
Austronesian (AN)	511	417	79	338	18.9 %	<b>81.1 %</b>
Oceanic	275	235	54	181	23.0 %	<b>77.0 %</b>

#### 4.3.2. The different types of Oceanic copulas

Languages with copulas are a minority in Oceanic, but they do exist. Thus, we saw in §4.2.1 that Lo-Toga has developed a verbal copula *da* for its TINP clauses. In Central Vanuatu, Nafsan

<sup>18</sup> Link: <https://grambank.cild.org/parameters/GB117>.

(South Efate) has gone one step further, and generalised the use of a verbal copula for all its non-verbal predicates (Thieberger 2006: 173–174, 270–273):

- (53) *Nafsan* (Thieberger 2006: 174)  
 Nafnag nen ⟨i=ta pi nafnag wi mau).  
 food that 3SG.REAL=NEG<sub>1</sub> be food good NEG<sub>2</sub>  
 ‘That food wasn’t good food.’

This *pi* copula behaves like any verb in Nafsan, including stem-initial mutation depending on modality (*pi* realis vs. *fi* irrealis). As a result, Nafsan has essentially lost the juxtaposition strategy (Thieberger 2006: 273). Lacrampe (2014: 238–242) reports on a similar copula *pi/fi* in the neighbouring language Lelepa – see (1). Early (1994: 320–321) describes a copula verb *pe/ve* in nearby Lewo, cognate with *pi/fi*. These copulas originate in a verb ‘make, do’.

In another region, Pawley (2000) shows that Wayan Fijian presents not one but “two *be*’s”, respectively for equative and for ascriptive noun predicates – see §4.1.1.

Polynesian languages present a less clear-cut picture. They lack any copula verb ‘be’; but they do not use the juxtaposition strategy as commonly as we saw for most other Oceanic languages. In Tahitian, where the standard order is {Predicate – Subject} [see (7), (11)], equative noun predicates can, in principle, be expressed as the direct juxtaposition of two NPs:

- (54) *Tahitian* (Vernaudon 2023:152)  
 ⟨Te pō⟩ te taime fifi roa nō’u.  
 ART night ART time painful INTSF POSS:1SG  
 ‘The most difficult moment for me (was) the night.’

If the construction shown in (54) were standard in this language, we would conclude that Tahitian simply uses the juxtaposition strategy for its equative predicates, as is common in Oceanic (21)–(26), (49)–(52). However, this structure is rare in Tahitian (Vernaudon 2023: 151), as the predicate is usually preceded by an optional particle ‘o:

- (55) *Tahitian* (Lazard and Peltzer 1991: 13)  
 ⟨’O mātou⟩ t-ā ’oe mau tamari’i.  
 ID 1EXCL:PL ART-POSS 2SG PL child  
 ‘Your children, that’s us.’

Although ‘o is optional, it has become almost systematic in marking the predicate phrase in equative clauses; thus Vernaudon (2023: 151) glosses it EQ for ‘equative copula’. That said, contrary to the ‘be’ verb of Nafsan, this ‘o copula of Tahitian is not a verb, nor is it obligatory.

Tahitian forms its ascriptive predicates using a particle *e*, sometimes glossed INC for ‘inclusive’ (i.e., ascriptive):

- (56) *Tahitian* (Vernaudon 2023: 113)  
 ⟨E ’ao⟩ terā manu.  
 INC green.heron ART bird  
 ‘That bird is a green heron.’

That *e* disappears in TINP constructions. A sentence like (57) confirms that Tahitian nouns are inherently predicative – unlike those, for example, of Nafsan – since they do not require a copula to form a predicate:

- (57) *Tahitian* (Vernaudon 2011:319)  
 ⟨**Ua** *tamaiti* a'e ra⟩ Ta'aroa.  
 PFT boy DIREC DEIC (name)  
 'Ta'aroa (*became*) a boy.'

So, should the particle *e* be analysed as a copula? It is cognate with Māori *he*, which Bauer (1997) glosses 'classifying particle' (CLSF):

- (58) *Māori* (Bauer 1997, in Vernaudon 2011: 328)  
 ⟨**He** *kahiako*⟩ ia.  
 CLSF teacher 3SG  
 'She is a teacher.'

The cognate morphemes *o* and *he* of Hawaiian have been the object of a controversy: Carter (1996) called them "copular verbs", but Cook (1999) concluded that *o* is a "copular preposition", and *he* an "indefinite determiner". In the latter interpretation, the particle would be comparable to the Mwotlap article *na-*, which is normally present in noun predicates [see (25b)] without being a copula. In sum, depending on their ability to appear in other contexts, it is ambiguous whether the particles found in Polynesian NP predicates (*o*, *he*, *e*) have fully grammaticalised into (non-verbal) copulas, or not yet.

Table 2 recapitulates the four main grammatical profiles we saw. It shows how NP predicates (equative or ascriptive) are encoded, first in the standard (non-TAM) case, vs. in combination with TAM inflection. Among the four profiles cited here, type 2 prevails among Polynesian languages, but type 1 is dominant in the rest of Oceanic. Types 3 and 4 are restricted to smaller areas.

Table 2 – Four language profiles for the encoding of noun predicates in Oceanic

	<i>standard NP predicate</i>	<i>TAM-inflected NP predicate</i>	<i>languages cited</i>
TYPE 1	bare NP	TAM+noun	Mwotlap, Nêlêmwa, Manam, Kokota++
TYPE 2	non-verbal copulas (?)	TAM+noun	Māori, Hawaiian, Tahitian+
TYPE 3	bare NP	TAM+verbal copula	Lo-Toga
TYPE 4	verbal copula	TAM+verbal copula	Nafsan, Lelepa, Lewo; Wayan Fijian

## 5. Numeral predicates

Mwotlap commonly uses numerals adnominally as in (59a), but also predicatively as in (59b). The linear order is identical in the noun phrase (59a) and the clause (59b): the difference in syntactic constituency is marked by prosody.

- (59a) *Mwotlap*  
 na-yño-n vëvet  
 ART-leg-3SG four  
 'its four legs'

(59b) *Mwotlap* <<https://doi.org/10.24397/pangloss-0002298#S27>>

Na-yño-n (**vēvet**).

ART-leg-3SG four

‘It has four legs.’ [Lit. ‘its legs (are) four.’]

Predicative numerals can be used for counting years or hours of the day:

(60) *Mwotlap* <<https://doi.org/10.24397/pangloss-0003273#S65>>

Na-lo (**soñwul**).

ART-sun ten

‘It (is/was) ten o’clock.’

Examples (59)–(60) are numeral predicates that are valid at a given point in time – either the moment of utterance, or the moment of reference in a narrative [see fn.6]; in that respect, they can be compared to the noun predicates we saw in §4.1. But just like nouns, numerals are tamophoric:

(61) *Mwotlap* <<https://doi.org/10.24397/pangloss-0003273#S20>>

Na-lo ni-van hōw ni-**vētēl**.

ART-sun AO-go down AO-three

‘The sun was going down, it (turned) three [o’clock].’

(62) *Mwotlap* <<https://doi.org/10.24397/pangloss-0002531#S86>>

Ni-siok m-atlō, mi-**vitwag**, mō-**vōyō**,

ART-ship PFT-appear PFT-one PFT-two

ni-siok mē-**vētēl**, ni-siok mē-**vēvet**.

ART-ship PFT-three ART-ship PFT-four

‘Then the ships began to appear: there was one, then two,  
then there were three ships, then four...’

In such sentences, numerals occupy the same slot as verbs, and take the same TAM prefixes. While one might propose that numerals have been turned into verbs in (61)–(62), it is more economical to conclude that we are dealing with verbless, tamophoric numeral predicates – just like we saw for adjectives and nouns.

Despite being predicative, Mwotlap numerals are distinct from verbs: indeed, they can also form direct predicates (59)–(60), a construction that is unavailable to verbs [see (6)]. By contrast, numerals in Araki are best analysed as a subclass of verbs, because they systematically inflect for subject and mood in the same way as verbs (François 2002: 81–89):

(63) *Araki* (François 2002: 155)

Ŕaju (*mo= hese*) lo ima rūrunu.

person 3SG:REAL= one LOC house cook

‘There is someone in the kitchen.’

[Lit. ‘person *is one* in the kitchen’]

Numerals are predicative virtually everywhere in Oceanic: see Lichtenberk (1983a: 338ff) for Manam; Sato (2013: 323) for Kove; François (2017: 315) for Hiw; Thieberger (2006: 76) for Nafsan; Brill (2017: 222) for Nêlêmwa; Lazard and Peltzer (1991: 16–18) for Tahitian. They are another clear illustration of the omnipredicativity of Oceanic languages [§4.3].

## 6. Inverse-possessive predicates

The Position Paper contrasts two types of possessive predicates. The “plain-possessive” type says something about the possessor, as in *She has two baskets*; in Oceanic, these constructions are most often based on the syntax of existentials, and will be examined in §8.4. The “inverse-possessive” type predicates about the possessed item, as in *This basket is hers*. Oceanic languages use verbless constructions here, in which the predicate is a word bearing possessive morphology.

In a typical Oceanic language, the majority of nouns belong to the “alienable”, or non-relational class. These nouns encode their possessor by means of an external linker – generally a possessive classifier (Lichtenberk 1983b, 2009) that bears personal affixes. Mwotlap has four of them, glossed ‘FOOD’, ‘DRINK’, ‘CARRY’ [cf. (96)] and ‘POSS’ (‘general possession’, the default classifier):

- (64) *Mwotlap* <<https://doi.org/10.24397/pangloss-0002388#S163>>  
 Kē ni-tey nō-mōmō na-**ga**-yō.  
 3SG AO-COOK ART-fish ART-FOOD-3DU  
 ‘He cooked their fish (for them to eat).’

Possessive classifiers form a word class of their own.<sup>19</sup> While they occur most often as adnominal possessors as in (64), they are autonomous enough to head a predicate. The possessive classifier functions here as an elliptical, headless noun phrase: ‘(one that is) theirs [to eat]’. In other terms, (65) has essentially the same structure as (36a), except that it is elliptical of the head noun.

- (65) *Mwotlap* <<https://doi.org/10.24397/pangloss-0003275#S14>>  
 Nō-mōmō a le-lo hay en, (∅) (na-**ga**-y).  
 ART-fish REL LOC-inside net DEIC 3SG:INAN ART-FOOD-3PL  
 ‘The fish inside the net, that (is) theirs (= it’s for them).’

Lo-Toga, one of Mwotlap’s neighbours, has replaced its possessive classifiers with a general possessive linker *mi* (etymologically, a comitative preposition):

- (66) *Lo-Toga* <<https://doi.org/10.24397/pangloss-0003288#S2>>  
 ē ne vegevage **mi** kemēm  
 OBL ART speech POSS 1EXC:PL  
 ‘in our language’

Unlike the classifiers of Mwotlap, Lo-Toga’s possessive linker *mi* cannot head a predicate by itself. In order to form an inverse-possessive clause, *mi* needs to be supported by a dummy head *na* ‘(the) one’:<sup>20</sup>

<sup>19</sup> The quasi-nominal nature of these classifiers is made evident by their compatibility with the article *na-*, and by their ability to be possessed like relational nouns.

<sup>20</sup> Lo-Toga contrasts its noun article *ne* /nə/ (< POc \*na) with a dummy noun *na* /na/ ‘thing, (the) one’. The latter goes back to a former noun phrase \**na yai* <ART thing>: see fn. 5.

- (67) *Lo-Toga* <<https://doi.org/10.24397/pangloss-0007303#S24>>  
 Ne pu tuwtōw nie ⟨**na mi hegere wureri wereño**⟩.  
 ART rank first 3SG DUMMY POSS HUM:PL small:PL only  
 ‘The first grade of honours, that is [one] for children only.’

The presence of the dummy head *na* is not specific to possession. Lo-Toga requires it whenever it derives a predicate from a nominal linker, e.g. (68) *i* ‘of’, or (69) *te* ‘from’:

- (68) *Lo-Toga* <<https://www.odsas.net/object/105090>>  
 Nihe ⟨**na i de~da-urvë-vë-tēle**⟩.  
 3PL DUMMY of NMLZ~make-well-OBJ-person  
 ‘They (are) healers.’ (Lit. ‘They (are) [ones] of making-people-better.’)

- (69) *Lo-Toga* <<https://www.odsas.net/object/105090>>  
 Verue ⟨**na te Hiu**⟩.  
 two DUMMY from Hiw  
 ‘Two of them (were) [ones] from Hiw island.’

This *na* is not a copula, because it is not restricted to predicative contexts. Rather, it serves as an empty nominal head allowing nominal modifiers (introduced by *mi*, *i*, *te*...) to form a full NP: e.g. *na minë* ‘mine’ [lit. ‘the one of me’]; *na te Hiu* ‘a Hiw person’... In turn, that NP can be used either as an argument, or as a standard NP predicate, parallel to (42) above.

Most Oceanic languages behave like Mwotlap rather than like Lo-Toga, insofar as they treat their possessive markers as directly predicative, with no need of a copula or of a dummy NP head. Thus, inverse-possessive predication in Tahitian would take the form (70):

- (70) *Tahitian* (Vernaudon 2023:130)  
 ⟨**Nō** Pito⟩ te va’a.  
 POSS (name) ART canoe  
 ‘The canoe (is) Pito’s.’

## 7. Adverbial and locative predicates

Many Oceanic languages can promote an adverbial phrase to the status of predicate head.

### 7.1. Locative (or plain-locational) predicates

The Position Paper contrasts “plain-locational” predicates (*The wine is on the table*) with inverse-locational predicates (*There is wine on the table*) – for which, see §8.

In Mwotlap, a locative adjunct may consist of a prepositional phrase (e.g. *lë-tqë* ‘in the garden’, *apwo ep* ‘above the fire’), or a locative lexeme (e.g. *Numea* ‘in Nouméa’; *hëyët* ‘in the bush’). Each of these locative phrases<sup>21</sup> can also form a locative predicate – like (71).

<sup>21</sup> As a word class, the (VP-external) adverbs of Mwotlap are strictly distinct from its (VP-internal) postverbs [§2].



Incidentally, the interrogative *ave* ‘where’ is also a verbless predicate, albeit one that can undergo *wh*-fronting:

- (71) ⟨Ave⟩ imam? – Kē ⟨lē-tqē⟩. / Kē ⟨hēyēt⟩.  
 where father 3SG LOC-garden 3SG in.bush  
 ‘Where’s Dad? – He (is) in the garden / He (is) out bush.’

Placenames commonly head locative predicates:

- (72a) *Mwotlap* <<https://doi.org/10.24397/pangloss-0002316>, at 8’22”>  
 Kē ⟨Apnōlap⟩.  
 3SG (island.name)  
 ‘She (is) on Vanua Lava.’

Unlike predicates headed by adjectives or nouns, those headed by an adverbial phrase are not tamophoric in Mwotlap.<sup>22</sup> Thus, while the lamitive aspect *mal* can affect verbs (6), adjectives or nouns, it cannot combine with a locative head:

- (72b) \*Kē ⟨mal Apnōlap⟩.  
 3SG IAM (island.name)  
 \*She is already on Vanua Lava.

In other terms, even though adverbials are as predicative as any other major constituent in Mwotlap, they form a construction of their own, distinct from other non-verbal predicates.

Locative predicates are common across Oceanic. (73) illustrates a postpositional predicate in Kove (Papua New Guinea):

- (73) *Kove* (Sato 2013: 317)  
 A-ghu kanika ⟨luma yai⟩.  
 POSS-1SG basket house LOC  
 ‘My basket (is) in my house.’

Adverbial predicates are tamophoric in certain Oceanic languages – unlike in Mwotlap. East Uvean can thus use the prepositional phrase *i fale* ‘at home’ as a predicate, combined with a TAM particle (here the non-past ‘e):

- (74) *East Uvean* (Moyses-Faurie 2019: 69)  
 ⟨‘E i fale⟩ ia te pule.  
 NPST OBL house ABS ART chief  
 ‘The chief (is) at home.’

Tahitian has even grammaticalised a paradigm of TAM markers dedicated to locative predicates (Vernaudon 2023: 140). These are *i* vs. *tei* vs. *‘ei* – respectively past, present and irrealis forms of the locative preposition *i*:

- (75a) *Tahitian* (Vernaudon 2023: 140)  
 ⟨I uta⟩ tō rāua fare.  
 LOC:PAST hill ART:POSS 3DU house  
 ‘Their house used to (be) on the hill.’

<sup>22</sup> To negate a locative predicate, Mwotlap uses the negative existential *tateh* [§8.3].

- (75b) ⟨*Ei*    uta)    tō       rāua   fare.  
 LOC:IRR   hill       ART:POSS 3DU    house  
 ‘Their house *will/should (be)* on the hill.’

While the locative predicates we’ve seen so far all function without a verbal head, many Oceanic languages encode plain-locational predicates by means of a locative verb ‘be at’:

- (76) *Kokota*           (Palmer 2009: 214)  
 Mala=na=re        *au*   ka    ġahipa   sarelau.  
 footprint=3SG=those be.at LOC stone    there  
 ‘Those footprints of his are in the stone there.’

## 7.2. Non-locative adverbial predicates

While adverbial phrases in predicate position are most often locative, non-locative adverbs are attested too. In Mwotlap, the preposition *be-* ‘due to, for’, prefixed to nouns or to nominalised verbs, can form adverbials of cause or purpose – e.g. *ba-hap?* ‘what for? why?’ That same *be-* can head a predicate, indicating the purpose of something or someone:

- (77) *Mwotlap*        <<https://doi.org/10.24397/pangloss-0003310#S60>>  
 Na-ga   en,   kē   ⟨**bu**-wu~wuh   *dēmdēm*⟩.  
 ART-kava TOP   3SG for-slap~NMLZ   thought  
 [About kava, the narcotic drink]  
 ‘Kava (is) (good) *for placating anxiety*.’

- (78) *Mwotlap*        <<https://doi.org/10.24397/pangloss-0003275#S65>>  
 N-et       vitwag,   kē   ⟨**bē**-sē~sēil⟩.  
 ART-person one       3SG for-soothsay~NMLZ  
 ‘One of the men (was) *to act as a soothsayer*.’<sup>23</sup>

Another sort of causal predicate involves the clause connector *veg* ‘because’ (Krauße and François 2023: 73). That coordinator can itself be negated, thereby revealing its status as a predicate head:

- (79) *Mwotlap*        (François 2005b:129)  
 ⟨Et= **veg**    te)   so   n-eh    itōk.  
 NEG<sub>1</sub>= because NEG<sub>2</sub> COMP ART-song   be.good  
 ‘(It is) not because the song is nice.’

## 7.3. Similitive predicates

Another type of adverbial predicate involves “similitives” (Haspelmath and Buchholz 1998) such as ‘like X’. While this morpheme is often used adverbially (e.g. *You did it like him*) or post-nominally (e.g. *a basket like this*), in many Oceanic languages it can also form the head of a

<sup>23</sup> Semantically, (78) is very close to the Lo-Toga sentence (68) above. The latter, however, would not fit in the present section 7.2, because the linker *i* in Lo-Toga cannot form adverbial phrases; it only serves inside noun phrases.

predicate. This is the case with Mwotlap *qele* ‘like’. In (80), the presence of the subject *ino* makes it clear that what follows is a predicative constituent, equivalent of ‘be like’:

- (80) *Mwotlap*  
 Ino        ⟨**qele** inək        en⟩.  
 1SG:TONIC   SIM        2SG:TONIC   DEIC  
 ‘I (am) like you.’

With an inanimate subject realised as zero – as in (25a) – similitive predicates such as (81) are common in everyday speech:

- (81) *Mwotlap*        (François 2024)  
 ⟨**Qele** anen⟩.  
 SIM        DX2  
 ‘That’s it.’ [Lit. ‘(It is) like that.’]

That particle ‘like’ has its own syntax, distinct from that of verbs, adjectives or prepositions. It cannot inflect for TAM, and is only compatible with the negation:

- (82) *Mwotlap*        (François and Howard 2000: 20)  
 ⟨Et= **qele** te⟩ na-lañvën, a        na-galês        en.  
 NEG<sub>1</sub>= SIM        NEG<sub>2</sub>        ART-(dance)        SUB        STA-difficult        DEIC  
 ‘(It is) *not like* the women’s dance, which is so difficult.’

Similitive predicates are common in Oceanic. In Teanu [§3.3], even though it is not a verb, the similitive *nga* ‘like’ is tamophoric. The future *kape* serves here as an epistemic modaliser:

- (83) *Teanu*        <<https://dictionaria.clld.org/sentences/teanu-XV001055>>  
 ⟨Kape **nga** ponu⟩.  
 FUT        SIM        DX2  
 ‘Yes, that must be it.’ [Lit. ‘That *will* (be) *like* that.’]

Whether or not they inflect for TAMP, the similitive predictors of Mwotlap or Teanu do not qualify as verbs. They are thus distinct from the *similitive verbs* that are found in some languages, like Nêlêmwa *shuma* ‘be like, behave like’:

- (84) *Nêlêmwa*        (Bril 2017: 220)  
 Hî ak=hleny xe        ⟨i *shuma* thaamwa⟩.  
 this man=DX1        TOP        3SG        be.like        woman  
 ‘This man *behaves like* a woman.’

Closely linked to similitive constructions are interrogatives meaning ‘how’. Some Oceanic languages have an interrogative verb ‘do/be how’ – like Teanu *kae*, used here as a second verb in a serial construction:

- (85) *Teanu*        <<https://doi.org/10.24397/pangloss-0002674>>  
 ⟨Kape le-te        le-kae⟩ ?  
 FUT        3PL:IRR-stay        3PL:IRR-do.how  
 [Lit. ‘They will stay they will do-how?']  
 ‘How will they be able to live there?’

But in many languages, there is no reason to analyse the question word as a verb. It is simply an adverb heading a non-verbal predicate:

- (86) *Hiw* <<https://doi.org/10.24397/pangloss-0003256#S29>>  
 {*Rakevtaye*?  
 how  
 [Lit. 'How (are things)?'] 'What's up?'

## 8. Existential and plain-possessive predicates

### 8.1. Existential (inverse-locational) predicates

Existentials (which the Position Paper calls “inverse-locational” predicates) involve various syntactic constructions across Oceanic. Occasionally, these employ lexical verbs, particularly posture verbs (Lichtenberk 2002: 270). For example, Teanu uses two verbs for this purpose, namely *te* (EXIST:ANIM < ‘sit, stay’) for animates, and *wene* (EXIST:INAN < ‘lie’) for inanimates:

- (87) *Teanu* <<https://www.odsas.net/object/103663>>  
 Kuo ponu, iuro i-*wene*.  
 ship that mast 3SG:REAL-EXIST:INAN  
 ‘That type of ship has a mast.’ [Lit. ‘That ship, a mast exists.’]

Even though *wene* is originally a lexical verb meaning ‘lie, be horizontal’, in (87) it has lost its postural sense – since a mast is actually vertical: it has taken up a general function of existential predicate for inanimate referents (hence the gloss ‘EXIST:INAN’). In Teanu, this verbal construction is the main strategy for encoding existentials, at least in the affirmative [see §8.5 for negative existentials].

Many Oceanic languages encode existentials using a morpheme that authors gloss ‘exist’, and present as a verb: see for instance Lichtenberk (1983a: 498ff) on Manam, Pawley (2000: 301) on Wayan Fijian, Crowley (2006: 169) on Tape, Palmer (2009: 214) on Kokota, or Moyses-Faurie (2019) on various languages of New Caledonia. In some languages, the verbal status of that form is evident from its morphology, and confirmed by its etymology: some existential predicators are grammaticalised from a posture verb (like Teanu *wene* above), or from a verb ‘stay’ – e.g. *nöö* in Xârâcùù. Moyses-Faurie (2019: 66) also reports on a grammaticalisation path { ‘do, make’ > ‘exist’} in several languages of New Caledonia.

Several languages use the same verb for their inverse-locational predicates (existentials) and their plain-locational ones [§7.1] – a verb glossed sometimes ‘be at’, sometimes ‘exist’; see (76) *au* in Kokota. Finally, the few languages that have developed a verb ‘have’ can use it as an existential predicator: see the use of Nafsan *pitlak* in (99).

That said, various Oceanic languages encode existential predicates using strategies that do not involve any lexical verb. For example, the language Araki has three ways, all verbless, to form its existentials (François 2002: 56–68). In affirmative statements, it can use an adverb *kia* ‘there’, or a numeral *hese* as in (63). In other clause types (questions, negative clauses), it can build its existential predicate around its quantifier *rē* ‘some, any’ (François 2002: 65–67):

- (88) *Araki* (François 2002: 154)  
 ⟨**Ŕe** paniavu⟩ lo ima rūrunu?  
 QTF pineapple LOC house cook  
 '(Is there) any pineapple in the kitchen?'

Likewise, Mwotlap employs a non-verbal particle *aē*, here glossed 'EXIST' in small capitals (standing not for a verb 'exist', but for a grammatical gloss, *existential operator*):

- (89) *Mwotlap* <<https://doi.org/10.24397/pangloss-0002531#S129>>  
 Ne-nem ⟨**aē
 ART-mosquito EXIST (island) DEIC  
 'There are mosquitoes on Vanua Lava.'**

That particle *aē* [aɪ] is multifunctional in Mwotlap. It is originally an oblique adverb (François 2003a: 19) glossed OBL:ANA ("oblique adverb, anaphoric"), and used for various sorts of inanimate, anaphoric adjuncts – Eng. 'to it', 'about it', 'for it', 'with it', 'at it', or 'there':

- (90) *Mwotlap* <<https://doi.org/10.24397/pangloss-0002300#S101>>  
 Nok van le-pnō vitwag tō nok ⟨muwumwu⟩ *aē* ēgēn.  
 1SG go LOC-island one then 1SG work OBL:ANA now  
 'I can travel to an island, and then start working *there*.'

We saw in §7 that Mwotlap can promote its adverbial phrases to predicative function. This was evidently the path followed by *aē* in its grammaticalisation from an adverb (90) 'there' to a predicative operator (89) '(be) there'.<sup>24</sup> There is no reason to consider that *aē*, in (89), has been turned into a verb: we are here simply dealing with an adverb used predicatively. Besides, the existential predicators of Mwotlap – whether positive (*aē*) or negative (*tateh*, §8.3) – clearly stand apart from verbs, because they cannot inflect for TAM.

## 8.2. Existential operators with added semantics

Mwotlap can also encode existentials using more marginal strategies, whereby the pure existential function is enriched with extra semantics. This is how certain non-verbal constructions can encode such meanings as 'there's only X', or 'there is still X'.

Mwotlap has a word *vēlēš* 'only, exclusively' which is regularly used as a postverb. Used predicatively, that word *vēlēš* can encode a *restrictive existential*, equivalent to 'there is only X':

- (91) *Mwotlap* <<https://doi.org/10.24397/pangloss-0003282#S110>>  
 Ige lōqōvēn ⟨**vēlēš**⟩! Tateh taṃan.  
 HUM:PL woman EXIST:RESTR NEG:EX man  
 '(There were) *only* women! There were no men.'

<sup>24</sup> All 15 languages in the Banks islands of Vanuatu have followed the same grammaticalisation path, from an oblique adverb to an existential (François 2005a: 492); see also Malau (2016: 378) for Vurēs, François (forthcoming a) for Dorig. Certain Polynesian languages followed a similar path of grammaticalisation from an anaphoric locative *i ai* 'there' to an existential predicator *iai* (Chapin 1974; Moysse-Faurie 2018:306).

Likewise, the word *lapgetō* is often used as a permansive postverb meaning ‘still’ (e.g. *mitiy lapgetō* ‘still asleep’). Used predicatively, that same word forms a *permansive existential*, i.e. ‘there is still X, there remains X’:

- (92) *Mwotlap* (François 2001: 759)  
 Mal bah? – O’oo, **<lapgetō>**!  
 IAM finish INTJ EXIST:PERM  
 ‘Is it over? – No, no, there’s still some left.’

When used as postverbs, *vēlē*s and *lapgetō* modify the predicate head, with no existential meaning. The latter sense is only found when they head the predicate, as in (91) and (92). Each word thus has two distinct grammatical uses, which stand in a mutual relation of heterosemy (for which notion, see Lichtenberk 1991; Enfield 2006: 197; François 2017: 299).

Predicative numerals [§5] can also take on an existential interpretation: see (59b), (63). The ostensive or presentative constructions we’ll examine in §9 can also have the same effect.

### 8.3. The negative existential

The negative counterpart of *aē* in *Mwotlap* is an unanalysable particle *tateh*, glossed NEG:EX ‘negative existential’. Its negative existentials follow two equivalent constructions, both shown in (93):

- (93) *Mwotlap* <<https://doi.org/10.24397/pangloss-0007413#S325>>  
 Nē-bē **<tateh>** me gōh. (...) Le-pnō gōh, **<tateh>** bē!  
 ART-water NEG:EX hither DX1 LOC-island DX1 NEG:EX water  
 ‘There’s no water here. In this island, there’s no water!’

The first construction *nē-bē tateh* follows a {SUBJECT – PREDICATE} syntax where the predicate phrase consists of *tateh* alone; this is much parallel to the positive existential *aē* in (89). In the second construction *tateh bē*, the logical argument of the existential is incorporated to the predicate phrase. This is parallel to (91) *tateh tamān* ‘there were no men’.

The etymology of *tateh* is unknown, but it is definitely not a verb – regardless of its translations – because it is not compatible with verbal morphology. Besides its meaning as a negative existential, this word has various other uses. If the subject is semantically definite, *tateh* can mean ‘be absent’, or serve to negate locative predicates like (71)–(72). The array of uses attested in *Mwotlap* for the negative existential is shared by many Oceanic languages, in Vanuatu (François 2011: 219–221, forthcoming *a*) and beyond.

In *Mwotlap*, existential operators (positive or negative) are not tamophoric; yet such an option exists in other Oceanic languages. For example, *Xârâcùù* can combine its negative existential verb *siè* (Moyse-Faurie 2019: 59) with a perfective particle, yielding a meaning ‘there is no more’:

- (94) *Xârâcùù* (Moyse-Faurie 2019: 59)  
 Wâ siè laasi.  
 PFV not.exist rice  
 ‘There is no more rice.’

Just like for positive existentials, Araki encodes its negative existential using a construction *je-rē* that includes no verb (François 2002: 164): it combines the standard negation *je* with the

partitive quantifier *rē* ‘any’ – see (88). And yet, although it is a verbless construction, it can encode modality (through its subject clitic) and even aspect [e.g. the Perfect *rē* in (95)]:

- (95) *Araki* <<https://doi.org/10.24397/pangloss-0002294#S20>>  
 ⟨*Mo= rē je-rē* no-no paua).  
 3SG:REAL= PFT NEG-QTF POSS-3SG power  
 ‘The (devil’s) power is no more.’

In sum, while existential predicates are sometimes expressed by verbs [e.g. (87), (99)], Oceanic languages also commonly resort to non-verbal strategies (89)–(95).

#### 8.4. Plain-possessive predicates

We discussed in §6 one type of possessive predicate, namely the “inverse-possessive constructions”, from Possessee to Possessor. Let us now examine the other type, labelled “plain-possessive” – that is, the relation that goes from Possessor to Possessee, equivalent to ‘A has X’. In Oceanic, the most common pattern is to derive the construction from an existential: so, ‘I have food’ is literally ‘*There’s my food*’. This is why these constructions are discussed here, after the presentation of existential constructions [§8.1–8.3].

In Mwotlap, it is common to find a possessed noun phrase<sup>25</sup> in the position of subject of an existential predicate (either *aē* or its negative counterpart *tateh*):

- (96) *Mwotlap* <<https://doi.org/10.24397/pangloss-0007436#S68>>  
 Ba *n-ih na-mu* ⟨*aē*⟩? – Óóó, *n-ih na-mu-k* ⟨*tateh*⟩.  
 but ART-bow ART-CARRY:2SG EXIST INTJ:NO ART-bow ART-CARRY-1SG NEG:EX  
 ‘Do you have a bow? – No, I don’t have a bow.’

Many Oceanic languages encode their plain-possessive predicates in the same way as Mwotlap, by deriving them from an existential construction: see (95) in Araki, (101) in Tahitian. Hiw forms its plain-possessive predicates quite differently though, using a construction that the Position Paper labels “comitative-possessee type” – namely, a pattern {*he (is) with X*}

- (97) *Hiw* <<https://doi.org/10.24397/pangloss-0003252#S46>>  
 Ike ⟨*mi n’ ōñwe*⟩, ike ⟨*mi ne yöte mařëřë*⟩,  
 2SG with ART house 2SG with ART garden many  
 ike ⟨*mi ne ga*⟩, ike ⟨*mi ne sōgë pusune*⟩...  
 2SG with ART kava 2SG with ART pig numerous  
 ‘You have a house, you have many gardens,  
 you have some kava, you have numerous pigs...’

Hiw is the only language in its area that uses its comitative preposition ‘with’ in plain-possessive predicates. Next-door Lo-Toga has grammaticalised the same preposition *mi*, but this time into an inverse-possessive linker: see (66)–(67) in §6. In other terms, to quote the

<sup>25</sup> The possessor may be marked on the noun itself if it belongs to the inalienable class – e.g. *igni-k* ‘my wife’ in (38) – or on an external possessive classifier if the noun is alienable [see §6] – e.g. *na-mu-k* ‘my [carried] item’.

typology in the Position Paper, Hiw builds upon an “S-possessor” pattern {*you (are) with a house*}, whereas Lo-Toga exploits the opposite “S-possessee” logic {*a house (is) with you*}.<sup>26</sup>

Bivalent verbs equivalent to English ‘have’ (called “transpossessive constructions” by the Position Paper) are extremely rare in Oceanic. One such language is Nafsan, which has developed a verb *pitlak* ‘have’ (Thieberger 2006: 272), etymologically from *pi atlak* ‘be owner’:

- (98) *Nafsan* (Thieberger 2006: 262)  
 Ag ku=*pitlak* ntaewen.  
 2SG 2SG:REAL=have knowledge  
 ‘You have knowledge.’

That verb ‘have’ serves also as an existential predicator:

- (99) *Nafsan* (Thieberger 2006: 200)  
 I=*pitlak* nañor e-maloput.  
 3SG:REAL=have hole LOC-middle  
 ‘There is a hole in the middle.’

Another case of transpossessive structure is when a language borrowed a verb ‘have’ from one of the pidgin languages spoken in its area. For example, Solomon Islands Pijin has a verb *garem* ‘have’ (Jourdan 2002: 57) – originally from English *got ‘em* – which Teanu borrowed as a verb *karem* (François 2021).

## 8.5. When existentials and ascriptives are coexpressed

In a minority of Oceanic languages, existential predicates employ the same syntax as ascriptive ones. For example, we saw above that Tahitian uses a particle *e*, glossed INC for ‘inclusive’, for its ascriptive predicates – see (56) or (100a):

- (100a) *Tahitian* (Lazard and Peltzer 1991: 4)  
 ⟨E *pape*⟩ tenā.  
 INC freshwater DX2  
 ‘That’s freshwater.’ [ASCRPTIVE]

Now, if the subject is itself anchored in space (e.g. *te-i uta* ‘that [which is] inland’), the ascriptive interpretation gives way to an existential reading:

- (100b) *Tahitian* (Vernaudon 2023: 127)  
 ⟨E *pape*⟩ te-i uta.  
 INC freshwater ART-OBL inland  
 [Lit. ‘that which is inland is freshwater’]  
 ‘There is freshwater further inland.’ [EXISTENTIAL]

<sup>26</sup> Teanu also follows an “S-possessee” logic when it encodes its plain-possessive predicates as {*s.th. exists with me*}. In doing so, it uses a verbal strategy, with posture verbs such as (87) *wene* ‘lie’ or *vio* ‘stand’ (see François 2021, under *wene teve* ‘lie with’ → ‘belong to’).



This coexpression between ascriptive and existential is also found in possessive clauses:

- (101) *Tahitian* (Vernaudon 2023: 139)  
 ⟨E piti *tamari'i*⟩ t-ā rāua.  
 INC two child ART-POSS 3DU  
 [Lit. 'Theirs are two children.']  
 'They have two children.' [PLAIN-POSSESSIVE]

The only clue that points to an existential reading, in sum, is when the subject explicitly refers to a location or to a possessor. In the absence of such indications, a predicate in *e* +N remains ambiguous:

- (102) *Tahitian* (Vernaudon 2023:129)  
 ⟨E 'ori-ra'a⟩.  
 INC dance-NMLZ  
 a) [ASCRPTIVE] 'It is a dance.'  
 b) [EXISTENTIAL] 'There is a dance.'

That said, even though Tahitian uses the same constructions for ascriptives and existentials in the affirmative, it contrasts them formally in the negative, via two separate constructions. Ascriptive clauses take a negative operator *e'ere* (similar to Lo-Toga *deda* in §4.2.1):

- (103a) *Tahitian* (Vernaudon 2023:129)  
 ⟨E'ere⟩ i te 'ori-ra'a.  
 NEG:ASCR OBL ART dance-NMLZ  
 'That is not a dance.' [NEGATIVE ASCRPTIVE]

As for existentials, they require a different negator *'aita* (Lazard and Peltzer 1991: 22; Vernaudon 2023: 132):

- (103b) *Tahitian* (Vernaudon 2023:129)  
 ⟨'Aita⟩ e 'ori-ra'a.  
 NEG:EX INC dance-NMLZ  
 'There is no dance.' [NEGATIVE EXISTENTIAL]

Teanu shows the reverse situation: it contrasts ascriptives and existentials in the affirmative, but coexpresses them in the negative. Indeed, Teanu uses the same clause-final negation *tae* for a negative ascriptive (104a) and a negative existential (104b):

- (104a) *Teanu* <<https://doi.org/10.24397/pangloss-0003351#S165>>  
 ⟨Tepakola *tae*⟩.  
 monster NEG  
 '(It is) not a monster.' [NEGATIVE ASCRPTIVE]

- (104b) *Tepakola* ⟨*tae*⟩.  
 monster NEG  
 'There is no monster.' [NEGATIVE EXISTENTIAL]

While (104a) and (104b) are both verbless predicates, they differ in their syntactic constituency – as suggested by the brackets around the predicate phrase. In (104a), *tepakola* heads a

noun predicate (SNP), which bears the negation *tae*; in (104b), the noun is the subject, and the negation constitutes the predicate itself.

The majority of Oceanic languages, however, do contrast ascriptives and existentials in the negative. Thus, Mwotlap distinguishes (29) *et=X te* ('it is not X') vs. (93) *tateh X* ('there is no X').

## 9. Ostensive predicates

Ostensive constructions, as defined in the Position Paper, consist in drawing the addressee's attention towards the presence of a given referent in the situation of utterance. Mwotlap has two types of ostensive markers. One is a morpheme *ete*, originally from the imperative of the verb *et* 'see' + the deictic *e(n)*. This form is quite comparable to French *voici*, both in its make-up and function:

- (105) *Mwotlap* (François and Howard 2000: 4)  
 ⟨**Ete** n-ēm̄ mino) a *hag* **gēn**, a isqet n-ēm̄yoñ *en*.  
 OST ART-house my FOC east DX3 FOC near ART-church DEIC  
 'Here (is) my house up over there, next to the church.'

This ostensive particle *ete* is in fact optional. What makes this utterance ostensive is, first and foremost, the presence of deictic material: *gēn* 'over there' is a demonstrative of the third degree DX3 [fn.11 p.11], which is inherently ostensive – see (32).

Mwotlap has another ostensive morpheme *vatag*, used to locate a referent in motion; I propose to gloss it 'Kinetic ostensive' (OST:KIN). Just like with *ete* in (105), *vatag* is always followed by a demonstrative (e.g. *anen*), and usually by a space directional (e.g. *yow*):<sup>27</sup>

- (106) *Mwotlap* <<https://doi.org/10.24397/pangloss-0007408#S77>>  
 Ige me-lep kē, ba kēy ⟨**vatag**⟩ *yow* le-lam *anen*.  
 HUM:PL PFT-take 3SG and 3PL OST:KIN seawards LOC-ocean DX2  
 'They've abducted [your wife], and they're on their way out to the ocean (over there).'

In spite of its predicative position, the ostensive *vatag* does not qualify as a verb, which makes (106) a non-verbal predicate. The same word has grammaticalised into a TAMP marker, the "Kinetic presentative" (François 2003a: 139–162), which combines with verbs:

- (107) Kēy ⟨*lak* **vatag**⟩ *yow* *anen*.  
 3PL dance PRSV:KIN seawards DX2  
 'They're (dancing) on their way to the sea.' [KINETIC PRESENTATIVE]

The ostensive strategies of Mwotlap have in common that the ostensive morpheme itself (whether *ete* or *vatag*) is separate from the demonstratives. Some Oceanic languages have markers that incorporate the deictic information. For example, Hiw has two ostensive markers, *ête* vs. *êne*, respectively speaker-centered (DX1) and addressee-centered (DX2):

<sup>27</sup> Mwotlap has a set of six space directionals, of which two are deictic (*me* 'hither', *van* 'thither') and four refer to geocentric coordinates (François 2015: 147): *hag* 'up; southeast', *hōw* 'down; north-west', *hay* 'in; inland', *yow* 'out; seawards'.

(108) *Hiw* <<https://doi.org/10.24397/pangloss-0003256#S101>>

Ne metu meṛoñ eñot **ēte** v' ay!  
 ART coconut dry one OST:DX1 IPFV float  
 'Look, a dry coconut floating [*here close to me*]'

(109) *Hiw* <<https://doi.org/10.24397/pangloss-0003256#S186>>

Pa **ēne** ga owuw!  
 and OST:DX2 FOOD:2SG Inocarpus  
 'There [*close to you*], some chestnuts for you!'

In Tahitian, the correspondence is transparent between, on the one hand, its three ostensive particles *eie* (OST:DX1) – *enā* (OST:DX2) – *erā* (OST:DX3), and on the other hand, the demonstrative triplet *teie* (DEM:DX1) – *tenā* (DEM:DX2) – *terā* (DEM:DX3):

(110a) *Tahitian* (Vernaudon 2023:155)

**Erā** te paoti.  
 OST:DX3 ART boss  
 'There's the boss.' [OSTENSIVE PREDICATE]

(110b) *Tahitian* (Vernaudon 2023:155)

**Terā** te paoti.  
 DEM:DX3 ART boss  
 'The boss, that's *him*.' [EQUATIVE PREDICATE]

## 10. Synthesis

This overview of a few Oceanic languages described the many constructions that fall under the category of “non-verbal predicates”, as defined in this volume’s Position Paper. They form a constellation of syntactic constructions that prove diverse across the family – and are sometimes diverse within a single language. For the sake of length as well as internal consistency, this study chose to focus on the system of one language, Mwotlap, taken here as representative of Oceanic as a whole; yet when specific constructions showed structural diversity in the family, other languages were cited.

One crucial property of Oceanic languages, strongly represented in Mwotlap, is that they tend to be *omnipredicative*: that is, all major word classes can head a predicate, with no need to be derived into a verb, or resort to a copula. As shown in Table 3, virtually all word classes in Mwotlap (with the exception of lexical postverbs) can head a *standard predicate* – i.e. a predicate that is unmarked from the point of view of tense, aspect or modality. The second column shows that certain predicative constructions – those headed by adjectives, nouns or numerals – are even “tamophoric”: they allow the predicate to inflect for TAM, just like verbs.

Unlike Mwotlap, several Oceanic languages did develop some forms of copulas. Yet these are rare, and when they exist, they are often restricted to specific contexts: some languages have a copula only in case of a negation, or only when the predicate inflects for TAM. In sum, through its propensity to treat almost any word as predicative, and its thorough preference for verbless strategies, Mwotlap constitutes an iconic example of the tendencies that characterise the Oceanic family as a whole.

Table 3 – Summary: Non-verbal predicates in Mwotlap, organised by word class

	Can head a standard predicate with no verb or copula	Can inflect for TAM, with no verb or copula	See
Lexical postverb	—	—	§2
Adjective	✓	✓	§3
Noun	✓	✓	§4
Numeral	✓	✓	§5
Possessive	✓	—	§6
Adverb, locative	✓	—	§7
Existential operator	✓	—	§8
Ostensive operator	✓	—	§9

For the typologist, these empirical results are crucial confirmation that grammatical properties such as [head of predicate], [TAM host] or [dynamic event] are not inherently restricted to the class of verbs. While these traits are prototypically linked with verbs across the world, nothing prevents them, in fact, from being compatible with just any word class.

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## Abbreviations

1EXCL	first person exclusive	DX1	demonstrative, speaker-centered (≈proximal)
1INCL	first person inclusive	DX2	demonstrative, addressee-centered (≈distal)
ABS	absolutive	DX3	demonstrative, ostensive
ADJ	adjective	EQUAT	equative predicate
ANA	anaphoric	EXIST	existential predicator
ANP	anchored noun predicate	FOC	focus particle
AO	aorist	FOOD	possessive classifier, items eaten
APPR	apprehensive mood	HAB	habitual
ART	article	HUM	number marker for humans
ASCR	ascriptive predicate	IAM	iamitive aspect
ATTR	attribute prefix	ID	identification (equative)
CARRY	possessive classifier, items carried	INAN	inanimate
CCL	conclusive deictic	INC	inclusive predicate
CLSF	classifying particle	INTSF	Intensifier
COMP	complementiser	IPFV	Imperfective
COP	copula	IRR	Irrealis
DEIC	deictic	KIN	kinetic, encoding motion
DIREC	directional	LOC	locative
DIST	distal demonstrative		
DUMMY	dummy noun		

NCCL	non-conclusive deictic	REAL	realis mood
NEG:EX	negative existential	REC.PST	recent past
NMLZ	nominaliser	REL	relativiser
NONDUM	nondumitive, 'not yet'	RESTR	restrictive
NPST	non-past tense	REVERS	reversive
OBJ	object marker	SIM	similative
OBL	oblique marker	SNP	standard noun predicate
ORIG	originative prefix	STA	stative aspect
OST	ostensive	STC	static presentative
PERS	personal article	SUB	subordinator
PFT	perfect	TAM	tense, aspect, mood
PFV	perfective	TAMP	tense, aspect, mood, polarity
POSS	possessive marker	TINP	tense-inflected noun predicate
POT	potential	TONIC	tonic pronoun
PROSP	prospective aspect	TOP	topic marker
PROX	proximal deictic	UNIT	units above 10
PRT	preterite	VB	verb
PRSV	presentative	VC	verb complex
QTF	quantifier		

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