

ON A POSSIBLE FACTOR IN THE ORIGIN OF PIAWI PERSONAL PRONOUNS

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In the discussion of the reconstruction of personal pronouns in Proto-Piawi, the language family including Haruai, Hagahai, and Pinai, I suggested the forms in Table 1 (Comrie 1988: 148).¹

Table 1. Proto-Piawi personal pronouns

	Singular	Plural
1	* <i>n</i>	* <i>an</i>
2	* <i>na</i>	
3	* <i>nw</i>	* <i>ñ</i>

I noted that one striking aspect of this system is the recurrence of the element *n* in all the pronouns. If we remove this recurrent element, then the system reduces to Table 2.

Table 2. Proto-Piawi pronominal person-number formatives

	Singular	Plural
1	* <i>-</i>	* <i>a-</i>
2	* <i>-a</i>	* <i>-~2</i>
3	* <i>-w</i>	

One objection that might be made to such a system is that personal pronoun systems across the world are not otherwise known to have a constant root with person-number being marked by affixes.³

Recently, however, a system has been drawn to my attention that shows a remarkable typological parallel to my reconstruction of the Proto-Piawi personal pronoun system (and indeed to the attested systems of Haruai and the Aramo dialect of Hagahai).

In Nisgha, a Tsimshian language of Western Canada, the independent forms of pronouns involve a fixed stem, *ni-*, to which person-number suffixes are attached, giving the forms as in Table 3.⁴

Table 3: Nisgha independent pronouns

	Singular	Plural
1	<i>ni-y̓</i>	<i>ni-m̓</i>
2	<i>ni-n</i>	<i>ni-səm̓</i>
3	<i>ni-t</i>	<i>ni-di.t</i>

These same pronominal suffixes are found elsewhere in the language, e.g. *nəbibi-y̓* ‘my uncle’; *nəbiba-n* ‘your uncle’.

A possible origin of the Piawi system is that the constant *n* was originally a separate morpheme, to which pronominal affixes were then attached. The original function of the *n* is probably impossible to determine now; perhaps it was somehow connected with functional sentence perspective (topicalization, focusing, or emphasis), though it is not synchronically attested in these or related functions.

In Nisgha, the affixes found in the independent pronouns also function productively elsewhere in the language, as illustrated in the possessive forms above. In the Piawi languages, there is only restricted evidence for this. In particular, palatalization is the mark of the second-third person plural in verbal morphology, e.g. *ab-m-~* ‘throw-PAST-2/3PLURAL’, i.e. ‘you (PLURAL)/they threw’.⁵ Since there is some alternation, at least in Haruai, between *ö* and *a*, the suggested second person singular pronominal formative *-a* may be compared with the second person singular in *-ö* in verbal morphology, e.g. *ab-m-ö* ‘throw-PAST-2SINGULAR’, i.e. ‘you (SINGULAR) threw’. In verbal morphology, the first person singular does indeed have a zero affix, e.g. ‘I threw’, though the comparison of two zeros is not particularly telling. There is, however, no analogue in verbal morphology to the third person singular pronominal formative *-w*⁶ or the first person plural *a-*; indeed, with respect to the latter, neither Haruai nor Aramo uses prefixation for verbal person-number morphology.

This account of the ‘deeper’ history of Piawi personal pronouns is necessarily speculative. However, it is plausible that originally these were pragmatically marked forms consisting of a fixed stem to which person-number affixes were

attached, the same person-number affixes as occurred elsewhere in the language. Subsequent divergence between pronominal forms and verbal person-number morphology and loss of pragmatic markedness of these pronominal forms have served to destroy this parallelism in the modern languages. In seeking the deeper genetic affiliations of the Piawi languages, the morphemically composite nature of the personal pronouns should be borne in mind.

Notes

1 These remarks on pronominal forms are based on detailed work on Haruai and limited work on the Aramo dialect of Hagahai. It is possible that work on other dialects of Hagahai and on Pinai would add further evidence, though since Haruai is the most divergent of the Piawi languages this seems unlikely. If, as suggested tentatively by William A. Foley (personal communication), the Piawi languages are genetically related to Arafundi, then Arafundi data might provide such further evidence.

The material contained in this article is based in part on work supported by the National Science Foundation under grant BNS-8504293. I am grateful to the Madang Provincial Research Committee for permission to carry out this research, to the Summer Institute of Linguistics (Papua New Guinea branch) for invaluable material aid, and to the Haruai people for their enthusiastic support of my work.

- 2 A free-standing tilde represents palatalization of the preceding segment; $C\tilde{}$ or $C\tilde{\cdot}$ is thus phonetically equivalent to \tilde{C} .
- 3 As pointed out to me by Christian Lehmann.
- 4 The Nisgha data were brought to my attention by Robert Belvin, from whom the cited forms (in phonetic transcription) are taken; see also Boas (1911b:391).
- 5 The verb forms cited here and below are Haruai. In most environments, they will appear with a further suffix, *-a* 'DECLARATIVE', before which the second person singular *-ō* drops, i.e. *ab-m-~a* 'they threw', *ab-m-a* 'I threw'.
- 6 Haruai does, however, have an alternative third person singular clitic possessive pronoun, *-nŋ*, restricted to occurrence with certain kinship terms. Since final *-ŋ/gō* is a constant feature of most Haruai personal pronouns (Comrie 1988: 149), this effectively leaves a third person form **-n*, i.e. the pronominal base *n* and a

zero affix. Zero is also the person-number affix for third person singular in verbal morphology.

References

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