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 mài (~ mi)</td>
<td>2nd (+ 3rd) bày (~ bay)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd nó, hân</td>
<td>3rd họ</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’. Bày ‘2nd+(3rd)’ should be interpreted either as bày ‘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 hô</td>
<td>1st (+ 2nd) ha</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd za</td>
<td>2nd (+ 3rd) pay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd no</td>
<td>3rd bâu</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2. The Rúc system

Rúc is a language spoken by no more than 150 people whose neighbors are the Nguôn (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>Plural</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Exclusive</td>
<td>Inclusive</td>
<td>Exclusive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1st hô</td>
<td>nhal</td>
<td>te</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd mỉ</td>
<td>mal</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd han</td>
<td>rion</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3. A comparative look

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Vietnamese, Muông and Rực 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); hän ‘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 mây, 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 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 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 Êêêê 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 mây. Thus, according to De Rhodes, a husband refers to himself as tao, and to his wife as mây; 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 tạọ, but also in terms of a social status (humble). The big difference between tạọ
and tôi is that face to tạọ, the only 2nd person possible is mạỵ while with tôi, a multitude of nouns
are 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
'm. 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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FIRST</th>
<th>SECOND</th>
<th>THIRD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>H pronouns</td>
<td>tạọ</td>
<td>mạỵ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V pronouns</td>
<td>tôi</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 Mụcng 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:
Ê¢Á’in Annamese the original 1st sing. pron. has disappeared completely, tôi, which is used in its
place, meaning ‘servant, slave. But how about in Mụcng? In his work, Nguyễn Văn Tài (1982)
has listed tôi as possible Ê¢1st 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.

Nguyễn Văn Tài (1988: 186) observes that in some Mụcng 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.

Mụcng 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, xơn ‘grand-child’
can be used to refer to the 1st person. The pair xơn-mu rendering I-you applies not only to
members of a family, but can also translate a social relationship.

But the original feature of Mụcng is that this language uses a combination of personal
pronouns and kin terms. For example a boy address his sweetheart using eng họ ‘elder I’ for self-
reference and un za ‘younger you’ for listener’s reference; eng and un in Mụcng mean
respectively ‘elder brother’ and ‘younger sibling’.

7. Pluralization

Morphologically, the Rúc 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) nha; (V) hai (đủa) tao
(2) Dual incl. : (R) te; (V) hai (đủa) ta
(3) Dual 2nd person : (R) mal; (V) hai dưa may
(4) Dual 3rd person : (R) riom; (V) hai dưa nó

As shown above, Vietnamese can use quantification to form dual pronouns. For instance in (1), we have hai ‘two’, a numeral (Nu); dưa ‘individual’, a classifier (CI); and tao ‘1st sg’. The pronoun tao in this example is quantified by the determiner cluster hai dưa [Nu CI] exactly as a noun (N) in a noun phrase whose structure is [Nu CI 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’, tụi ‘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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Hội thảo quốc tế lần thứ V về Ngôn ngữ và Ngôn ngữ học PAN Asiatic Linguistics

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Nùng là một trong 54 dân tộc thiểu số được nhà nước Việt Nam công nhận. Nùng An là một trong nhóm các nhóm địa phương của dân tộc Nùng. Tiếng Nùng An là một trong những phương ngôn của dân tộc Nùng, và là đề tài nghiên cứu của bài viết này.

Các học giả đều công nhận rằng Nùng thuộc vào nhóm ngôn ngữ được Li Fang-Kuei gọi là nhóm Trung Thái (Central Tai), nhóm Thái của ngôn ngữ Tai-Kadai. Tuy vậy, André Haudricourt, người có nhiều công trình nghiên cứu về các ngôn ngữ ở Việt Nam lại cho rằng Nùng là một thành viên trong nhóm Yaying, nhóm có thể so sánh với nhóm Bắc Thái mà Li đã phân loại (Strecker 1984). Tuy nhiên Nùng An không hối dứa các tiêu chí mà Li đã đưa ra cho nhóm Bắc Thái vì Nùng An có âm tắc thanh hậu, còn các phương ngữ Miền Bắc thì không.
