

Person Marking in Pronoun Systems: The Case of Gban (Southern Mande) (oral or poster)

While most languages grammaticalize “standard” semantic person features, e.g. ‘only speaker’ (1sg), ‘only addressee’ (2sg), pronominal systems can also combine person features either in frequently attested ways, e.g. 1pl incl, or with relatively exotic results, e.g. a common form for 1 and 2 person paucal pronoun (‘locutor + few others’) in Yimas (Papuan; Foley 1986), 1dual incl (‘only locutors’) in Dan (Southern Mande; Vydrine 2006), contradicting the view that there cannot be a common marker for both locutors (Plungian 2000). In this paper I present a typology of person feature neutralization followed by a particularly interesting field study from Gban (Southern Mande). Such neutralizations, whereby the coincidence of forms creates a common form with another semantic feature, may be *paradigmatic* (the features in different paradigms can be different) or *syntagmatic* (additional semantics is expressed in certain syntagmatic contexts); the formal analysis may be *morphemic* or *submorphemic* (Pozdniakov 2003). For example, Swahili has a paradigm of object pronouns in which the 2 and 3 pl form *wa* neutralizes the features in the subject pronoun paradigm: ‘addressee+’ and ‘non-locutors, animate’, thereby creating a new feature ‘speaker excluded, pl., animate’. In submorphemic cases the common element is less than a morpheme, involving either a full segment or a feature, e.g. vowel height, nasality, tone. There are some borderline cases which show the lack of a strict border between these two phenomena and other cases where it is not clear if a submorphemic analysis is warranted (French: *moi - toi* ‘locutor included’). While submorphemic neutralization is a limited phenomenon in Swahili, French and many other languages, it is of special importance in Gban, where the full system of personal pronouns can be represented as a set of tonal and phonological features: (i) the tone all locutors is one step higher than that of non-locutors; (ii) tone of Past pronouns is two steps higher than that of Present pronouns; (iii) 1p pronouns have closed vowels vs. 2p and 3p pronouns which have (semi-) open vowels; (iv) only 2p pronouns have a long vowel; (v) all singular pronouns have a front vowel vs. plurals which have back vowels. These facts from Gban show that a language simultaneously exploits tones and phonological features instead of the surface sequential morphology observed in other languages. Submorphemic neutralization is thus available to account for the semantics of personal pronouns either independently or in combination with standard concatenative morphology. Finally, tonal patterns are shown to behave in exactly the same way as phonological features in creating the Gban pronominal system. The importance of submorphemic and suprasegmental marking has additional interesting consequences, e.g. tonal agreement of pronouns with the verb (with ergative type of alignment!) and formation of the so called “portmanteau” forms, with the degree of contraction between subject and object pronouns depending on the position of object pronoun in the “animacy hierarchy” (Silverstein 1976). It is argued that such analyses in general, and of the Gban pronominal system in particular, have typological significance beyond person marking as these very phenomena characterize other aspects of morphology as well.

References

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