

Accounting for Variability in Malayo-Polynesian Pronouns: Morphological Instability or Drift?

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Abstract

This paper presents a suggested explanation for the multiple variants of the forms of some Malayo-Polynesian pronouns that have been characterized as the result of drift. The explanation that is given is referred to here as morphological instability.

DRIFT, in the sense of what appears to be parallel independent development of linguistic features in genetically related languages is often recognized, but any explanation for why the changes are parallel, is often not discussed. Joseph (2013) however, points to variability in the phonology of Proto-Germanic and of Proto-Indo-Iranian as an explanation for certain parallel developments of phonological features in the daughter languages of those families, suggesting that such an account is preferable to simply attributing them to drift. This paper follows a similar theme, in that it focuses on what has been described as drift in the development of certain pronouns in Proto-Malayo-Polynesian (PMP) and in some of its daughter proto-languages that resulted in a number of parallel developments that are found throughout the family, especially in the Philippines (Liao 2008:1, Blust 2009 [2013]:320), and northern Borneo (Lobel 2015).

MORPHOLOGICAL INSTABILITY, a condition that results from a semantic change in one of the members of a paradigmatic set that produces a typological anomaly in other members of the set that happen to share the same form, is seen as a trigger for change in order to eliminate or modify the anomalous form. In Malayo-Polynesian languages it was the shift of the meaning of Proto-Austronesian (PAN) $*=mu$ '2nd person *plural* pronoun' to PMP $*=mu$ '2nd person *singular* pronoun' that is considered to be the underlying reason for the wide variability that is found in a several of the forms. To understand why drift has been invoked and why morphological instability is involved it is necessary to outline the different reconstructions of PMP pronouns, as provided by Blust (2009 [2013]), and Reid (2009).

PMP pronouns, as reconstructed by Blust, contain the well-known and widespread distinction between 1st person inclusive and exclusive pronouns ($*=ta$ 'we all' vs. $*=mi$ 'we, but not you'), but do not include a 1st person dual ('we two') that is found widespread throughout the Philippines and northern Borneo. Blust attributes the development of this form to drift, explaining it as a result of the pragmatics of the speech act, where most conversations take place between two people. Frequency of use, he claims, lead to the restriction of $*=ta$ '1st person inclusive pronoun' to a dual. In the languages where the inclusive pronoun was restricted to a dual, a new inclusive form was "cobbled together" from the original form plus various ad hoc pronominal forms (either $=ku$ '1SG', $=mu$ '2SG', $=yu$ '2PL', $=da$ '3PL', etc.), much like the English plural *y'all*, developed after *you* had become the 2nd singular person form.

In Reid (2009), I reconstruct the dual pronoun to PMP as $*=ta[mu]$ claiming that the dialectal addition of $*=mu$ (called an EXTENDER) must have taken place before PMP, since one of the innovations in PMP that distinguishes all the daughter languages of that family from their relatives in Formosa is a change of $*=mu$ from a plural 2nd person pronoun to a singular ('you plural' > 'you singular'), and the addition of a singular extender to form an inclusive pronoun from a dual is pragmatically unlikely and typologically unknown elsewhere.

PAN *=ta '1PL.IN' > PMP *=ta '1DL.IN' / *=tamu '1PL.IN' (Reid 2009:465)
PAN *=mu '2PL' > PMP *=mu '2SG' (Blust 1977)

In this paper, I will show first the wide range of language subgroups in which a dual pronoun is found in the Philippines and outside, supporting my reconstruction of a dual form, and suggesting that parallel independent innovation is an unlikely explanation for the development of dual pronouns. It will then show the range of subgroups in which there is still a reflex of the original *=mu extender, giving support for my reconstruction of PMP *ta[mu]. The claim that morphological instability is involved in their development will be supported by three types of evidence, 1) the cases where the addition of a 2nd person plural extender (=mu + =yu) are found; 2) the cases where =mu has apparently been replaced by =yu; 3) the cases where a third person plural extender has replaced earlier forms; 4) the cases where the dual does not appear, and a reflex of PMP *=ta occurs as a 1st person inclusive form; and 5) the cases where other pronouns that also contained a *=mu plural extender (e.g., PMP *=ka[mu]), have modified them to either eliminate the typologically inappropriate form and/or reduced them to form what appears to be a singular =ku 'I, my' extender.

Morphological instability must have already been present in PMP, with some dialects choosing alternative forms for the inclusive plural, while others retained the inherited form without change. In the daughter languages, some maintain one form, while others retain another, while others have no dual form at all, giving the appearance of drift.

References

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