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 Rúc 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’.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Singular</th>
<th>Plural</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1st tao (~ tau)</td>
<td>1st (+ 2nd) ta</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd mày (~ mi)</td>
<td>2nd (+ 3rd) bảy (~ bảy)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd nó, hán</td>
<td>3rd hò</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note that ta ‘1st+(2nd)’ means that ta can be used either as ‘1st sg’ or as ‘1st inclusive’, i.e. ‘1st+2nd’. Bảy ‘2nd+(3rd)’ should be interpreted either as bảy ‘2nd pl’ or as ‘2nd+3rd’.

1. THE MƯỜNG OF HÒA BÌNH SYSTEM

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Singular</th>
<th>Plural</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1st hò</td>
<td>1st (+ 2nd) ha</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd za</td>
<td>2nd (+ 3rd) pảy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd no</td>
<td>3rd bảu</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2. The Rúc system

Rúc is a language spoken by no more than 150 people whose neighbors are the Ngươn (population around 20,000) and the Sách (population estimated at 600). The Rúc are located on the high valleys of the Gianh river, Quảng Bình province.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Singular</th>
<th>Dual</th>
<th>Inclusive</th>
<th>Exclusive</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1st hò</td>
<td>nhal</td>
<td>te</td>
<td>cupa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd mi</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>pảmi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd han</td>
<td>riom</td>
<td></td>
<td>apa, pana</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(*) Centre de Recherches Linguistiques sur l’Asie Orientale – CNRS Université Paris 7 – France

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

Note that:

a) the most complete system is Rúc 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); hân ‘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 mà, we have mi.
- hở ‘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 Nguyễn Phú Phong, 1996: 7-14.

In his investigation on the phonology of Muông, 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 Muông, and in Rúc, 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 Bình Khiembre (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 ‘ÈegoÈ’ 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 ‘1sg’. 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 Pronominitis) indicates that when a superior addresses to an inferior, the term for self-reference is tao while the term for second-person reference is mà. Thus, according to De Rhodes, a husband refers to himself as tao, and to his wife as mà; 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 and tôi is that face to tao, the only 2nd person possible is này 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 (Vertical) 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>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1. H and V systems</th>
<th>FIRST</th>
<th>SECOND</th>
<th>THIRD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>H pronouns</td>
<td>tao</td>
<td>này</td>
<td>nó</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V pronouns</td>
<td>tôi</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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: "Những người Annamese the original 1st sing. pron. has disappeared completely, tôi, which is used in its place, meaning ‘servant, slave. But how about in Mường? In his work, Nguyễn Văn Tai (1982) has listed tôi as possible ở 1st sg ở 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.

Nguyễn Văn 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.

Mường 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 hó ‘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 Ruc 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 (đũa) tao
(2) Dual incl. : (R) te; (V) hai (đũa) ta
(3) Dual 2nd person : (R) mal; (V) hai đũa may
(4) Dual 3rd person : (R) rion; (V) hai đũa no

As shown above, Vietnamese can use quantification to form dual pronouns. For instance in (1), we have hai ‘two’, a numeral (Nu); đũa ‘individual’, a classifier (Cl); and tao ‘1st sg’. The pronoun tao in this example is quantified by the determiner cluster hai đũa [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 may ‘you (pl)’, and chúng nó ‘they’. Instead of chúng, Vietnamese uses also bọn ‘gang’, tui ‘coterie, clique’, or lũ ‘gang, group’, the latter three are also found in Mường as plural morphemes to form plural pronouns.

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