

A PATTERN OF MORPHOPHONEMIC ALTERNATION IN NGUNA, NEW HEBRIDES¹

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In a 1927 publication,² Dempwolff discussed the morphophonemic alternation of certain initial consonants in the dialects of Epi, stating that these were the only dialects in which the alternation was still an active process. His unawareness of a very similar process in Nguna and some closely related languages³ can be traced to some curious omissions in S.H. Ray's grammatical sketches of Nguna.

Ray's first work on Nguna appeared in 1887, the year he began his study of Melanesian languages.⁴ In it he noted that "the letter changes so common in Sesake and Faté [Efate] occur also in Nguna. k changes to g[ŋ], p to v, q [a bilabial implosive, later written as ɸ] to w, r to t, ..." ⁵ Since Ray's data were restricted to a translation of Matthew and Mark, it is unlikely that he had enough information to produce a paradigm showing clearly the pattern of the alternation. This might also explain a similar omission in his work on Epi (Baki dialect), which appeared in 1889. It wasn't until 1893 that the alternation was more fully described. Again for the Baki dialect, "modification of initial consonant" was noted as one of the markers for tense. In a verb paradigm listed, forms with mb- were used in the "indefinite" tense; those with v- for future tense.⁶ Through chance, the alternation does not show in the Efate (which dialect is not stated) paradigm; if forms without the future particle wo had been elicited, the alternate consonants would have been used, and later Dempwolff would have been able to see that this phenomenon was not limited to Epi. In spite of the abundance of material in Nguna that was made available in the intervening years, and the notes and corrections provided by the field missionaries Milne and Michelesen, in 1926, Ray still found it

possible to say of the Ngunu consonant alternation, "The changes appear to have no grammatical signification."⁷ It wasn't until over twenty years later that someone wrote a description of the environments for the two classes of consonants. The Reverend Graham Miller listed the pairs in the following order:⁸

<i>Primary</i>	<i>Secondary</i>
p	v
ḡ	w
g	k
t	r

He gave the environments for the secondary forms:

1. Directly after any of three morphemes: ḡa, used for imperative, conditional, and incomplete action; ga, non-past and subjunctive; and pe, conditional.
2. As the first consonant of any adjective form.
3. As the first consonant of the base in reduplicated forms.
4. In passive constructions.

For the material it covers, this description is adequate. But the listing of environments is not exhaustive; there are other cases in which the so-called secondary form is used.

It finally becomes apparent that the description would be simplified by using the other form for the base. The newly-designated secondary form now occurs under the following conditions:

1. Directly after all of the set of pronoun-verbal markers.

<i>Base</i>	<i>Secondary form</i>
vano	e pano 'he goes'
warua	eu ḡarua 'they're big'
kani	a ganikani 'I eat'
rogo	ku togo 'you hear'

2. Within this construction, any tense or aspect marker can be inserted between the verbal marker and the verb,

except those three morphemes listed above - *ḡa*, *ga* and *pe*, which require the base form.

ḡa vano 'go (imperative)'

a ga vano 'I'm going'

e pe vano 'if he goes'

So far this seems like a problem merely in economy of description. But when viewed in the light of some other phenomena in the Austronesian languages of Oceania, it provides information that may ultimately help clarify one of the more puzzling problems of the comparative linguistics of this area.

There are many Proto-Austronesian etyma for which the cognate forms in some cases reflect in initial position a simple Proto-Austronesian obstruent, while in others they reflect a cluster of that obstruent preceded by its homorganic nasal. Sometimes this results in doublets in the same language, such as Fijian *rua* 'two' and *ṛua* 'twins'. This phenomenon is unexplained, but is clearly of considerable interest to the reconstruction of the history of the languages involved, and may be of particular interest to problems of subgrouping.

It has been hypothesised, for example in Dyen's 1949 and Grace's 1959 works, that the simple obstruent and the nasal cluster derive from different members of some sort of paradigm that existed at an earlier period of history. However, no systematic distinctions in either meaning or function between forms of the two types have been noted in the better-studied languages of Oceania. Nguna is unusual in that the pattern of morphophonemic alternation just described is an example of a system of paradigmatic relations of the general sort hypothesised. That is, the set of consonants occurring as the base form can be considered as the reflex of the simple obstruent, and the set occurring in the other positions as the reflex of the nasal cluster.

As for the phonetic shapes of the present reflexes, in the course of development, the sets of consonants in some languages have been considerably reduced. This has often taken the form of loss of nasalisation in the complex set, and spirantisation of the non-nasalised set, so that no segmentation is possible. This has happened to an extent in

Nguna, but some of the related languages still show pairs like *t - nd* and *v - mb*.⁹

Although the shape of this hypothetical morpheme is difficult to determine, its function may be better guessed at from the Nguna data than from previous information. Its primary function seems to have been verbal, possibly marking some grammatical function exclusive of the general nature of the exceptions mentioned before: imperative, incomplete, subjunctive, non-past, and conditional.

A clearer knowledge of these alternations in Nguna has simplified one complexity in the comparison of the consonant systems of Nguna and Fijian. It first appeared that Nguna initial /p/ corresponds to both /v/ and /b/ in Fijian. For example:

<i>Nguna</i>	<i>Fijian</i>
pano	vano 'go'
piisa	vica 'how many'
peepe	bebe 'butterfly'
pati	bati 'tooth'

But by using /v/ as the base form for those Nguna words that do permit alternation, the correspondence is restated as /v/ to /v/. This also seems to hold for those words that do not permit an alternation: Nguna *vonu* and Fijian *vonu* 'turtle'. Nguna initial /p/ with no alternation corresponds to Fijian /b/, as in the examples above.

However, the medial occurrences of the nasal clusters have never been explained satisfactorily. This problem exists in Nguna, with a seemingly unique complication. The members of each pair, alternating in initial position, are in partial complementary phonological distribution medially. For example, for the pair /p,v/, the former often occurs after doubled vowels:

loopu	'bamboo'
noopa	'cabbage'
laapa	'many'

/v/ usually occurs in other positions:

nanova	'yesterday'
nasava	'what'

An even more complex problem is presented by the major allophones of /t/, [t] and [d]. Although the members of this pair contrast in closely-related Tongoa and have been written separately since the orthography was established, there are no examples of contrast in Nguna. Even though the lines have been blurred by the influence of the writing system, there is a pattern of complementary phonological distribution and free variation that accounts for all instances of [t] and [d] except those that fit the morpho-phonemic pattern described above. Obviously, this poses some theoretical problems for those who hesitate to describe allophonic variation by using morphological criteria.

NOTES

1. An earlier version of this paper was read at the winter, 1966, meeting of the Linguistic Society of America. The field research in the summer of 1966 was supported by a grant from the University of Hawaii Research Council; that in the following summer by a grant from the National Science Foundation.

The historical part of the paper is based on suggestions from George W. Grace.

2. Capell 1962:217. I have not seen the original article.

3. Some more distantly related languages have a much more complicated system of morphophonemic alternation. See Gary J. Parker's discussion of Ambrym.

4. Ray 1926:vii.

5. Ray 1897:409.

6. Ray 1889:104.

7. Ray 1926:196.

8. Miller 1948 (?). No pagination.

9. Tongoa has retained the prenasalised consonants.

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