

Morphological Instability: Accounting for Variability in the Forms of Proto-Malayo-Polynesian Pronouns

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Abstract

This paper claims that one cause of variability in languages has its source in morphological instability, a condition that results from a semantic change in one of the members of a paradigmatic set, such as pronouns, that produces a typological anomaly in other members of the set that happen to share the same form. The cases that are discussed in this paper relate to the variant forms of the first person inclusive and second person plural pronouns in Philippine languages.

Evidence for the reconstruction to Proto-Malayo-Polynesian (PMP) of a dual pronoun such as is found in Philippine languages has appeared in print (Reid 2009), but alternate explanations for much of the same data, such as drift, have also appeared in print (Liao 2008, Blust 2009 [2013]), based partly on the wide range of variant forms that have developed for the corresponding first person inclusive pronoun that appear in Malayo-Polynesian languages today.

The paper will review the evidence provided in Reid (2009) that the common extender *-mu*, which in many languages distinguishes a first person inclusive pronoun from its restricted dual counterpart and which appears to be cognate with a second person singular pronoun, could not have been a second singular pronoun when first added, but must have been added **prior** to the shift of Proto-Austronesian *mu ‘GEN.2PL’ to a singular pronoun in PMP. It will then claim that morphological instability resulting from the semantic change resulted not only in variation in PMP, but also in the addition of additional extenders and/or the replacement of the reflex of PMP *mu by a linguistically more appropriate extender, conditioned primarily on the inappropriateness of the extender following its semantic shift from a plural to a singular pronoun.

Reconstructed PMP second person plural pronouns likewise show variant forms that can also be accounted for by the need to distinguish plural forms from singular, following the shift in PMP of PAn *=mu from a plural to a singular pronoun.

References

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