

# THE PHENOMENON OF MORPHEMIC AND SUBMORPHEMIC NEUTRALIZATION: EVIDENCE FROM PERSONAL PRONOUNS IN SOME ADAMAWA LANGUAGES

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**Abstract:** The paper is based on the ideas of Konstantin Pozdniakov about morphemic and submorphemic neutralizations. He considers that full or partial coincidence of the form within the same paradigm is not accidental but rather is an important mechanism for “gluing” the element of the paradigm. He also points out that morphemic and submorphemic neutralizations are in complementary distribution. The paper shows that it seems to be true for four pronominal paradigms of Adamawa languages which have never been analyzed from this point of view. The data show that the opposition of 1/2 person is very often submorphemically neutralized opposing locutors to other pronouns. The whole system of pronouns tends to be “glued” by morphemic/submorphemic neutralizations, but sometimes 3<sup>rd</sup> person seems to go out of the system (as in Yendang and Wakka) which should show a rather recent origin of 3 person pronouns. Adamawa languages give good data for the theory of neutralization, and, on the other hand, the theory of neutralization can help in better understanding of Adamawa data.

**Key words:** Konstantin Pozdniakov, morphemic oppositions, submorphemic oppositions, personal pronouns, Adamawa languages.

## 1. Introduction

Among many important contributions of Konstantin Pozdniakov to African linguistics and linguistic theory, there is a concept of submorphemic neutralization which dates back to Roman. Jakobson's (1958 / 1985) ideas and was further elaborated in the works by Pozdniakov (2003; 2009). It was he who has drawn a considerable distinction between the morphemic and submorphemic neutralizations.

### 1.1. Morphemic neutralizations

As regards morphemic neutralization, there is a lot of examples of this phenomenon in world languages. Thus, in Swahili, the object case in the pronominal paradigm has the same form *wa* for the second and the third person plural pronouns. The German personal pronoun *sie* is used for the third person singular feminine, the third person plural, and the second person plural honorific. The English personal pronoun *you* is used for both the second singular and the second plural. Such phenomena are often treated as homonymy or syncretism, but Pozdniakov (2003; 2009) considers them as morphemic neutralizations. According to Pozdniakov, neutralization is not a destructive process that could eliminate meaningful differences between elements of a paradigm, nor is it an occasional realization of “the language economy principle”. On the contrary, a neutralization that reduces the opposition in a given semantic feature may, in turn, create another semantic feature that can be very important for the language.

### 1.2. Submorphemic neutralizations

As for the submorphemic neutralization, the concept was first introduced by Roman Jakobson (1958 / 1985) who called this phenomenon *primeta* (‘mark’ in English) and applied it to the analysis of Russian declension. According to Jakobson, the dative, instrumental and prepositional cases in Russian adjectives are marked with a special semantic feature of “peripherality” that distinguishes them from all other cases. The formal

marker of “peripherality” in the surface structure of adjectives can be seen in that all inflections in the dative, instrumental and prepositional cases (and only in these) in the singular forms of masculine gender have a common formal feature [m]<sup>1</sup>: [-mu] in the Dative, [-m] in the Instrumental, [-m] in the Prepositional.<sup>2</sup> Thus, we are dealing with a sign: there is a meaning — “peripherality”, and there is a formal carrier of this meaning — [m], and there are no other ways to express the semantics of peripheral cases. Most intriguingly, the carrier of this value is formally (segmentally) smaller than a morpheme, which, therefore, loses its status of a “minimal linguistic sign”. These considerations open up an opportunity to introduce a new level of linguistic description, although the intra-paradigmatic “motivation”, or marking the semantics of peripherality with the nasal sonant is in a crucial contradiction with the traditional view that the meaning (semantics) cannot show up in the segments which are smaller than morphemes. For this process Konstantin Pozdniakov has coined the term “sub-morphemic neutralization”, a labial nasal sonant [m] being the formal carrier of the common meaning of “peripherality”.

However, this line of linguistic analysis has hardly become widely discussed: “Unfortunately... this line of Jakobson’s work has remained almost non-continued unless one counts individual enthusiastic remarks of our middle generation linguists” (Ivanov 1985: 22); “Since the publication of this observation, the middle generation of linguists has become older, but not a single systematic study in this field has appeared” (Pozdniakov 2003: 25). It should be noted, however, that such “systematic studies” undoubtedly include the works of Pozdniakov himself.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> It is [m], not /m/, as it is phonetic segment that is a marker of “peripherality”, not phonological characteristics of /m/.

<sup>2</sup> The same feature can also be observed in the singular masculine forms of the numerals as well as of the demonstrative, possessive and anaphoric pronouns (but not in the noun declension or in the plural number).

<sup>3</sup> It is worth mentioning that similar process was much wider recognized in historical linguistics where it is known as “analogical changes” or “analogical alignment”.

This approach was applied by Pozdniakov to various languages and allowed him to conclude that submorphemic neutralization is used for “gluing” together the elements with a common component of meaning in the same way as morphemic neutralization does, but the former seems to be more convenient for language than the latter since submorphemic neutralization allows to preserve the distinctions between the elements of a paradigm that cannot be preserved in case of morphemic neutralization. Pozdniakov points out the two important generalizations concerning these phenomena: first, elements of a certain paradigm may undergo both morphemic and submorphemic neutralization, while elements of other paradigms may keep their distinction without being affected by this process; second, the morphemic and submorphemic neutralizations tend to be in complementary distribution.<sup>4</sup>

Another important issue discussed by Pozdniakov is the relation of the submorphemic neutralization to the notion of “sound symbolism”. He believes that they have nothing in common. Indeed, the fact that [m] expresses the common meaning of “peripherality” for several cases in the singular adjectival paradigm of the masculine gender is meaningful only in a certain linguistic paradigm: in another paradigm, [m] may have no meaning at all or a different one.

## 2. Problem statement and data

So, on the one hand, the ideas of Jakobson and Pozdniakov have hardly become a part of linguistic mainstream, but, on the other hand, they appear to be important for better understanding of paradigm structure and the problem of a rather widely spread formal syncretism/similarity of the elements within one paradigm.<sup>5</sup> This contradiction leads to

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<sup>4</sup> For more detail, see Pozdniakov (2009). It is worth mentioning that it is a tendency, but not an obligatory rule.

<sup>5</sup> For instance, why the pronouns tend to be similar and form a sort of paradigmatic “rhyming”: German *mir* — *dir* (1–2 Sg, Dative), *mich* — *dich* (1–2 Sg,

formulating two actual tasks: 1) checking the proposed approach for the data from various languages, families, and linguistic areas; 2) formulating some typological generalizations about the interaction of morphemic/submorphemic neutralizations.

To make a step in this direction and following the fact that this interaction is a phenomenon which is usually observed in pronominal paradigms, the paper concerns the interaction of morphemic and submorphemic neutralizations in the paradigms of personal pronouns in some Adamawa (Niger-Congo) languages: Nyong (Leko group), Maya, Yendang and Waka (Yendang group). It is worth mentioning that Adamawa languages have never been analyzed from this point of view, and the languages under consideration are among the least studied languages of this family. The data were collected during the fieldwork in Yola (Adamawa province, Nigeria) in 2012–2014.<sup>6</sup> The data on the Nyong and Maya (Bali) languages were collected by the author of this paper; the data on Wakka were collected by Anastasia Lyakhovich (2012; personal communication), on Yendang — by Tatiana Anikina (2012). Hence the purpose of the paper is to include Adamawa data into the typology of morphemic/submorphemic neutralizations and to observe what generalizations these data can offer for the typology of this phenomenon.

### **3. Morphemic and submorphemic neutralizations in Adamawa personal pronouns**

#### **3.1 Morphemic and submorphemic neutralizations in Nyong personal pronouns**

Table 1 presents a paradigm of Nyong personal pronouns where the relevant cells are grey (light grey marks submorphemic neutralization,

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Accusative), Russian *nas* — *vas* (1–2 Pl, Accusative), French *moi* — *toi* (1–2 Sg, Emphatic), etc.

<sup>6</sup> It is necessary to emphasize the preliminary character of the presented data, especially with relation to the accuracy of phonetic fixation, phonological interpretation and tonal notation; in particular, tone is unmarked if it is still unclear.

dark grey — morphemic) scaled and the relevant phonological parts of the pronouns in focus are boldfaced.

Table 1

**Morphemic and submorphemic neutralizations  
in Nyong personal pronouns**

	Subject		Object			Poss
	Independent	Verbal	Direct Ind	Direct Suffix	Indirect Suffix	
1 sg	<b><i>má</i></b>	<i>ĩ</i>	<b><i>má</i></b>	<i>-inɔ</i>	<i>-n</i>	<i>máj</i>
2 sg	<b><i>mo</i></b>	<i>mo</i>	<b><i>mo(kɔ)</i></b>	<i>-imɔ</i>	<i>-m</i>	<b><i>múj</i></b>
3 sg human	<i>yò</i>	<i>yò</i>	<i>yò(kɔ)</i>	<i>-ɔ</i>	<i>-ò</i>	<b><i>mùj</i></b>
3 sg non-human	-					
1 pl	<b><i>vá</i></b>	<i>vá</i>	<b><i>vákɔ</i></b>	<i>-vákɔ</i>	<i>-vá</i>	<b><i>váj</i></b>
2 pl	<b><i>yá</i></b>	<i>yá</i>	<b><i>yákɔ</i></b>	<i>-yákɔ</i>	<i>-yá</i>	<b><i>yáj</i></b>
3 pl human	<b><i>và</i></b>	<i>và</i>	<b><i>vákɔ</i></b>	<i>-foro</i>	<i>-foro</i>	<b><i>vàj</i></b>
3 pl non-human	-					

We can see from Table 1 that submorphemic neutralizations of 1/2 person are observed: *m-* for 1/2 Sg and *-á* for 1/2 Pl. As for 2/3 persons, we can see both morphemic (2/3 human Sg Poss — *mùj*) and submorphemic (*-ò* for 2/3 Sg, *-a/-aj* for Pl). There is also one more neutralization of 1/3 Pl which is of special interest: *vá* 1Pl / *và* 3 human Pl. Segmentally, it is a morphemic neutralization, but the tone is different. It allows us to correlate tonal differences with submorphemic ones: tone can differentiate and neutralize forms in the same way as

segmental submorphemes (**high** 1/2 Pl — **low** 3 Pl, *v-* 1/3 Pl — *y-* 2 Pl). This is a case of various means for submorphemic oppositions/neutralizations, both segmental (phonemes, groups of phonemes) and suprasegmental (tones, differential features of phonemes<sup>7</sup>).

In general, we can see that the personal paradigm is “glued” in all possible lines: 1/2 (submorphemic means), 2/3 (both morphemic and submorphemic), 1/3 (tonal submorphemic). The only neutralization which seems to be absent is that in number: there are no common formal features for Sg and Pl (unlike in English, where *you* provides a case of the number neutralization). However, the common zero marking for 3 Sg/Pl non-human pronouns does create such a neutralization, and, hence, the whole paradigm appears to be “glued” together.

### 3.2. Morphemic and submorphemic neutralizations in Maya (Bali) personal pronouns

Table 2 presents a paradigm of Maya (Bali) personal pronouns where the relevant cells are grey (light grey marks submorphemic neutralization, dark grey — morphemic) scaled and the relevant phonological parts of the pronouns in focus are boldfaced.

On the one hand, the distribution of neutralizations in Maya is different from that of Nyong: the language prefers morphemic neutralizations — 2/3 Sg and Pl (*ny*), 3 Sg and Pl human/non-human (e.g. *yano*, *-uŋ*), and Sg/Pl in almost all series of pronouns. On the other hand, just like in Nyong, we can see submorphemic neutralizations of 1/2 Sg Independent Possessive (*amò* / *aó*) and Pl verbal subject (*dī-* / *i-*), 2/3 Sg direct object (*-oŋ* / *-aŋ*). Hence, in Maya, we can also see that the person paradigm is “glued” in all possible lines: 1/2 (submorphemic means), 2/3 (both morphemic and submorphemic), human/non-human (both morphemic and submorphemic), Sg/Pl (both morphemic and submorphemic). In Maya, there is no neutralization of 1/3 which was observed in Nyong. So, the distribution and quality

<sup>7</sup> As nasality for 1/2 Sg (verbal subject *ĩ* / *mo*) or 1/2 (indirect object suffix *-n* / *-m*).

Table 2

**Morphemic and submorphemic neutralizations  
in Maya (Bali) personal pronouns**

	Subject		Object		Possessive	
	Independent	Verbal	Direct/ Indirect Suffix (with <i>toyē</i> 'show')	Indirect ( <i>men</i> 'to' + Suffix)	Independent (‘mine’ etc.)	Suffix
1 sg	<i>mo</i>	<i>m-</i>	<i>-m</i>	<i>-m</i>	<i>amò</i>	<i>-m</i>
2 sg	<i>nyoŋ</i>	<i>ŋ-</i>	<i>-oŋ</i>	<i>-é</i>	<i>aó</i>	<i>-ré</i>
3 sg human	<i>nyoŋ/a</i>	<i>a-</i>	<i>-aŋ</i>	<i>-aŋ</i>	<i>yaŋo</i>	<i>-aŋ</i>
3 sg non- human	<i>au/bi</i> ( <i>bo, ba</i> )	<i>b-, bi</i> ( <i>bo, ba</i> )	<i>-aŋ</i>	<i>-aŋ</i>	<i>yaŋo</i>	<i>-aŋ</i>
1pl	<i>tó</i>	<i>dí-</i>	<i>-roʔ</i>	<i>-roʔ</i>	<i>eròʔ</i>	<i>-roʔ</i>
2 pl	<i>nyóŋ</i>	<i>i-</i>	<i>-ne</i>	<i>né</i>	<i>eó</i>	<i>-é</i>
3 pl human	<i>nyóŋ</i>	<i>ni/i-</i>	<i>-ne</i>	<i>né/òŋ</i>	<i>eŋó</i>	<i>-uŋ</i>
3 pl non- human	<i>au/bi</i> ( <i>bo, ba</i> )	<i>b-, bi</i> ( <i>bo, ba</i> )	<i>aŋ</i>	<i>-aŋ</i>	<i>yaŋo</i>	<i>-uŋ</i>

of neutralizations are different, however, the whole paradigm appears to be “glued” together as in Nyong.

**3.3. Morphemic and submorphemic neutralizations  
in Yendang personal pronouns**

Table 3 presents a paradigm of Yendang personal pronouns where the relevant cells are grey (light grey marks submorphemic neutralization,



dark grey — morphemic) scaled and the relevant phonological parts of the pronouns in focus are boldfaced.

Table 3

**Morphemic and submorphemic neutralizations  
in Yendang personal pronouns**

	Subject		Object		Possessive
	Independent	Prefixes	Independent Direct	Suffixes	
1 Sg	<i>mɛkʔ</i>	<i>a-</i>	<i>mɛkʔ</i>	<i>-ɔm</i>	<i>maŋ</i>
2 Sg	<i>mɔkʔ</i>	<i>mɔ-</i>	<i>mɔkʔ</i>	<i>-ɔmɔ</i>	<i>bɔ</i>
3 Sg human	<i>wɛŋ</i>	<i>ni-</i>	<i>wɛŋ</i>	<i>-ni</i>	<i>mini</i>
3 sg non-human	<i>ɛkʔ</i>	<i>i-</i>	<i>ɛkʔ</i>	<i>-u</i>	
1 pl	<i>tokʔ</i>	<i>tu-</i>	<i>tokʔ</i>	<i>-uru</i>	<i>boru</i>
2 pl	<i>nɔkʔ</i>	<i>nɔ-</i>	<i>nɔkʔ</i>	<i>-uru</i>	<i>bɔ</i>
3 pl human	<i>lɛŋ</i>	<i>lɛŋ</i>	<i>lɛŋ</i>	<i>-rɛŋ</i>	<i>birɛŋ</i>
3 pl non-human					

Yendang has the following set of neutralizations:

- regular submorphemic neutralizations of Sg/Pl (*mɔkʔ* / *nɔkʔ*) for Independent Subject and Object pronouns,
- morphemic Sg/Pl neutralization for 2 Possessive (*bɔ*),
- morphemic 3 human/non-human neutralization in all plural series and Possessive Sg, 1/2 neutralization (submorphemic — in all series except Subject prefixes and Possessive, morphemic in Pl Object Suffixes — *-uru*).

That is the only example of morphemic 1/2 neutralizations in all the languages under consideration. Another distinctive feature of Yendang is the absence of any 2/3 neutralizations while in Nyong and Maya this type of neutralization is rather widely spread (in the case of Maya, with prevailing “more radical” morphemic neutralizations).

### 3.4. Morphemic and submorphemic neutralizations in Wakka personal pronouns

Table 4 presents a paradigm of Wakka personal pronouns where the relevant cells are grey (light grey marks submorphemic neutralization) scaled and the relevant phonological parts of the pronouns in focus are boldfaced.

Table 4

#### Morphemic and submorphemic neutralizations in Wakka personal pronouns

	Subject		Object		Possessive
	Independent	Prefixes	Independent Direct	Suffixes	
1 sg	<b>(i)mi</b>	á-	<b>mi</b>	-úŋ	ámì
2 sg	<b>(i)mú</b>	mú-	<b>mú</b>	-mú	ògè
3 sg human	<b>íwíy/á</b>	<b>ní-</b>	<b>wíy</b>	-ní	ínè
3 sg non-human	<b>íyòŋ/bí</b>	<b>bí-</b>	<b>yòŋ</b>	-wì	bírúwe
1 pl	<b>(i)tú</b>	<b>tú-</b>	<b>tú</b>	-rú	<b>úrúgè</b>
2 pl	<b>(i)nú</b>	<b>nú-</b>	<b>nú</b>	-nú	<b>únúgè</b>
3 pl human	<b>(i)dêŋ</b>	<b>dêŋ</b>	<b>dêŋ</b>	-ráŋ	íránǵè
3 pl non-human	<b>íyèni/í</b>	<b>í</b>	<b>yèni</b>		

Being a close relative to Yendang, Wakka demonstrates a similar scheme of neutralizations: submorphemic neutralizations of Sg/Pl (e.g. **mú** / **nú** for 2 Sg/Pl), very intensive submorphemic neutralization of 1/2 (all series in Pl and two series in Sg), the absence of 2/3 neutralizations. The special feature for Wakka is a rather widely spread differentiation of human/ non-human: while in other three languages this opposition is morphemically neutralized in most the series, in Wakka — only in Object suffixes and Possessive Pl.

### 3.5. Some historical-comparative observations

Some of the neutralizations may evidence about the historic processes (analogy changes), and, hence, date back to the proto-system of a group or family. According to lexicostatistics, the relationship between the languages under consideration is as follows (Table 5).

Table 5

#### Lexicostatic data: Yendang, Wakka, Maya (Bali), Nyong

100-word list	Wakka	Yendang	Maya (Bali)
Wakka			
Yendang	75		
Maya (Bali)	50	49	
Nyong	24	24	25

So, if one compares the lexicostatic data with those of morphemic/submorphemic neutralizations, one can, at least preliminarily, determine which neutralizations seem to be an innovation, and which date back to the proto-systems of Leko and Yendang: it seems that the most stable (observed in all the languages under consideration) is the submorphemic neutralization of 1/2 (speech act participants, analogous to 1-person inclusive pronouns). It gives a possibility to preliminarily outline the proto-system with submorphemic neutralizations of 1/2 Sg for all 4 languages (Table 6), and 1/2 Sg and Pl for more closely related Maya, Yendang, and Wakka (Table 7) which also demonstrate regular 2 Sg/Pl submorphemic neutralization.

Table 6

#### Preliminary reconstruction of 1/2 Sg and Pl for Yendang/ Wakka/ Maya (Bali)

1 sg	* <i>mI/ma</i>
2 sg	* <i>mU</i>
1 pl	* <i>tU</i>
2 pl	* <i>nU/U</i>

Table 7

**Preliminary reconstruction of 1/2 Sg  
for Yendang/ Wakka/ Maya (Bali)/ Nyong**

1 sg	* <i>mI/ma</i>
2 sg	* <i>mU</i>

#### 4. Conclusion

The opposition 1/2 is very often submorphemically neutralized. It is worth noting that the language tends to oppose locutors to other pronouns. Some languages (e.g. having inclusive/ exclusive 1 Pl opposition<sup>8</sup>) make it morphologically, while other languages consequently use the submorphemic neutralizations for it. Adamawa languages are a good example of the latter case.

The system of pronouns tends to be “glued” by morphemic/submorphemic neutralizations, but sometimes 3<sup>rd</sup> person seems to stand out of the system (as in Yendang and in Wakka) which may testify for a rather recent origin of the 3 person pronouns.

Some specific neutralizations can appear, such as 1/3 in Nyong or 2/3 in Wakka. We still have some explanation for them: opposing either “speaker” / “others” (in case of 2/3 neutralization actively observed in Maya), or “addressee” / “others” (in case of 1/3 neutralization observed in Nyong).

Adamawa languages give good data for the theory of morphemic and submorphemic neutralization, and, on the other hand, the notion of neutralization helps in better understanding of Adamawa data.

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<sup>8</sup> The existence of inclusive/exclusive overt morphological opposition in 1 Pl / Dual (e.g. Dan (Mande)) seems to give an answer to the remark of an anonymous reviewer: “...it would seem reasonable to expect that languages should be found that draw the distinction between locutors and 3rd person pronouns at a morphemic level, by neutralizing all distinctions between locutor pronouns. Yet such languages do not seem to exist; why?” There is a neutralization (common form uniting speaker and addressee) at a morphemic level (1 Pl / Dual inclusive), but this distinction is too important for being neutralized in all forms, so, in can be morphologically neutralized, but just in Pl / Dual (I and you) being distinct in Sg. Submorphemic neutralization is just another way both to oppose locutors and non-locutors and to keep the distinction between speaker and addressee.

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