Multiple dependent marking in a noun phrase implies that ‘every case-marked constituent passes its case to all of its dependents or co-constituents which bear cases marking their own functions as well as the cases of their heads’ (Nichols 1992: 62). This ‘multiple-layered’ case marking is found in some Australian languages, and has been dealt with in a classic paper by Dench and Evans (1988); see also Evans (1995a) and Dixon (2002). This involves simultaneous marking of two distinct clausal functions on one noun phrase, known as ‘double case’, providing an exception to Nichols’ (1986: 104–5) statement that while ‘many languages have polysynthetic verbs, there are no polysynthetic nouns’.

Polysynthetic inflectionally-complex nouns are found in other languages which combine head- and dependent-marking properties. For instance, in Tariana, a previously undescribed Arawak language from Northwest Amazonia, both nouns and verbs are inflectionally complex. Tariana allows sixteen affixed positions in a verbal word, and fifteen in a noun. The structure of the noun is recursive: that is, the same category may be marked more than once, while verb structure is not recursive.

This double marking of distinct syntactic functions has to be distinguished from marking one syntactic function twice within a noun phrase.

I will show that Tariana allows both phenomena—that is, in some instances, two distinct clausal functions can be marked on one noun phrase; while in others a noun phrase takes two case markers which combine to indicate one syntactic function.

Double marking of syntactic function can be also found within a noun phrase. In Tariana, if a noun phrase contains another noun phrase as a modifier the noun class agreement with two distinct ‘heads’—the head of the embedded noun phrase, and the head of the embedding noun phrase—gets marked on the modifier.
Thus, Tariana consistently follows the principle of multiple-layered marking of syntactic function, both within a clause, and within a noun phrase. Note that the double marking of syntactic function is distinct from marking the same function twice.

§1.1 of this chapter deals with the nominal and verbal categories, and the structure of nouns and verbs in Tariana. The dependent marking case system in Tariana is considered in §1.2. Syntactic function of one noun phrase marked twice is discussed in §2.1. In §2.2 I look at double marking of syntactic function within a clause. Multiple-layered agreement within a NP is considered in §2.3. Conclusions are given in §3.

1. Grammatical Background

1.1. Structure of nouns and verbs in Tariana

Tariana1 is a polysynthetic language which combines head-marking morphology with elements of dependent marking. The open classes are nouns, verbs and adjectives; the latter share most categories with nouns (see note 7).

Nouns and verbs have partly different and partly similar sets of grammatical categories. Nominal categories include possession, diminutive, augmentative, pejorative, number and tense, while verbal categories cover cross-referencing, valency-changing and tense-aspect-evidentiality. Note that nouns have only three values for tense (past, future and Ø-marked present) and one for extralocality (‘elsewhere’), while verbs have eleven values of tense-evidentiality (with an obligatory specification of the source of information: whether the event or a state was seen, perceived with means other than seeing, inferred from some non-firsthand evidence, or reported).

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1 Tariana, from the North Arawak subgroup of the Arawak language family, is spoken by about 100 people in the Vaupés river basin, north west Amazonia, Brazil. This chapter is based on data obtained during fieldwork on North Arawak and East Tucanoan languages of the Upper Rio Negro, Brazil, in 1991–1997. My text corpus of Tariana consists of appr. 700 pp. (135 stories of different genres). I am grateful to all my teachers of Tariana—Cândido, José, Jovino, Graciliano and Olivia Brito. Special thanks go to R.M.W. Dixon, Alan Dench and Tim Curnow for comments and discussion, and to Suzanne Kite for technical assistance.