PERSONAL PRONOUNS IN VIETNAMESE AND IN MƯỜNG

Nguyen Phu Phong [*]

In this paper, first I will present successively the systems of personal pronouns in Vietnamese, in the Mường language of Hòa Bình, and in Rục of the Quảng Bình province. Then I will sketch a comparative look at the three systems, and finally I will show how the introduction of *tôi* '1ˢᵗ sg humble', originally a noun, has the effect of upsetting the whole Vietnamese system.

0. The Vietnamese system

The system presented below is composed of personal pronouns, i.e. morphologically related to other deictic words like demonstratives. This system is supposed to be the chief one before the 17th century, preceding the introduction of *tôi* '1ˢᵗ sg humble'.

Singular		Plural	
1ˢᵗ	*tao (~ tau)*	1ˢᵗ (+ 2ⁿᵈ)	*ta*
2ⁿᵈ	*mày (~ mi)*	2ⁿᵈ (+ 3ʳᵈ)	*bây (~ bay)*
3ʳᵈ	*nó, hắn*	3ʳᵈ	*họ*

Note that *ta* '1ˢᵗ+(2ⁿᵈ)' means that *ta* can be used either as '1ˢᵗ sg' or as '1ˢᵗ inclusive', i.e. '1ˢᵗ+2ⁿᵈ'. *Bây* '2ⁿᵈ+(3ʳᵈ)' should be interpreted either as *bây* '2ⁿᵈ pl' or as '2ⁿᵈ+3ʳᵈ'.

1. THE MƯỜNG OF HÒA BÌNH SYSTEM

Hoà Bình is about 60 kilometers S-W of Hanoi. The Mường spoken in this province is considered to be close to Vietnamese.

Singular		Plural	
1ˢᵗ	*hô*	1ˢᵗ (+ 2ⁿᵈ)	*ha*
2ⁿᵈ	*za*	2ⁿᵈ (+ 3ʳᵈ)	*pay*
3ʳᵈ	*no*	3ʳᵈ	*bâu*

2. The Rục system

Rục is a language spoken by no more than 150 people whose neighbors are the Nguồn (population around 20.000) and the Sách (population estimated at 600). The Rục are located on the high valleys of the Gianh river, Quảng Bình province.

	Singular		Dual		Plural	
	Exclusive	Inclusive	Exclusive		Inclusive	
1ˢᵗ	*hô*	*nhal*	*te*		*cupa*	*ming*
2ⁿᵈ	*mi*		*mal*			*pami*
3ʳᵈ	*han*		*riơm*			*apa, pana*

3. A comparative look

Vietnamese, Mường and Rục belong to the same group, called the Việt-Mường group or the Vietic group. In this group, Rục is one of the most conservative languages, Vietnamese the most evolutive, and Mường rather close to Vietnamese.

Note that :

a) the most complete system is Rục with the distinction singular/dual/plural

b) the same form can be found in more than one language, such as:

- *nó* '3rd sg' (V, M) ; *hăn* '3rd sg' (V, R)

- *bay* '2nd pl' (V) ~ *pay* '2nd pl' (M)

- *mi* '2nd sg' (V, R). In some conservative Vietnamese dialects such as that of Quảng Bình, instead of *mày*, we have *mi*.

- *hô* '1st sg' (M, R)

These recurrent forms in the different systems mean that personal pronouns like some other deictics in the Vietic group are formed with a small number of basic forms. For further details of morphological and semantic relationships between Vietnamese personal pronouns and demonstratives, see Nguyên Phu Phong, 1996: 7-14.

In his investigation on the phonology of Mường, Nguyễn Văn Tài (1982) shows the following distributions about the 30 dialects of this language

c) Pronouns in the 3 systems above are characterized only in term of *person* as a grammatical deictic category, and *number* with the opposition singular/(dual)/plural.

d) For technical reason, tones are not marked for all the dialects in Mường, and in Rục, but remark that morphemes for 1st person and 2nd person have even tones, while for 3rd person have oblique tones.

5. The introduction of tôi

Before the 17th century, there is no substantial prose work in Vietnamese. That is why we have to resort to poetry work to study the language of this period. Neither in the 254 poems by Nguyễn Trãi (15th century), nor in the 100 ones by Nguyễn Bỉnh Khiêm (16th century), *tôi* did not appear in its use as personal pronoun. In Nguyễn Trãi collection *Quốc Âm Thi Tập* 'Poems in National Tongue', the notion of ËegoË is expressed by *ta*, i.e. '1st+2nd'. However in the *Brevis Declaratio*, addendum to his *Dictionarium* (1651), A. de Rhodes has already discussed the semantics of *tôi* as '1st sg'. It is plausible then to date the introduction of *tôi* into the Vietnamese personal pronoun system at the end of the 16th or the beginning of the 17th century.

De Rhodes (*ibid*, chapter IV *De Pronominibus*) indicates that when a superior addresses to an inferior, the term for self-reference is *tao* while the term for second-person reference is *mày*. Thus, according to De Rhodes, a husband refers to himself as *tao*, and to his wife as *mày*; on the contrary the wife should use *tôi* 'ancilla' for first-person reference when talking to her husband. Taking into account the still strong lexical meaning 'servant' (ancilla) of the pronoun *tôi*, de Rhode has examined its use in two delicate situations: how the king of Tonkin refers to himself in a conversation with his mother, and which term Virgin Mother Maria (Virginem Matrem) should use for self-referring when addressing to her Son, but at the same time God (Filio Deo). In both cases, de Rhodes said that *tôi* could be used.

Because of de Rhodes preoccupation with the correct and difficult employ of *tôi,* we can say that *tôi* has introduced an extra dimension of quality into the notion of person, and is best defined as '1st sg humble', i.e. not only in terms of participant-role (1st person), of number

(singular) as is *tao*, but also in terms of a social status (humble). The big difference between *tao* et *tôi* is that face to *tao*, the only 2nd person possible is *mày* while with *tôi*, a multitude of nouns can be used to refer to the hearer: nearly all the kin terms and status terms and the likes.

Because the meaning of *tôi* is that of social status term, all the kin terms now used as 'pron. 2nd pers.' paired with *tôi* '1st sg humble' have their semantics modified so as to express a social position with respect to *tôi*. Thus *ông* is 'grand-father' when in relation with *cháu* 'grand-child' – both *ông* and *cháu* are kin terms – but should be interpreted as 'monsieur' if paired with *tôi* as '2nd person' to '1st person'. The relationship, grammatical as well as semantic, between the paired *I-you* terms is very close.

With the grammaticalization of *tôi* as '1st sg', we have now two systems of personal pronouns in Vietnamese, the V(ertical) pronouns which reflect social hierarchy and the H(orizontal) ones which do not. The two systems H and V with only the singular pronouns are summed up in Table 1 below :

Table 1. H and V systems

	FIRST	SECOND	THIRD
H pronouns	*tao*	*mày*	*nó*
V pronouns	*tôi*		

The 2nd person/addressee slot in the V system is empty. As a filter which functions like a 2nd person pronoun, we can now use a noun, usually a kin term or a status term. Because of the much more frequent use of V pronouns at the expense of H ones, and of the great number of possible candidates for *you* in V, one can be led to say that Vietnamese has no personal pronouns proper.

6.   The evolution of the Mường system

The introduction of *tôi* has the effect of upsetting the whole Vietnamese personal pronoun system to the point that an author like H.J. Pinnow (1965) has brought this remark: ÊẢin Annamese the original 1st sing. pron. has disappeared completely, *tôi*, which is used in its place, meaning 'servant, slave. But how about **in Muong** ? In his work, **Nguyen Van Tai** (1982) has listed *tôi* as possible Ê1st sgÊ in 10 out of 30 dialects of his survey, and *tui* a variant of *tôi* in 4 dialects. Note that with *tôi*, we have an instance of grammaticalization of a noun into a pronoun, but with *tui* we now possess a complete new word, a case of neologism. The introduction of *tôi/tui* in the dialects in question should have the same effect: the multiplicity of forms which especially affect the 2nd person. The trend is that *person* as a grammatical category becomes more and more *person* as a social deixis category.

Nguyen Van Tai (1988: 186) observes that in some Mường story, the pronouns *ho* and *za* are used without any shade of deference or disdain. But nowadays with the Vietnamese influence, *ho* and *za* are not neutral any more with regard to the expression of politeness or hierarchical distinction.

Muong as well as Vietnamese also uses kin terms to render the 1st person. When *you* in the pair *I-you* is a kin term, for instance *mu* 'grand-mother', its converse term, *xôn* 'grand-child' can be used to refer to the 1st person. The pair *xôn-mu* rendering *I-you* applies not only to members of a family, but can also translate a social relationship.

But the original feature of Mường is that this language uses a combination of personal pronouns and kin terms. For example a boy address his sweetheart using *eng hô* 'elder I' for self-reference and *un za* 'younger you' for listener's reference; *eng* and *un* in Mường mean

respectively 'elder brother' and 'younger sibling'.

7. Pluralization

Morphologically, the Rục system is the most complete among the three languages with a three-way distinction in number: singular/dual/plural. These distinctions, Vietnamese can realize nevertheless through syntax. Let's see how:

(1) Dual excl. : (R) *nhal* ; (V) *hai (đứa) tao*

(2) Dual incl. : (R) *te* ; (V) *hai (đứa) ta*

(3) Dual 2nd person : (R) *mal* ; (V) *hai đứa mày*

(4) Dual 3rd person : (R) *riơm* ; (V) *hai đứa nó*

As shown above, Vietnamese can use quantification to form dual pronouns. For instance in (1), we have *hai* 'two', a numeral (Nu); *đứa* 'individual', a classifier (Cl); and *tao* '1st sg'. The pronoun *tao* in this example is quantified by the determiner cluster *hai đứa* [Nu Cl] exactly as a noun (N) in a noun phrase whose structure is [Nu Cl N]. By changing the Nu *hai* into any other Nu, we will obtain other forms of plural personal pronouns.

Instead of quantification, Vietnamese also uses combination to pluralize. Thus singular pronouns can be combined with the morpheme chúng of Chinese origin, meaning 'many, the people'. We then obtain chúng tao/chúng tôi 'we', chúng mày 'you (pl)', and chúng nó 'they'. Instead of chúng, Vietnamese uses also bọn 'gang', tụi 'coterie, clique', or lũ 'gang, group', the latter three are also found in Mường as plural morphemes to form plural pronouns.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

De Rhodes, Alexandro (1651), Dictionarium annamiticum, lusitanum et latinum, Rome, Sacrae Congregationis de Propaganda Fide.

Nguyễn Phú Phong (1995), Questions de linguistique vietnamienne. Les classificateurs et les déictiques, Paris, Presses de l'EFEO.

Nguyễn Phú Phong (1996), Personal pronouns and pluralization in Vietnamese. Mon Khmer Studies 25: 7-14.

Nguyễn Văn Lợi (1993), Tiếng Rục (The Rục language), Hà Nội, Nhà xuất bản Khoa Học Xã Hội.

Nguyễn Văn Tài (1982), Ngữ âm tiếng Mường qua các phương ngôn. Luận án Phó tiến sĩ Ngôn ngữ học (Mường phonology across its dialects. Ph. D. dissertation in Linguistics), Hà Nội, Ủy Ban Khoa Học Xã Hội, Viện Ngôn Ngữ Học.

Nguyễn Văn Tài (1988), Tiếng Mường Bi - Đôi nét độc đáo của tiếng Mường (The Mường Bi dialect - Some specific features of the Mường language). In Nguyễn Từ Chi and al. Người Mường với văn hoá cổ truyền Mường Bi (The Mường people and the Mường Bi traditional culture), pp. 172-190, Ủy ban Nhân dân huyện Tân Lạc, tỉnh Hà Sơn Bình.

Pinnow, H.J. (1965), Personal pronouns in the Austroasiatic languages: a historical study (translated by H.L. Shorto). Lingua 14: 3-42.

Hội thảo quốc tế lần thứ V về Ngôn ngữ và Ngôn ngữ học PAN Asiatic Linguistics