

# Reexamining the Nuuchahnulth Article

David Inman

University of Washington Department of Linguistics



## 1 The Research Question

The Nuuchahnulth article has historically been important for distinguishing syntactic categories.

Sapir (1911)	Swadesh (1938)	Jacobsen (1979)	Wojdak (2001)
No distinction between verbs and nouns in bound roots	No distinction between verbs and nouns	Verbs and nouns distinguishable by use of the article	Article use determined by phrasal head

Figure 1: History of work on syntactic categories and the article

- What are the syntactic and semantic properties of the article itself?
- What does it say about the semantic representation of other elements of Nuuchahnulth, and are there implications for how we conceive of articles generally?

## 2 The language

Nuuchahnulth (iso 639-3 nuk) is a South Wakashan language spoken on Vancouver Island, Canada.



## 3 Clause structure and clausal predicates

The basic syntax of the Nuuchahnulth clause is: **predicate =inflection (participants)**

The *syntactic predicate* is the word or phrase that expresses the primary semantic relation, and the *syntactic participant* fills a semantic argument of the predicate. Inflection is a second-position clitic. Syntactic predicates are normally verbs (1), but adjectives (2) and common nouns (3) are possible predicates, while proper nouns are not. All predicates may be modified with an adverb (4).

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| (1) ?naafsa haak'aaɬʔi<br>?naafsa=s haak'aaɬʔi<br>see=STRG.1SG young.girl=ART<br>'I see the young girl.'                   | (2) ?aɬaʔiʃ quuʔas'minh.<br>?aɬaʔiʃ quuʔas'minh<br>two=STRG.3 person-PL<br>'There are two people.' |
| (3) kiwitaanama ?ahkuu.<br>kiwitaana=ma ?ahkuu<br>horse=REAL.3 this<br>'This is a horse.' (Sapir and Swadesh, 1955, p.256) | (4) pisatuwiɬma ?aanaɬi.<br>pisatuwiɬ=ma ?aanaɬi<br>gym=REAL.3 only<br>'It's only a gym.'          |

## 4 The article and clausal participants

Participants are usually nouns (1, 2) but may be verbs (5) or adjectives (6), where the article is required (Jacobsen, 1979). The article is optional on common nouns and does not affect meaning (7, 8).

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| (5) ?uhʔiifʔi ?ihak kamatqukʔi.<br>?uhʔiifʔi ?ihak kamatqukʔi<br>FOCUS=STRG.3 cry run=ART<br>'The one that's running is crying.' | (6) wik'iitʔaaf ɬ'iixʔs'us ɬaɬɬuuʔi.<br>wik'iitʔaaf ɬ'iixʔs'us ɬaɬɬuuʔi<br>NEG=CMMD.2PL=HAB laugh.at other.PL=ART<br>'Don't laugh at others.' |
|--|---|

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| (7) ɬ'amaasiɬintʔiʃ haaʔwitaɬʔi kiwitaana.<br>ɬ'amaas-iɬʔ=intʔiʃ haaʔwitaɬʔi<br>climb-PERF=PST=STRG.3 young.man=ART<br>kiwitaana<br>horse<br>'The young man climbed up onto the horse.' | (8) ɬ'amaasiɬintʔiʃ haaʔwitaɬʔi kiwitaanaʔi.<br>ɬ'amaas-iɬʔ=intʔiʃ haaʔwitaɬʔi<br>climb-PERF=PST=STRG.3 young.man=ART<br>kiwitaana=ʔi<br>horse=ART<br>'The young man climbed up onto the horse.' |
|---|--|

Unlike common nouns, proper nouns never accept the article (9, 10).

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| (9) jaɬs'as'wit'ass mituuni.<br>jaɬs'-las-ʔwit'as=s mituuni<br>step-out-going.to=STRG.1SG Victoria<br>'I am going to visit Victoria.' | (10) *jaɬs'as'wit'ass mituuniʔi.<br>*jaɬs'-las-ʔwit'as=s mituuni=ʔi<br>step-out-going.to=STRG.1SG Victoria=ART<br>Intended: 'I am going to visit Victoria.' |
|---|---|

Speakers typically reject examples with an article applied to deictic demonstratives (11) or pronouns (12), but will occasionally produce an article on a deictic (13), and extremely rarely on a pronoun (14). This marginality of articles on deictics and pronouns is poorly understood and requires future work.

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| (11) wiinapuʔi ?ahkuu(*ʔi).<br>wiinapuɬʔi ?ahkuu(*=ʔi)<br>stop-CMMD.2SG here(*=ART)<br>'Stop here.'                                  | (12) wik'aaps suʔwa(*ʔi).<br>wik'aap=s suʔwa(*=ʔi)<br>not.hear-STRG.1SG 2SG(*=ART)<br>'I don't hear you.'<br>(collected by Adam Werle)   |
| (13) hitqhsʔaaf ?ahkuuʔi natʔaaf.<br>hit-qh=sʔaaf ?ahkuu=ʔi<br>be.at-LINK=STRG.1SG=HAB this=ART<br>natʔaaf<br>read<br>'I read here.' | (14) himwiɬs'a'wit'asʔatweʔitʔin nii'waʔi.<br>himwiɬs'a-ʔwit'asʔatweʔitʔin nii'waʔi<br>telling.a.myth-going.to=PASS=HRYS.1PL<br>IPL=ART<br>'He's going to tell us a story!'<br>(collected by Adam Werle) |

	verb	adjective	common noun	proper noun	deictic	pronoun
predicate	yes	yes	yes	no	yes	no
article	req	req	opt	no	rarely?	almost never?

Table 1: Predicative and article properties across syntactic classes

## 5 Syntactico-semantic analysis

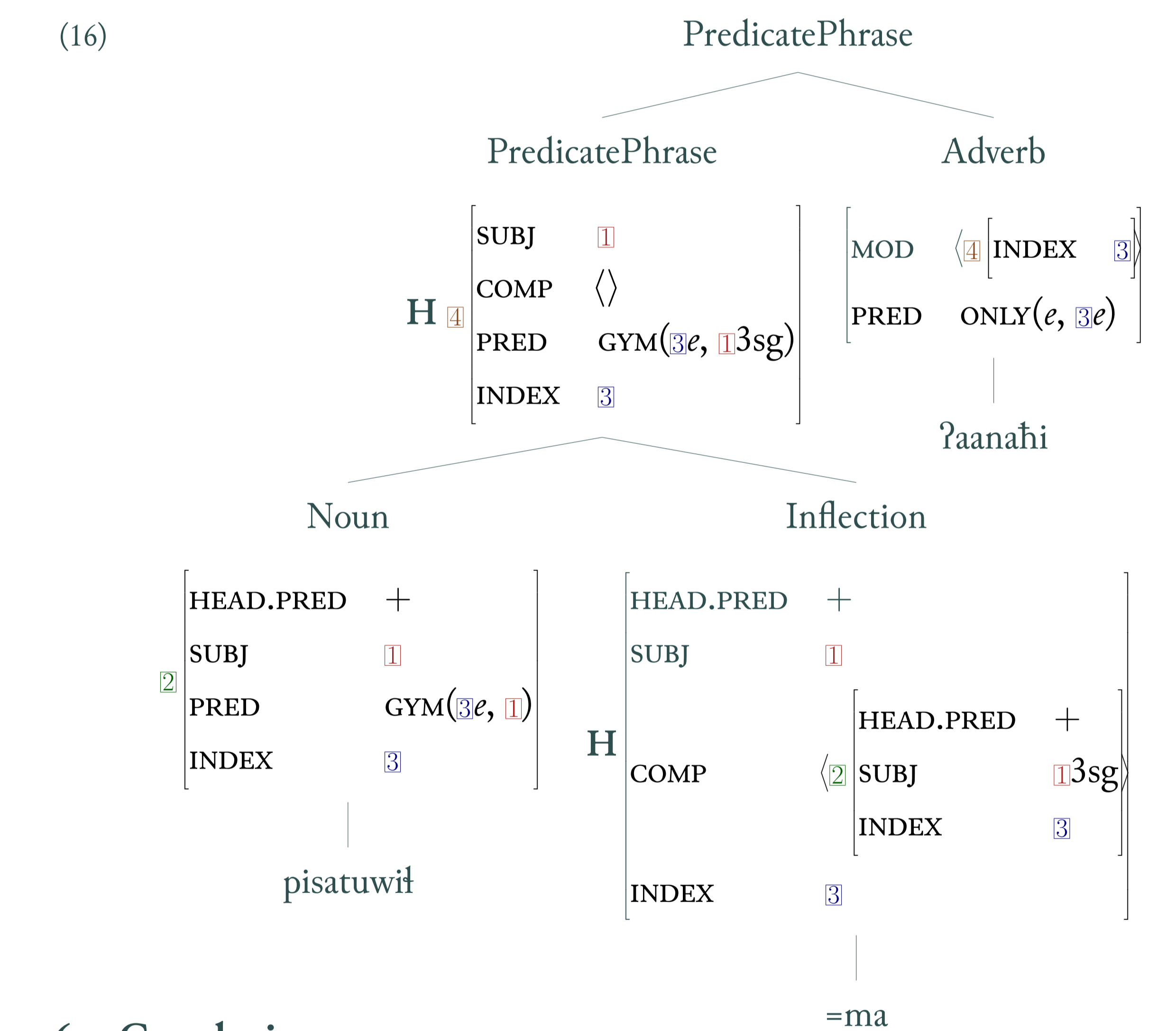
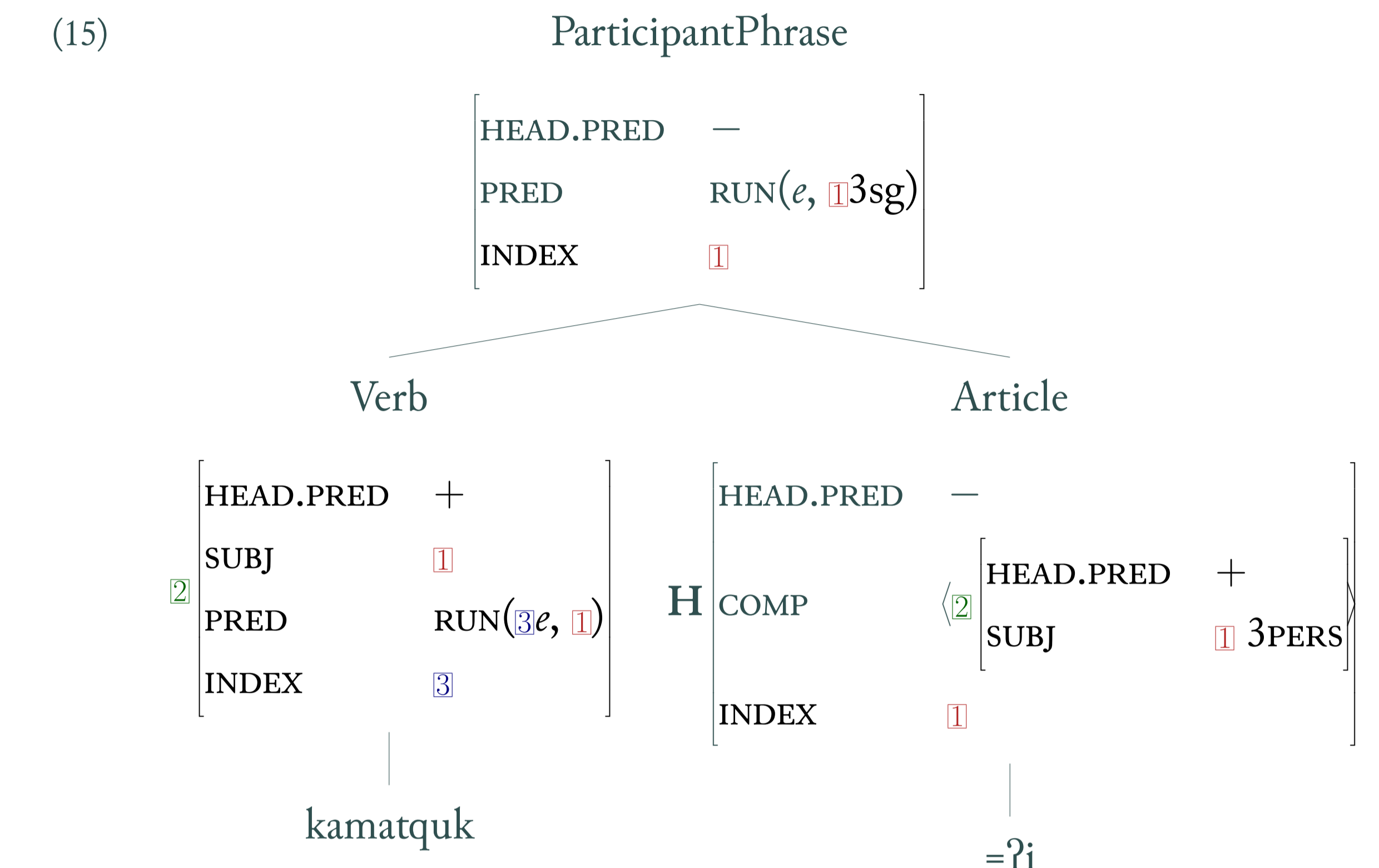
Set-theoretic semantics requires inherent variables for all semantic relations: 'person' must be PERSON(x). In languages such as English a copula is required to access that variable syntactically: "Kim is a person". No such copula is required in Nuuchahnulth (§3). There are two ways to model this.

- Nouns are not events, e.g. PERSON(x). When used predicatively they must be wrapped in a copula relation with an event variable, even if the copula is not expressed in the syntax.
- Nouns are events, e.g. PERSON(e, x), which may function as a predicate and take an argument or adverb, as in (3, 4). Nouns then require relativization when used as a participant, as in (7, 8).

Analysis I cannot model why common nouns pattern with adjectives and verbs but not with proper nouns. Analysis II makes all predicative words events, and constrains article attachment to predicates. Several analytical consequences follow:

- The "article" is a relativizer. It attaches to a semantic event and relativizes its first argument.
- The article heads its phrase.
- Common nouns may be relativized in the syntax without an article present.
- Proper nouns are not events.

Using the HPSG framework, I model the distinction as a boolean feature on heads PRED, + for predicates and - for participants. The article and clausal inflection require a [HEAD.PRED +] complement, which excludes proper nouns. (15) shows the participant phrase from (5) and (16) gives a tree for (4).



## 6 Conclusion

In Nuuchahnulth, the traditional "article" on closer inspection is a relativizer. This also leads to the conclusion that nouns are inherently events. This relationship between articles, relativizers, and semantic representation raises broader linguistic questions.

- Does a model of nouns as events extend to other zero-copula languages?
- Does it extend to copular languages, such as English? If so, is there any reflex of an event variable?
- If this model generalizes to other languages, do many or all articles have a relativizing-like function?

## Acknowledgements and References

This work is possible due to the patience and collaboration of Nuuchahnulth language consultants, language learners and collaborators, and the digital resources, notes, and collaboration of Matthew Davidson and Adam Werle.

Jacobsen, W. H. (1979). Noun and verb in Nootkan. In *The Victoria conference on Northwestern Languages*, pages 83–155.  
 Sapir, E. (1911). Some aspects of nootka language and culture. *American Anthropologist*, 13(1):15–28.  
 Sapir, E. and Swadesh, M. (1955). *Native accounts of Nootka ethnography*. Indiana University, Research Center in Anthropology, Folklore, and Linguistics.  
 Swadesh, M. (1938). Nootka internal syntax. *International Journal of American Linguistics*, 9(2/4):77–102.  
 Wojdak, R. (2001). An argument for category neutrality? In Megerdoomian, K. and Bar-el, L. A., editors, *Proceedings of the West Coast Conference on Formal Linguistics*, volume 20, pages 621–634.