

Suppletive kinship term paradigms in the languages of New Guinea

In some languages, the possessed forms of nouns, particularly kinship terms, may show suppletion according to possessor person. For example, in Awtuw (a Sepik language of New Guinea; Feldman 1968), ‘grandfather’ is split into two forms, *eywe* with 1st person possessors, and *yar* with 2nd and 3rd. Prior accounts of this phenomenon (e.g. Merlan 1982, Dahl & Koptjevskaja-Tamm 2001, Drossard 2004, Ortmann 2006, Vafaeian 2010) have ascribed it to the special relationship of 1st person possessors to kinship terms, leading inter alia to the use of a marked term (hypocoristic or term of address) by speakers making reference to their own kin, yielding an apparent 1st ~ non-1st suppletive alternation. However, these accounts have been based on a limited stock of examples; a fuller treatment reveals a considerably wider range of patterns.

The present study expands the existing typology on the basis on the languages of New Guinea, an area where suppletive kinship terms appear to be more common than elsewhere. Examples are drawn from 30 languages spread across 7 families/phyla (including 7 branches of the Trans-New Guinea phylum), and classified according to (i) the paradigmatic pattern of stem suppletion, and, where possible, (ii) the hierarchical relationship between forms (where relevant) -- which is the marked term and which the default term? On the first parameter, two stem alternation patterns predominate: 1st person ~ non-1st person -- by far the most common -- and 3rd person ~ non-3rd person. Within each of these there is evidence for either of the logically possible values of the second parameter. The combined typology is illustrated in (1), using the word ‘father’ in 4 languages of the Trans-New Guinea phylum. Telefol (Mountain Ok; Healey 1962) and Tainae (Angan; Carlson 1991) both display 1st ~ non-1st patterns. In Telefol the bare non-1st person stem (= 3SG form) is the default, while in Tainae it is the 1st person stem. In both cases evidence for the default status of a given stem comes from the fact that it can be used -- accompanied by possessive pronouns -- for ANY possessor person. Ekagi (Wissel Lakes; Drabbe 1952) and Usan (Madang; Reesink 1987) illustrate 3rd ~ non-3rd stem alternations. In Ekagi it is the non-3rd person stem *ajta* which is the default, while in Usan, it is the 3rd person stem which is the default. In both cases the evidence for default status comes from the clearly non-referential use of the terms in texts. Several languages also provide examples of 3-way person suppletion, but these (i) always occur as a minor pattern alongside one of the stem alternation patterns shown in (1), and (ii) there is good morphological evidence that they can all be interpreted as the concatenation of the two dominant stem alternation patterns.

(1)		Telefol	Tainae		Ekagi	Usan
	1SG	áatúm	apo	1	nà-ajta-j	tain
	2SG	k-aaláb	tí-no	2	akà-ajta-j	tain
	3SG	aaláb	ka-no	3	na-kamee	ur
stem alternation pattern:		1 st ~ non-1st	1 st ~ non-1st		3 rd ~ non-3rd	3 rd ~ non-3rd
default stem:		non-1 st	1st		non-3 rd	3rd

Thus these patterns discussed here cannot all be attributed to the special status of 1st person, *pace* previous observers. Rather, there are two binary paradigmatic splits (1st or 3rd person vs. everything else), where the markedness relationship is not fixed, but may vary across and even within languages. The resulting paradigmatic oppositions largely coincide with the patterns of subject person syncretism seen cross-linguistically in verbal inflection (Cysouw 2003, Baerman 2004), which is striking, given both the morphological differences (stem suppletion vs. largely affixal inflection) and the semantic differences (kinship relation vs. verb subject).