GRAMMATICAL DECAY IN PAPUAN LANGUAGES

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Many Papuan languages have very highly complex morphological systems, both in the verb morphology and in the noun morphology. A feature found in the noun phrase of many Papuan languages is the presence of complex to very complex classification systems, often with elaborate concordance features.

It has been observed in a number of instances that during the last few decades there have been tendencies of varying strength towards a simplification of such elaborate morphological features in Papuan languages in the speech of young people, with these simplifications remaining in use as they grow up and the entire community adapting its language use to it as·older speakers of the more elaborate forms of the language die out. This decay of grammatical complexity is apparently contributable to sociolinguistic factors and to language influence resulting from increasing contact between speakers of different languages, the incidence of the use of lingue franche such as Tok Pisin (New Guinea Pidgin) and Solomon Islands Pijin, and the increasing disuse of the local languages in favour of the lingue franche in many situations by the young generation, as well as increasing loss of contact with the traditional culture in which, in many cases, the principles underlying noun classifications for instance, are anchored.

One striking example of this phenomenon is the gradual loss of the very highly complex verb morphology in dialects of Southern Kiwai, which are spoken in the Fly delta area of the Western Province of Papua New Guinea. The language has four main dialects:

— Island Kiwai, mainly on Kiwai Island

— Coastal Kiwai, on the south-eastern and eastern coast of the Trans-Fly area

— Doumori Kiwai, on Doumori Island in the western part of the Fly delta and a village on the ·left bank of the Fly, downstream from Doumori Island

and finally

— Daru Kiwai, on Daru Island off the south-eastern coast of the Trans-Fly area.

Of these dialects the Island Kiwai dialect was reduced to writing and used as a missionary language by the London Missionary Society in the Fly delta area before the turn of the century.

The main features of the complex verb morphology of Island Kiwai are as follows (Wurm 1973):

Four numbers are distinguished, i.e. singular, dual, trial and plural. They are marked by prefixes and suffixes. However, only two persons, speaker and non-speaker, are differentiated — they are marked by prefixes. The verb stem, and sometimes prefixes added to it, undergo changes to denote non-singularity of the object, e.g. oruso *eat one*, iriso *eat more than one*.

A variety of aspects, such as punctiliarity, repetitiveness and continuity, are indicated by suffixes added to the verb stem, while prefixes to the verb stem denote modes of actions, such as spontaneity, reflexivity, application, an action with something. Combination of a number of such prefixes on one verb form appear in many instances.

There are two past tenses, one present tense and three future tenses. They are indicated by tense forms of subject prefixes, together with combinations of prefixes, suffixes and tense forms of the affixes indicating the number of the subject. In many verb forms tense is signalled several times, often first in a general form by the shape of the subject prefix with which only present, past and future are distinguished, and this general indication is then followed by the indication of a specific past or future tense through additional suffixes.

A similar repeated signalling of number in a verb form is also found frequently. So, for instance, the changes of the verb stem mentioned above, which refer to the number of the object, only serve to signal singularity versus non-singularity. The indication of the specific number of a non-singular object, i.e. whether it is dual or trial or plural, is marked by the addition of suffixes, i.e. oruso *eat one*, iriso-ama *eat two*, iriso-bi *eat three*, iriso-potoro *eat more than three separate ones*, whereas iriso indicates *to eat more than three at the same time*.

In addition to this, there is a complex system of habitual forms in which four tenses, present, near past, definite past and future are distinguished, a range of different imperative forms denoting actions ordered to be carried out immediately, or in the near future, or at some future time, or repeatedly or habitually or as something that must or should be done, or as something whose performance is only advised and not definitely ordered. Four numbers are distinguished in all these forms. A number of permissive and conditional forms exists as well, as well as verbal nouns.

A characteristic feature of the Island Kiwai dialect and incidentally of all Kiwaian languages is the fact that the elaboration of the verb forms as mentioned above is restricted to the affirmative. In the negative, only two basic forms occur, one denoting past and present, and one the future. A comparable paucity of negative forms exists in the imperative forms: only an ordinary and a strong prohibitive are present.

The person of the object is indicated in a number of verb forms through prefixes. Other prefixes appear to denote assertion or certainty, completion of an action, incompleteness of an action, repeated action, actual performance or succession of actions, affirmative and negative interrogation, temporal condition, etc.

In contrast to this highly elaborate verb morphology of the Island Kiwai dialect, the Coastal Kiwai dialect shows a somewhat simpler verb morphology. Especially constructions containing verbal nouns formed by prefixes appear instead of complicated tense forms. In general, the appearance of tense markers in verb forms with non-singular subjects tends to be optional with past tenses, if the context is clear. Doumori Kiwai is similar in verb morphology to Island Kiwai, but Daru Kiwai shows a greatly simplified verb morphology when compared with the other dialects of Southern Kiwai. Constructions containing verbal nouns appear extensively in the place of tense forms, tense markers in verb forms with non-singular subjects are much more rarely used than in Coastal Kiwai, the dual and trial object markers are largely optional and the tense system is greatly simplified. It seems likely that the loss, or only rare optional use, of much of the elaborate Kiwai verb morphology in Daru Kiwai may be due to a pidginisation process attributable to the use of this dialect as a lingua franca by a large number of speakers of other languages living on Daru Island.

This simplification of the Daru Kiwai dialect as a result of its use as a lingua franca is not an unusual phenomenon. However, a simplification process of the morphology of the other three dialects of Southern Kiwai is observable with descending age of the speakers, and is slowly but steadily progressing. Some of this phenomenon may be attributable to influence from the Daru Kiwai dialect. Daru is the administrative centre of the area and tends to be visited by speakers of other dialects of Southern Kiwai. However, that influence by itself appears to be no reason for speakers of these other dialects to start introducing morphological simplifications into their dialects when they speak to each other within their own dialect area. Also, it may be significant that the morphological simplifications observable in these other dialects of Southern Kiwai are directly proportional to decreasing age of the speakers of the dialects, which at the same time means that they are directly proportional to an increasing knowledge of English and increasing modern educational sophistication on the part of its speakers. At the same time, there appears to be a tendency in Southern Kiwai, as evidenced by the Coastal Kiwai dialect, towards moving obligatory marking of grammatical forms into the optional sphere. The fixing of these markings in a largely obligatory form in the Island Kiwai dialect may be attributable to the reduction of writing of this dialect almost a hundred years ago and its long use in printed materials, with the apparent insistence of the creators of the written form of the language on maximal use of the morphological facilities of the language for clarity of expression, e.g. in translations of Scripture. This tendency for 'fullness of expression' has been observed by myself when working with informants in Coastal Kiwai who, when giving stories, sentences and other volunteered material, show a tendency for fuller usage of the morphological possibilities of the language than in ordinary conversational situations.

All these factors and, in addition, the tendency of the younger generation in that area, as is the case in many other parts of Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands, to oppose traditional features of their culture, which in cases extends to opposition to the use of, or features of, their traditional language, may well be a better explanation of the simplification phenomenon referred to than the assumption that it is caused by a direct influence of the simplified Daru Kiwai dialect. This assumption is supported by the observation that there are other cases, which will shortly be mentioned, in which a comparable simplification of morphological complexity of languages has taken place, without the availability, to the speakers, of an already extant simplified model of the respective languages to follow.

Another striking example of such grammatical decay in a Papuan language is provided by the Buna language of the East Sepik Province of Papua New Guinea. This language, for which Kirschbaum (1926) reported the presence of a complex noun-class system comprising 12 classes, has been found by Laycock (1975) to have no noun-class system at all today. The same situation appears to be present with Murik of the same province for which Schmidt (1953) reports the presence of a noun-class system, but during his fieldwork in 1970-71, Laycock (1973) was unable to find any trace of it. Similarly, Laycock (1975) reports the tendency towards a breakdown of the elaborate noun-class system in Mountain Arapesh.

A situation in which the breakdown and decay of an elaborate noun-class system is at present in progress and is in direct proportion to the descending age of the speakers, is observable in the Äy̌iwo language of the Reef Islands of the Santa Cruz Archipelago at the extreme eastern end of the Solomon Islands chain. This language has an almost totally semantically based multiple-class nominal classification system in which the noun classes are marked by prefixes on the nouns. Sixteen of the noun classes show concordance of varying types. The concordance is limited to the noun phrase and is found with qualitative adjuncts, numerals and possessives (with the latter only if possession is emphasised) (Wurm 1981).

The following types of concordance are distinguished with various noun classes:

(1) Five of the noun classes show full concordance within the noun phrase, with qualitative adjuncts, numerals and possessives.

(2) With four noun classes, concordance is present with qualitative adjuncts and possessives (if possession is emphasised), but with numerals the concordance is marked by the prefix of another noun class, the so-called person class, for all four of them.

(3) With five of the noun classes, concordance is present with qualitative adjuncts only, though a few cases have been observed in which numerals have the class prefix.

(4) With two classes, concordance is present with numerals only.

(5) With other noun classes which are present in the language in addition to the 16 noun classes referred to, no concordance has been observed, but qualitative adjuncts are preceded by a special adjunct prefix which can also appear with possession markers if possession is emphasised. Over 30 such additional noun classes have so far been found to exist in the language.

It has been observed that with decreasing age of the speakers, there is an increasing tendency of concordance as described above under points (1)-(4), to be replaced by the system described under (5). Even old speakers today show a tendency towards free variation between the types of concordance described under (1)-(4), and what has been described under (5).

It appears that in all cases referred to, increased exposure to the Western world and turning away from the traditional culture in which many of the morphological complexities of languages are anchored as reference systems, constitute the major reasons for the decay of complex grammatical features of Papuan languages.

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