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# Firstness of Secondness in Nauruan Morphology

Lisa M. Johnson

The Nauruan suffix  $-(V)n'$  performs many functions. For example, it acts as a possessive suffix, as a completive aspect marker, and as a part of a relative pronoun. The formal contexts in which the morpheme appears are so varied as to suggest several homophonous lexical entries rather than a single morpheme. The purpose of this paper is to relate the disparate usages through the expression of common semantic information. The morpheme is said to have an inherent meaning (Immediate Interpretant in Peircean terms, "general meaning" in Jakobsonian) that is expressed in each of the different contexts. The proposed meaning for the morpheme is expressed in Peircean terms as a marker of Firstness of Secondness.

The first section of the paper presents the data exemplifying the different usages of the morpheme. The next two sections provide an outline of Peircean Semiotics as it is applied in this paper, with a special emphasis on the category Firstness of Secondness. The next section illustrates how each instance of the morpheme expresses the same meaning, and the final section provides a summary and proposal for further research.

## USES OF $-(V)N$

The following examples illustrate the patterns in question. The last line of each example describes the context in which the suffix is found.

1. a pudun  
1Sing fall+Vn  
*I fell.*  
COMPLETIVE VERB
2. eawen  
light<sup>2</sup>+Vn  
*Now it is light. (It became light.)*  
INCHOATIVE VERB
3. mui<sup>3</sup> ebawo  
tooth+(V)n shark  
*shark tooth*  
PARTITIVAL NOUN PHRASE
4. ngain  
child<sup>4</sup> +n  
*his/her child*  
POSSESSIVE NOUN PHRASE
5. ituber eran  
mat e+CLASS+n (ART)  
*a mat*  
ARTICLE
6. wo t'o me ñaran o mo  
[2Pers.Sing] only [1Pers.Sing.Dat.]  
[ña+CLASS+n] [3Pers.Sing] good  
*Give me only that which is good.*  
RELATIVE PRONOUN
7. irriang in eibogi  
song + Vn joy/gladness  
NOUN PHRASE OF CHARACTERIZATION

In example 1 the suffix is added to an active verb to produce a verb in the completive form. In 2 the suffix attaches to an adjectival verb, producing the inchoative form. Examples 3 and 4 express similar partitival notions, but 4 is a clearer use of a possessive construction. Examples 5 and 6 illustrate

how the morpheme can be combined with noun classifiers to produce an article and a relative pronoun, respectively. In example 7 the morpheme appears between two nouns, allowing one noun to modify the other.

The variety of contexts in which the morpheme is found prevents any morphosyntactic explanation for the formal similarities. One natural reaction to these data would be to treat each instance of  $-(V)n$  as a different morpheme, attributing the homophony to coincidence. Kayser (1936) takes this approach, assigning names as various as "actualising suffix," "possessive suffix," and "adverb of purpose" to the cases cited above. In some instances (the formation of indefinite articles, demonstratives, and relative pronouns, for example) Kayser offers no name or explanation whatsoever. He simply notes that the suffix  $-n$  is added to a numeral classifier in each case and makes no attempt to relate the forms.

While Kayser's approach may describe the function of a morpheme in a particular context, it fails to capture an important generalization—the similar phonological forms illustrated above represent common semantic information, regardless of context. In Peircean terms, the morpheme functions as a marker of Firstness of Secondness.

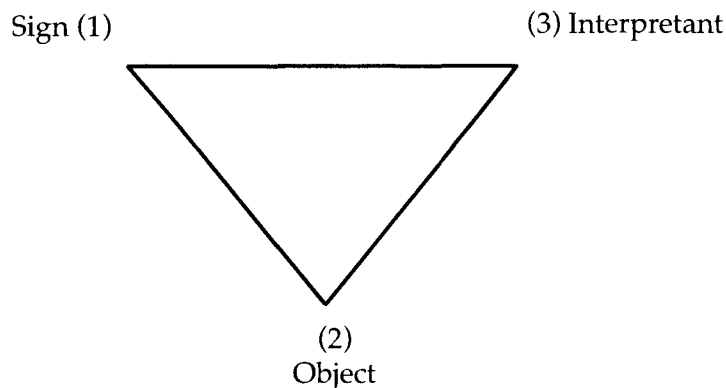
## PEIRCEAN CATEGORIES

Peircean Semiotics is the study of signs. A Sign is something that can be interpreted. It can represent an Object in the existential world, and it suggests or leads to an interpretation known as the Interpretant. The relationship among the Sign, the Object, and the Interpretant can be expressed graphically in the following diagram.

The numerals at the angles represent the Peircean categories of Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness. Here they correspond to the Sign, the Object, and the Interpretant, respectively. Peirce, however, did not limit the categories to this application, claiming that the categories are truly universal, pertaining to every phenomenon. In other words, everything in the real world, whether existential or not, will exhibit the characteristics represented by the terms Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness. Although Peirce spent his life trying to describe these categories and their implications, I will attempt to summarize each "mode of being" (Peirce 1931–66, 1.23) in one short paragraph.

*Firstness* can be characterized by the terms "origin," "potential," and "quality." Firstness is not part of the existential world; instead, it is "the potential

Figure 1. Peircean Triad



world of quality" (1.421). Pure quality is abstract. I can speak of "redness" as a quality. It does not refer to the redness of the apple I hold in my hand or to the redness of the blood I see when I cut my finger. It is the quality redness that could be applied (potentially) to any number of things. But in the realm of Firstness, the quality is not related to any existential thing. Firstness is "that whose being is simply in itself, not referring to anything nor lying behind anything" (1.356).

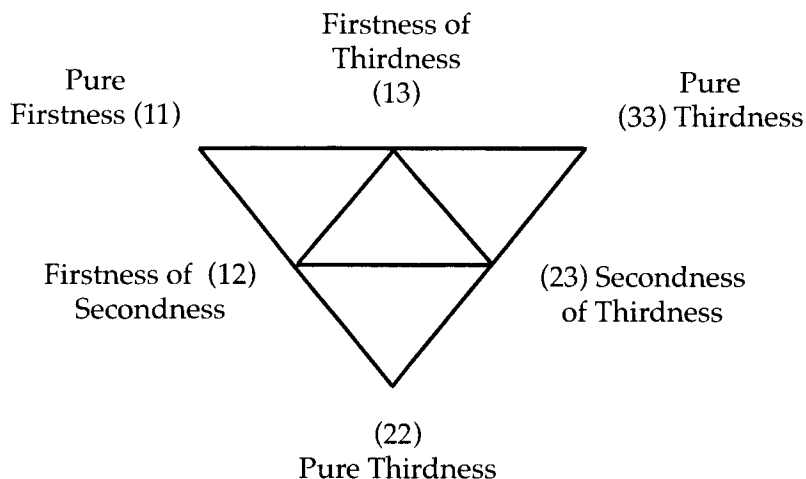
*Secondness* depends on existence and opposition. It is the existential world of fact. According to Peirce, opposition is the essential quality of existence: "A thing without oppositions *ipso facto* does not exist" (1.457). We know that an object exists because of the physical laws of opposition. If I lean against a wall, the wall "reacts" with an equal and opposite force. The wall produces effects on my senses: when I touch it, I can feel that it is hard and smooth; when the light reflects off of it, I see that it is white. Things in the world of secondness are tangible, observable, and factual.

*Thirdness* is associated with the key words "law," "pattern," and "habit." Every time I throw a ball up in the air, the

ball comes down again. The law of gravity that predicts the motion of the ball is an example of Thirdness. As a natural law, gravity predicts that objects will be attracted to the earth by a certain force and that the acceleration of a falling object can be determined by a specific formula. The law of gravity does not specifically identify every object or the context in which it will be attracted to the earth, but it describes the relationship between the earth and *all possible objects*, predicting the behavior of objects that may never even exist. This, too, is characteristic of Thirdness, which involves "the idea of possible variations which no multitude of existent things could exhaust but would leave between any two not merely many possibilities, but possibilities absolutely beyond all multitude" (1.366).

In addition to the "pure" categories described above, Peirce identifies "degenerate" categories that exhibit features of more than one. Firstness of Secondness (12), Firstness of Thirdness (13), and Secondness of Thirdness (23) lie on the midpoints of the triangle's sides as illustrated in figure 2.

Figure 2. Expanded Triad with Degenerate Categories



## FIRSTNESS OF SECONDNESS

This paper focuses on the so-called degenerate category Firstness of Secondness. As stated above, this category lies between the categories of pure Firstness and pure Secondness. Thus, it exhibits features of both. According to Robertson, Firstness of Secondness is the “experiential world . . . not necessarily subject to . . . objective investigation” (1994, 185). Although the character Goldilocks cannot be photographed or weighed, children familiar with her fabled encounter with three bears can attest to her reality in the world of their experience.

One common linguistic expression of Firstness of Secondness is the representation of one thing in two different states. In the existential world, it is impossible for an object to be in two different states at the same time. But, as Peirce explains, the idea of time allows for two instances (Secondness) of the same single object (Firstness).

Contraries [opposites] can be united in one subject. Time is that diversity of existence whereby that which is existentially a subject is enabled to receive contrary determinations in existence. Phillip is drunk and Phillip is sober would be absurd, did not time make the Phillip of this morning another Phillip than the Phillip of last night. The law is that nothing dyadically exists as a subject without the diversification which permits it to receive contrary accidents. The instantaneous Phillip who can be drunk and sober at once has a potential being which does not quite amount to existence. (1.496)

Another important instantiation of Firstness of Secondness lies in a part-whole relationship. Firstness of Secondness “consist[s] in the relation between two parts of one complex concept, or, as we may say, in the relation of a complex concept to itself, in respect to

two of its parts” (1.365). The juxtaposition of a part and a whole (or two parts of a whole) extracts two roles from one existential object.

A second kind of partitival relationship consists in the extraction of a quality from a particular object. “So also, we speak of the abstract quality of a thing as if it were some second thing that the first thing possesses” (1.365). The phrase ‘the redness of the apple’ abstracts a quality (Firstness) from an existential object (Secondness).

## FIRSTNESS OF SECONDNESS IN NAURUAN DATA

These descriptions of Firstness of Secondness are apparent in all the Nauruan examples of  $-(V)n$  presented at the beginning of this paper. Throughout the various contexts, the inherent meaning of the morpheme—a marker of Firstness of Secondness—remains constant. This section will describe the Firstness of Secondness expressed in each of the contexts given.

### One Thing in Two States

In both examples 1 and 2, repeated here as 8 and 9, respectively,  $-(V)n$  is suffixed to a verb but to a different effect in each case.

8. a pudun  
1Sing fall+Vn  
*I fell.*
9. eawen  
light7+Vn  
*Now it is light. (It became light.)*

In 8 the suffix marks a perfective or complete aspect. The action denoted by the verb is seen as complete, whether it occurs in the past, the present, or the future. In 9 the suffix marks the inchoative. In this context, Kayser calls the affix ( $-en$ ) a “realizing particle” that “denotes the actualizing or the coming into being of an action or a state whether present, past, or future” (1936, 165–67). According to Kayser’s

description, the particle can be affixed to any part of speech to “[denote] the occurring or the coming into being of the respective action or state” (167).

The difference between the completive and inchoative is derived from the context. When the suffix is attached to an action verb, it signals that the action is complete, as in the following examples:

10. a nuwawen  
1Pers.Sing. go+Vn  
*I did go. (I left.)*
11. a kaiotien aem  
[1Pers.Sing] [hear+Vn] [your words]  
*I heard what you said.*

When the suffix is attached to a noun or an adjectival verb, it expresses the notion “become x.”

12. owaken  
big+Vn  
*He/she/it became big. (He’s grown.)*
13. a nan timoren  
1Pers.Sing. FUT health+Vn  
*I shall be cured (get better).*

The suffix can even be attached to a number to indicate that a group of that number has been formed:

14. angon  
six+n  
*Now there are six.*

Both the completive and inchoative uses of the -(V)n suffix express the same kind of Firstness of Secondness: one thing in two different states. It is impossible to imagine a completed action without imagining the incomplete state. Similarly, the inchoative verbs juxtapose two distinct states. In 12, for example, the small person is compared with the grown; and in 13 the sick is compared with the healthy. The identity of the subject in both cases represents Firstness, and the inherent contrast in states represents Secondness.

### Part-Whole Relationship

The prototypical “part-whole” relationship is shown in 3, reproduced here as 15.

15. muit<sup>s</sup> ebawo  
tooth+(V)n shark  
*shark tooth*

The tooth in this example is clearly part of the shark. The Firstness of Secondness lies in the comparison between the “part” (the tooth) and the “whole” (the shark). One part of the object is set up against the whole as though it were a separate object. In 16 and 17, the leg and the post are juxtaposed with the table and the house, respectively.

16. naenaen murana table  
leg+n that table  
*table leg*
17. joret<sup>o</sup> oag  
post+Vn house  
*post of the house*

It is interesting to note that the form for table leg is exactly the same as the form meaning his/her leg, as in 18.

18. naenaen  
leg+n  
*his/her leg*

Here the leg is seen as part of the whole person. Example 4—here 19—illustrates a similar relationship.

19. ngain  
child10 +n  
*his/her child*

In this example the child and the parent are seen as two parts of a complex concept—the family.

In these contexts the suffix is best described as part of the possessive paradigm. Table 1, recreated from information in Kayser (1936), shows the possessive suffixes for all persons and numbers. The suffixes in this table are attached to the noun referring to the *possessed* object.

The third person singular suffix corresponds to the -(V)n suffix discussed in this paper. The correspondence between possessive suffixes and a partitival relationship is evidenced by the types of nouns with which the suffixes are used. Possessive suffixes are attached to nouns

Table 1. Nominative Possessive Suffixes.

	Sing.	Dual	Trial	Plural
1 Person Inclusive	—	-tar	-teij	-ta(n)
1 Person Exclusive.	0	-mar	-meij	-ma(n)
2 Person	-m	-muror	-mieij	-mie(n)
3 Person	-n	-ror	-reij	-ra(n)

referring to inalienably possessed objects, including body parts and kin. Possession of alienable objects—including things that can be bought and sold—is expressed by possessive pronouns from two different paradigms, as in the following examples:

20. wan telephone  
1Pers.Sing.Poss telephone  
*his/her telephone*

21. aen oag  
1Pers.Sing.Poss house  
*his/her house*

Another type of part-whole relationship refers to certain members of a group, as in the following example:

22. innon  
those (beyond) + n  
*a few of them (a few of those things way over there)*

This relationship is also expressed when a single member of a general class is identified. In Nauruan, a general class (one of thirty-nine noun classes) is represented by a classifier. A single instantiation is brought about by the  $-(V)n$  suffix. Both articles and demonstratives identify actual manifestations (Secondness) of a general class (Firstness) in this way. Two formal differences distinguish articles from demonstratives: different prefixes and an additional “distance” suffix on the demonstratives. The following list provides additional examples of this usage:

23. ituber eran  
mat e+CLASS+n  
*a mat*  
ARTICLE
24. ini emagen  
coconut tree e+CLASS+(V)n  
*a group of coconut trees*  
ARTICLE
25. iju iwin  
fish i+CLASS+(V)n  
*a netful of fish*
26. ARTICLE  
murane dibidi  
[mu+CLASS+n+Distance Suffix]  
knife  
*this knife*  
DEMONSTRATIVE
27. murana epe  
[mu+CLASS+n+Distance Suffix]  
stone  
*that flat stone*  
DEMONSTRATIVE

### Quality of an Object

Another important partitival relationship abstracts a quality from an object. The relative clause is a prime example of this use. In the English construction “the girl who is singing,” the clause “who is singing” identifies a specific type of girl—that is, a girl who has the quality of “singing.” Since the relative clause in Nauruan performs the same function, it is not surprising that we find the Firstness of Secondness marker in this construction. The relative pronoun is formally similar to the demonstrative pronoun, the key difference between the two consisting in the absence of the distance suffix on the former.

28. wo otaruweij ituber ngaran o mo  
2Pers.Sing bring mat  
nga+CLASS+n 3Pers.Sing.  
good.  
*Bring me a mat which is good.*

Another way of identifying a quality is the addition of a possessive suffix to a verb. This creates a nominalized passive construction.

29. abien  
kill+(V)n  
*the killing of him/her*

In 29 his or her being killed is a quality attributed to the person. The morphological construction involving -(V)n extracts that quality from the person (the object), expressing a Firstness of Secondness.

Example 7, repeated here as 30, illustrates a final way that a quality can be expressed by -(V)n.

30. irriang in eibogi  
song + Vn joy / gladness  
*song of joy*

This construction allows one noun to identify a characteristic of another. Although Kayser (1936) calls -(V)n an "adverb of purpose" in this context, it is more appropriately described in terms of the possessive paradigm presented above. Ross (1998) identifies such constructions, present in Proto-Oceanic and many Oceanic languages, as noun phrases with nonspecific possessors. Thus "joy" in 30 is the possessor of "song" in much the same way that "shark" is the possessor of "tooth" in 15. The English translations "song of joy" and "tooth of shark" express this relationship quite accurately, with "of" representing the Firstness of Secondness marker. The fol-

lowing list provides additional examples of this usage:

31. oagit anakiwi  
house+Vn coconut  
*coconut house (house for storing coconuts)*
32. adae it torer  
time + Vn speaking  
*time off/for speaking*
33. oagin arak  
house + Vn sick  
*hospital*

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Although the Nauruan suffix -(V)n appears in a wide variety of contexts, these different usages are united by the consistent meaning present in the morpheme itself. Table 2 summarizes the different ways in which the suffix expresses the meaning Firstness of Secondness.

Peircean Semiotics provides a perfect explanation for homophonous forms in disparate contexts. Since most of the forms discussed here are reflexes of Proto-Oceanic reconstructions, a valuable follow-up study would examine the Semiotics of the morpheme in a comparative-historical context. Such a study might offer new insights into the discussion of Oceanic possessive and

Table 2. Summary.

Context	Resulting Construction	Firstness of Secondness
active verb + (V)n	Completive verb	One thing in two states
noun or adjectival verb + (V)n	Inchoative verb	One thing in two states
noun+(V)n noun	Partitival noun phrase	Part-whole relationship
noun+ possessive suffix	Possessive noun phrase	Part-whole relationship
e/i + classifier + (V)n	Indefinite article	Part-whole relationship (member of a class)
prefix + classifier + (V)n + distance suffix	Demonstrative pronoun	Part-whole relationship (membership of a class)
prefix + classifier + (V)n	Relative pronoun	Quality of object
verb + possessive suffix	Nominalized passive	Quality of object
noun + (V)n (nonspecific) noun	Noun phrase of characterization/ Possessive noun phrase	Quality of objects



construct forms (see Ross 1998; Lynch 1997; Harrison 1976; Groves, Groves, and Jacobs 1985; and Rehg 1981).

## NOTES

1. Throughout this paper I refer to this suffix as -(V)n, although it is sometimes realized as -(V)[t], according to the following phonological rule: /n/ Æ [t] / \_\_\_ [-cons, -low] (Maggie Jacob, personal communication). The conditions that determine the value of the vowel will not be addressed in this paper.

2. The gloss "light" refers to brightness, not weight.

3. See note 1.

4. The gloss "child" here refers to "son" or "daughter", as opposed to "young person."

5. This diagram is a modification of a diagram that appeared in Robertson (1994).

6. *Ibid.*

7. The gloss 'light' refers to brightness, not weight.

8. See note 1.

9. See note 1.

10. The gloss "child" here refers to "son" or "daughter," as opposed to "young person."

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