A statistical approach to African personal pronouns
Category: oral

Following Nichols and Peterson (1996), Nichols & Peterson (WALS 2005: 546-553) present a statistical approach to two formal features of pronominal systems which “show up interestingly on a map”. These features concern the root consonants of 1st and 2nd persons, which may contain a $m$ and a coronal obstruant respectively (henceforth M-T feature), or a $n$ and a $m$ respectively (henceforth M-N). These two types are not evenly distributed in the world’s languages: M-T languages are to be found mainly in northern Eurasia, while N-M languages are more frequent in the western coast of the Americas.

This paper is an attempt to test Nichols and Peterson’s results against a very large database of personal pronouns, namely the LLACAN database on personal pronouns of African languages (http://sumale.vjf.cnrs.fr/pronoms/) which contains data on over 500 languages. The database is not based on a balanced language sample, and is so far limited to three of the four African phyla: Niger-Congo (347 languages), Afroasiatic (137 languages), Nilo-Saharan (37 languages). The balanced sample used by Nichols and Peterson included 230 languages, of which 30 are African languages.

Our main purpose was to check whether the large African data could shed a new light on the distribution of the M-T and N-M features. We also included the measure of the M-N feature (i.e. $m$ in 1st person and $n$ in 2nd person) because, as rightly pointed out by Nichols and Peterson (1996:351), Africa as a member of the Old World, tends to have $m$ in 1st person, $m$ being also the most frequent nasal consonant, as opposed to $n$ in the New World.

Our presentation will discuss our main findings, which are the following:

- M-T African languages are twice as frequent as could be inferred from the WALS sample (64/530 vs. 2/30).
- For N-M languages, the average distribution is comparable, but only if one mixes paradigmatic (i.e. languages where $n$ and $m$ “occur in the same form class(es) of their respective pronouns”) and nonparadigmatic distributions (76/530 vs. 4/30). But the distribution is far different when one only looks at the paradigmatic N-M languages which amount to 68 as against 1 only in the WALS. If, as Nichols and Peterson argue, nonparadigmatic situations are marginal, the African distribution of N-M languages is far more significant than previously mentioned, with as many as 12% of N-M paradigmatic languages as compared to 25% in the Amerind languages. Even if one takes into account the overrepresentation of Afroasiatic languages in the African sample, Africa stands apart from the rest of the Old World (which has no N-M language).
- It is interesting to note that the M-N paradigmatic distribution is also equally pervasive in Africa: 69/530 languages are concerned.

References
Appendix: Maps from the database

M-T distribution

N-M distribution

M-N distribution