The semantics of noun prefixes in Imere

Imere (mxe), an understudied Polynesian language (Samoic-Outlier subgroup) spoken in Vanuatu, has a number of noun prefixes, exemplified in (1)-(3), which are claimed to vary according to number, definiteness and familiarity (Clark 1975, 1998, 2002/2011)(examples not attributed to a source are from my own fieldwork; the letter j corresponds to [tʃ], k is variably realized as [k] or [ɣ] intervocalically, ō and ō̃ are labio-velars):

(1) te-fare
   TE-house
   ‘the house’
   (Clark 2002/2011: 684)

(2) jii-tama
   jii-child
   ‘the child’
   (familiar; e.g., my child)
   (Clark 2002/2011: 685)

(3) te-ngata poulapa
   TE-snake big
   ‘a big snake’
   (Clark 2002/2011: 684)

I focus here on the non-familiar prefixes te- (singular), ruu- (dual) and a- (plural) (te- prefixes for short), which are treated as definite articles in Clark’s work. In this talk I argue that te-prefixes are grammatical number morphemes, not articles, and that nouns in Imere can appear in DPs headed by a null determiner, of the kind argued for Innu-aimun by Gillon and Armoskaite (2013) (cf. the overt Ds of St’át’imcets, Matthewson 1998, and Skwxwú7mesh Gillon 2006, 2015)—a null D with a context-sensitive semantics.

Te-prexes appear with nouns in argumental position (except with loanwords and trimoraic roots, which, with the exclusion of ruu-, don’t take them) ((4)), in predicative position ((5), (6)), and can begin a discourse ((6)):

(4) Au seia te-ngata ngo te-namu.
    I see TE-snake and TE-mosquito
    ‘I saw a snake and a mosquito’

(5) Lekina te-sea i-fare
    exist TE-chair LOC-house
    ‘There is a chair in the house’

(6) Niirake ee-tasi, lekina te-meto ...
    time 3SG.NFUT-one exist TE-prince
    ‘Once upon a time, there was a prince…’

That te- phrases appear in predicative position suggests that te-prefixes are not articles/in D: if they were, they would give rise to DPs of type <e>, which is the wrong type for examples (5)-(6). That they can, in addition, begin a discourse suggests that they are not definite (i.e., give rise to presuppositions of uniqueness or existence, more on which below). I suggest, instead, that these prefixes are the spell out of number morphology; e.g., they can head a NumberP of the kind found in Harbour (2014) (i.e., te-sea in (5)= [NumP te- [número sea]][a compositional account of the dual ruu-, following Harbour, is thus made possible but goes beyond our current concerns]). In (5)-(6), this is all there is to te- phrases, which are predicted, correctly, to be of type <e,t>. It follows from their status as pure number morphology that te-prefixes do not give rise to presuppositions of existence or uniqueness when te-phrases are in predicative position—in (7) and (8), existence is questioned explicitly, and (8) cannot have a uniqueness presupposition, as eyes come in pairs:

(7) [An iguana has been dissected. Pointing to an unidentified body part:]
    Au s-taae kee ta iguana lekina te-ate
    NEG-know NEG COMP iguana have TE-liver
    pe sai, or NEG
    pe te-ate te-raa?

    but TE-liver TE-DEM
    (cf. Coppock and Beaver 2015)

    ‘I don’t know whether iguanas have a liver or not, but is that the liver?’
(8) [An iguana has been dissected. Pointing to an unidentified body part:]
   Au s-taaea kee ta iguna lekina a-mata pe sai,
   l NEG-know NEG COMP iguana have A-eye or NEG
   pe te-mata te-raa?
   but TE-eye TE-DEM (cf. Coppock and Beaver 2015)
   ‘I don’t know whether iguanas have eyes or not, but is that the eye?’


(9) \([D^0, C] = \lambda \ P. \ f(\lambda x. P(x) & C(x))\)

This analysis predicts no existence presuppositions for te- prefixes in argumental position, a prediction shown to be correct in (10), which questions existence:

(10) Au s-taaea kee ta iguna lekina te-ate pe sai,
   l NEG-know NEG COMP iguana have TE-liver or NEG
   pe te-ate epaku?
   but TE-liver black (cf. Coppock and Beaver 2015)
   ‘I don’t know whether iguanas have a liver, but is the liver black?’

Because of the presence of C in (9), it also predicts that te- phrases in argumental position must refer to a previously introduced referent if this referent exists—if a continuation of (4), (11) is only about the previously mentioned snake, and (12) sounds contradictory (cf. (13), with a numeral that obviates the need for D^0C):

(11) ...Te-ngata sa.
    TE-snake dangerous
    ‘...The snake/#some other snake was dangerous’
(12) #Te-ngata ee-moe ngo te-ngata s-ee-moe kee.
    TE-snake 3SG.NFUT-sleep and TE-snake NEG-3SG.NFUT-sleep NEG
    ‘A snake was sleeping and the snake wasn’t sleeping’
(13) Te-ngata ee-tasi ee-moe ngo te-ngata ee-tasi s-ee-moe kee
    TE-snake 3SG.NFUT-one 3SG.NFUT-sleep and TE-snake 3SG.NFUT-one NEG-3SG.NFUT-sleep NEG
    ‘One snake was sleeping and one snake wasn’t sleeping’

If that referent does not exist (cf. (4)), C, in effect, does no work, and some individual or other is chosen by f—hence the indefinite flavor of these occurrences. These two possibilities for C can be shown to be relevant in the analysis of the scope of te- phrases with respect to negation, where both wide and narrow scope are possible (data not shown).

Finally, I follow Gillon in that uniqueness is an implicature triggered by D—as such, it is sometimes present with te- DPs ((14))(cf. Coppock and Beaver 2015), sometimes not ((15)):

(14) [An iguana has been dissected. Wondering what an unidentified body part is:]
    #Au s-taaea kee ta iguna lekina a-mata pe sai, pe te-mata poulapa?
    l NEG-know NEG COMP iguana have A-eye or NEG but TE-eye big
    ‘I don’t know whether iguanas have eyes or not, but is the eye big?’
(15) Lekina a-sea ee-ffa. Tourave e-nofo te-sea.
    exist A-chair 3SG.NFUT-four Tourave 3SG.NFUT-sit TE-chair
    ‘There were four chairs. Tourave sat down on a chair’ (one of the four)