

A POINT OF GRAMMAR AND A STUDY IN METHOD

By A. M. HOCART

THE origin of the Melanesian and Polynesian pronouns is really a problem for the specialist; in itself it holds neither interest nor profit for any but scholars in those languages. The wider public cannot be plagued with small details: it awaits the more vital conclusions and leaves the experts to discuss the minute demonstrations that lead up to those conclusions.

Through some accident however these pronouns have caught the eye of the philosopher who thought to find in them proof and illustration of a psychological doctrine. Following his example the culture-fusionist seized upon them to support a different view altogether. Thus by luck they have attained to a theoretical importance to which intrinsic merit scarcely entitles them.

Few problems as concrete as this one have been treated both by the psychological and by the culture-fusion schools. These pronouns provide us therefore with an excellent touchstone of the methods and assumptions of both schools; the more so as the material is linguistic; for our information about languages is vastly more detailed than about customs and beliefs, and moreover language has long been subject to an exactness of treatment to which no other branch of ethnology has yet approached.

Such are my reasons for appealing in this paper to the ethnologist in general and for hoping that he will patiently labor through details of grammar that do not interest him, for the sake of methods and principles that do.

THE PROBLEM

One peculiarity of these possessives is the cause of all the trouble. We Europeans have but one series of possessives: my, thy, his, etc. In Melanesian and Polynesian there may be as many as five. We use the same possessive whatever the nature of the possession; they distinguish various modes of possession. Thus we say "his

leg," "his house," "his food," "his drink." The Fijian uses a different word each time, as who should say "legis," "nis house," "kis food," "mis drink."¹ Now this seems a very cumbrous arrangement, Heath Robinsonian grammar, as it were, an elaborate apparatus to produce no more result than we effect by simpler means.

THE PSYCHOLOGICAL THEORY

This complication is a defect, says the psychologist; a defective language argues a defective mind; therefore the South Sea mind is defective: it lacks the power of abstraction; it cannot distil out of experience the pure idea of possession, but at most only extract crude, impure notions of possession mixed with foreign matter. The savage mind can conceive the possession of a leg, the possession of a house, the possession of a drink; it cannot conceive possession pure and simple.

I will not discuss this theory at any length here, as I have done so in my article on "The Psychological Interpretation of Language."² I will merely sum up the arguments.

Firstly it is impossible to judge a people by their grammar, for their language is seldom entirely their own, being oftenest borrowed in part or wholly from other peoples. Kindred races often speak widely different languages, whereas the same language may be shared by races remote from one another in physique and character. The past history of a language influences its present. The conditions in which people live also account for a great deal in their speech. For language is indeed the creation of mind, but of mind working upon past traditions and present environment; we cannot understand how that mind works unless we know what it works upon.

Secondly, the very assumption is wrong from which the psychological theory starts. The Melanesian and Polynesian possessives are not multiplied beyond need, but every one is indispensable. In the examples selected by the psychologist to illustrate his theory one possessive would do just as well as three or four; but we have no right to judge an idiom by a few examples

¹ *yavana, nona vale, kena kakana, mena wai.*

² *British Journal of Psychology*, vol. v, pt. 3, pp. 267 ff (Nov., 1912).

picked out at random. On that principle it would be equally possible to prove that English has a superfluity of prepositions, that "in," "on," "at," could have their work done just as effectively by a single preposition. We must see an idiom at work before we can appraise its utility. On closer acquaintance these pronouns appear as fulfilling a most important function, as expressing distinctions which we also are compelled to express, though we do it by other means: what we convey by varying our prepositions they sometimes convey by a change of possessive.

Thirdly, direct observation tells us that these savages, so called, are perfectly capable of expressing abstract ideas at least equal to that of possession in general.

THE CULTURE-FUSION THEORY

The culture-fusion theory admits that a people's mind cannot be measured by their language. It does take into account the accidents of history and the force of environment. But it accepts the assumption from which the psychological theory takes its start. It tacitly admits that these possessives are unreasonably numerous; it does not once entertain the idea that they may be a logical and systematic growth, even as our genders are, or our conjugations, or our prepositions. If they are not the outcome of mental deficiencies, neither are they the product of sense; their apparent foolishness must therefore be the result of accident; and this is how the culture-fusionist conceives this accident. Let us suppose two cultures X and Y; X includes *a* and Y includes *b*. If those two cultures come together they will fuse into a compound XY which will include both *a* and *b*. Thus given an X folk that use the pronoun "I" alone, and a Y folk that instead use only "me"; the people resulting from the fusion of X and Y will use both *I* and *me* to represent the first person singular. In the Pacific it is supposed that one people said "nis leg," "nis house," while another people said "legis," "houseis"; that both peoples became one, preserving both modes of speech, using sometimes one, sometimes the other, saying "legis," but "nis house," "handis," but "nis hat." Such is the gist of the theory propounded by Dr. Rivers in his *History of Melanesian Society*, vol. II, p. 488.

To begin with, the theory has somewhat simplified the facts: the Melanesian possessives number not two, but many. Modern Fijian has four: *-na*, *nona*, *kena*, *mena*, which for convenience I have represented in English by “-is,” “nis,” “kis,” “mis.” It once had five possessives, possibly six. To be consistent therefore we should invent at least five peoples to account for the Fijian usage alone, to say nothing of the other Pacific tongues. Let that pass however; for the sake of argument we shall suppose with Dr. Rivers that there are only “two modes of denoting possession in Melanesian”; we shall count the suffixed possessive as one mode, and all the rest together as another, to return to our illustration *-is* will be no. 1, *nis*, *kis*, *mis* can be lumped together as No. 2.

The test of a good theory is that it explains every detail naturally by its own resources, without calling to its aid vain suppositions to fill the gaps. A theory of these possessives should account both for their form and for all the peculiarities of their use.

The culture-fusion theory practically makes no attempt at explaining the form. The second series for instance, the one I have represented by *nis*, is compounded of the first series and a particle *-ne* or *no*. What is the meaning of this particle? Why was it chosen? No answer is offered to these questions.

The theory does make an attempt to explain the use; but the explanation, as we shall see, hardly squares with the facts, even after it has been corrected and readjusted with suppositions for which there is no evidence.

The use of the two series of possessives may roughly, though not accurately, be summed up thus: the suffixed possessive, that which I have represented by *-is*, goes with the names of parts of the body and with kinship terms. Now this is hardly what we should expect from the theory, of which the logical consequence would be that all words derived from the language of the X people should take the suffixed possessive, and that all words of Y origin should have the other possessive. To use an analogy: supposing we retained both the Norman and the Anglo-Saxon possessives in English we should naturally expect the rule to be “his father,” “his ox,” “his house,” but “sa uncle,” “sa beef,” “sa table”; we should not

expect pure caprice. Now it is hard to believe that all the terms for parts of the body come from the X people, and that the Y's supplied all the rest of the nouns.

Dr. Rivers indeed claims to have found a dialect where his theory is verified, where the X words take the suffixed possessive, and the Y words the other one (I, 290, II, 198 and 488). Among the Nandrau tribe in the interior of Fiji there are two sets of kinship terms: one takes the suffixed possessive as among the coastal tribes; the other is preceded by the possessives of the second series; this latter set he supposes to be peculiar to the mountain tribes and concludes that they are an "older linguistic substratum" (II, 199). The argument is: the earlier inhabitants, our Y people, placed the possessive before the noun; the immigrants from the coast, our X's, tacked the possessive on to the noun; the present compound tribe places it before Y words and after X words. Which is what one would expect from the theory.

Unfortunately these supposed indigenous words are nothing of the kind; they are not confined to the interior of Fiji but are common-all over; they are derived from universal Fijian roots according to universal Fijian rules.

Secondly they are not true kinship terms at all, but polite circumlocutions such as all Fijians delight in. I will analyze a few of these terms:

Veikila is derived from *kila*, "to know." *Veikila* is "to know each other," "to be acquainted." As acquaintance in Fiji implies kinship it also means "to be related," and hence "to intermarry." Thus when a Fijian from the hills calls his cousin his *veikila* he is merely describing him as one with whose family he intermarries.

I vola is derived from an old hill word meaning "to apportion" by means of the favorite Fijian prefix *i* which has instrumental or passive force. When a man calls a woman his *i vola* he is merely describing her as the woman assigned to him. The coastal Fijians preserve this root in the word *ndavola* which is used for the same relationship, and which is merely the same word with a different prefix; it has there become a real kinship term and accordingly takes the suffixed possessive.

I sa is a common word all over Fiji meaning "vis à vis." As a kinship term it is found in parts on the coast and in the island of Kandavu. It is needless to multiply instances.

Thirdly, contrary to what Dr. Rivers thought, the hill tribes are not alone in replacing kinship terms by descriptive words, though they do so far more extensively and constantly than the coastal people. A Lauan, than whom no Fijian can be said to be more coastal, will inquire politely about "your originator" (*i tum-butumbu*)¹ meaning parents; for your wife he will say "your lady."

In conclusion these Nandrau terms are not indigenous words, but merely examples of the universal Fijian custom of polite speech, which consists in substituting for the true name a descriptive term usually derived from a verb by means of the prefix *i*.² These terms not being kinship terms do not take the possessive proper to kinship terms.

The culture-fusion theory can scarcely hope to fit the facts considering that it starts from a misapprehension. I said above that roughly speaking the suffixed possessive goes with names of parts of the body and with kinship terms. That is a rough statement, useful in practice at the start, but totally useless as a basis for theory. It is not the case that each series of possessives is restricted to a particular set of words. Few words are confined to one possessive only; many, if not most can be used with two possessives; some with three, a few with all four. A word can take any possessive that is not inconsistent with its meaning. It may be said that in theory a noun may take any possessive, but in practice it is generally limited to one or two out of the four, because the rest have a meaning inconsistent with its own meaning. To understand this the reader must know the meaning of the various possessives which I have represented by *-is, nis, kis, mis*.

No. 1 implies partial identity,

No. 2 means "possessed by," "used by,"

No. 3 means "destined for,"

No. 4 means "drunk by."

¹ From *tumbu*, "to grow," and the prefix *i*.

² In this language the hand becomes "the instrument," the head "the place above," etc.

Now it is evident straightaway that a Fijian can never say "housis" because a house is never part of anybody; nor can he say "mis house" because a house can never be a drink; but he can say "nis house," since houses are owned; he can also say "kis house" when it is intended for a certain purpose. A stem is part of a tree, hence "stemis"; but it may mean the stem of the family, the ancestor, and then it is "nis stem" since it is not part of anyone; "kis stem" and "mis stem," on the other hand, would not fit. Water, liquid, on the other hand can belong to someone or something in all these ways: it may be part of a thing, its juice; it may belong to a man; it may be destined to a certain purpose; and it is commonly drunk. Hence the word *wai* which means liquid, medicine, may take all four possessives according to the meaning, thus

wai-na: its juice;

nona wai: his medicine (the doctor's);

kena wai: its remedy, the cure for it;

mena wai: his drink, his medicine (the patient's).

It may even happen that a word is used with two possessives at the same time. Though very rare this idiom alone is enough to upset the culture-fusion theory.

The assumption therefore that the Melanesian possessives are each assigned to a different set of nouns is not verified by experience; and with it falls the theory based upon it.

But enough of criticism; let us pass to construction. This is not so difficult a task as to *expound* the results. To appreciate the evidence properly some knowledge of Pacific languages is necessary. This can be expected of few readers. I shall be compelled therefore to reduce the evidence to its simplest expression and be content with the barest necessities. Moreover to avoid confusing the reader with a multitude of strange languages I shall confine myself as far as possible to one language, namely Fijian, since it is the basis of the culture-fusion theory and it also supplies much of the evidence. I shall only go outside when necessary.

ANALYSIS OF FORMS

The first step is to tabulate our possessives. In the Mbauan dialect of Fiji they are as follows:

Sing.	1st pers.	-nggu	nonggu	kenggu	menggu.
	2nd "	-mu	nomu	kemu	memu.
	3rd "	-na	nona	kena	mena.
Plur.	1st incl.	-nda	nonda	kenda	menda.
	1st excl. ¹	-ikeimami	neimami	keimami	meimami.
	2nd pers.	-muni	nomuni	kemuni	memuni.
	3rd "	-ndra	nondra	kendra	mendra.

Two dialect forms that represent the second series must be mentioned here as they are of interest. Lasakauan has:

Nenggu, nemu, nena, etc.

In Lauan it runs:

nggou, omu, ona, etc.

In Hawaiian the second series appears in two variants:

no'u, nou, nona, etc.

and

na'u, nau, nana, etc.

Hawaiian also has the Lauan series:

o'u, ou, ona, etc.

We now have enough to start. It is obvious at first glance that the second, third, and fourth series are merely the first attached to monosyllabic particles instead of being stuck directly on to the noun. What then is this first series out of which all the others are compounded?

They have been called possessives. Now this is an idea we must get out of our heads before we proceed any further. They are not really possessives, but personal pronouns; strictly speaking they do not mean *my, thy, his*, but *I, thou, he*. Take the first person plural inclusive, for instance, it can equally well be used as subject, thus:

nda lako: let us go.

When therefore a Fijian says "*yavanda*," he says in effect not "our leg," but "leg we."

Therefore these so-called possessives are really personal pronouns in apposition.

So much for the terminations. Now for the particles *o, ne* or

¹ Inclusive and exclusive, *i. e.*, including or excluding the person spoken to.

no, *ke*, and *me*. If the second part be a pronoun, what is the first likely to be? Answer: an article or a preposition. Both answers are right, for in Melanesian and Polynesian the article and the preposition run into one another. We must reduce proof to its simplest expression.

Lauan series: *O* means "of" throughout Polynesia.

2d series: *Ne* means "of" in High Fijian before proper nouns;¹ in Rotuman before common nouns;

Ni is "of" in Fijian before common nouns;

Na and *no* mean "of" in Hawaiian, Tahitian, etc.

3d series: *Ke* in Fijian means "for" before proper nouns.² In certain dialects it also means "to," "towards" before common nouns;

Ki means "to" in most Fijian dialects, in Tongan, Maori, etc.

4th series: this one is obscure and will be left out of consideration.

The conclusion is thus reached that these so-called possessives are not really possessives, but personal pronouns in apposition to nouns or preceded by prepositions. We may express it otherwise by saying that they are pronouns in various cases.

Andrews saw this clearly in the Hawaiian language.³ Indeed he could not help seeing it. Here is a list of Hawaiian possessives in the 3d person singular:

o na or *ana*: of him,

Kona or *kana*: his,

nona or *nana*: for him.

Not one of the particles *o*, *a*, *ko*, *ka*, *no*, *na*, but is still used as a preposition before nouns to this day.

THE EXPLANATION

The reason why there are so many possessives in Melanesian and Polynesian is that there are none. This may sound paradoxical, but an analogy will make it clear.

¹ This fact is obscured by the usual spelling *nei*. As a matter of fact *i* is the article that always precedes a proper noun in the oblique cases. It should be *a vale ne i Rasolo*, not *nei Rasolo*.

² Usually written *kei*, but *i* is really the article before nouns in the oblique cases.

³ *Grammar of the Hawaiian Language* (Honolulu, 1854), pp. 57 ff.

Supposing we English had no possessives, we should have to supply the lack in some way, probably by means of prepositions. We might then have to say: "the house of him," "the bread for him." Where we now say "his book" we might have to choose between "the book of him" and "the book by him" according as "he" was the owner or the author. Our phrase "his story" would be represented by "the story by him" or "the story about him" as the case might be.

Well that is exactly what the Pacific Islanders have done. And after all we need not invent analogies, for we have done something similar in our own language; compare "my father's house" and "the House of God," "Grimm's tales" and "the tale of Puss in Boots."

AN OBJECTION

I have so far kept silent about one serious difficulty in the way of the theory I have propounded. If the so-called possessives of Melanesian and Polynesian are really nothing but pronouns with prepositions they ought to occupy the same position in the sentence as nouns with prepositions. We have laid it down that in ethnology, as in other sciences, if $A=B$, whatever is true of B is true of A . It is the standard of our own choosing and we must abide by it. Now it so happens that in Fijian and kindred tongues possessives do not behave like prepositions followed by pronouns or nouns; prepositions governing nouns and pronouns follow the principal noun, whereas possessives of all but the first series come between it and the article. According to our theory we should expect Fijian to say:

a vale ne i Rasolo: the house of Rasolo, and
a vale nona: the house of him,

or else

a ne i Rasolo vale: Rasolo's house, and
a nona vale: his house.

In point of fact it says:

a vale ne i Rasolo: the house of Rasolo,

but

a nona vale: his house.

The whole fabric of our argument would collapse but that Hawaiian comes to our rescue once more. In that language the dependent noun may either follow the principal word or come between it and its article, thus

ka hale o ka ali'i: the house of the chief,

or

ka ko ali'i hale: the chief's house.¹

Pronouns behave in the same way:

ka hale o makou: the house of us,

or

ko makou hale: our house.²

We therefore conclude that in the parent language of Polynesian and Melanesian the dependent noun or pronoun could stand either before or after the principal word. The possessives being nothing but pronouns in the oblique cases could take up either position. Fijian in common with many other languages of the same family has lost this freedom of construction.

"Easy, easy," will some one say, "let's not run away with the argument. We know the Hawaiian rule, and we know the Fijian rule; but what right have we to jump to the conclusion that the Hawaiian is the original one? Why should it not be a recent and local development?"

Questions as to which of two usages is the more ancient are usually settled by survivals. Let us suppose two peoples A and B originally derived from the same stock; A practises a custom which B has not; is A keeping up an old custom which B has lost, or has A developed this custom after parting from B? If we can find traces of this custom lingering among the B folk then it is evident that the A's are merely keeping up the traditions of the parent race. In other words whenever such a problem arises we immediately look for survivals.

Here we must be allowed to pause a moment in order to define survivals.

A DIGRESSION ON SURVIVALS

A survival is the corpse of a custom. A custom is living so long as those ideas are living which brought it into being. When those

¹ Andrews, p. 34.

² *l. c.*, p. 82.

ideas die, the custom withers. The ideas are the sap which makes the custom grow, blossom forth and propagate. A living custom changes and expands; a dead one is rigid and unchangeable like a skeleton. Take for instance the English prefix "for" in "forlorn," "forgone;" it is dead; it is a survival; no one can tell its meaning who has not some knowledge of English philology: it persists mainly in a few old-fashioned words which themselves persist in a few old-fashioned idioms and in poetry; it cannot be used at will to make new words, such as "forworn," "forburnt," "forbroken," but the words in which it is allowed have to be learned by heart. Contrast with this the prefix *un-*; it is ancient yet as full of life as ever; the meaning is clear to every child; it can be set before any Anglo-Saxon adjective, provided it makes sense. Give me an adjective I have never heard before and I will compound it with *un-*; in using it I do not obey the dictates of memory but follow the counsels of reason.

What is true of words is also true of beliefs and institutions. The fear of being thirteen at a table is a survival: the underlying principle has evaporated; no one can even guess what it was; nothing is left but the dry bones; it can never increase and multiply. The use of disinfectants on the other hand is a living custom, for the theories at the back of it are still in their prime; they change, improve, and expand, give up old applications and find new ones. Sainthood is a survival among Protestants; for with them it is little more than a title accorded by tradition to some great men of the Church in olden times, but no longer now conferred. Among Roman Catholics it is a living belief which still creates new saints to the present day.

In short a survival is in ethnology what a fossil is in zoölogy.

SURVIVALS AND POSSESSIVES

Let us now apply this conception of survivals to the present problem. In Hawaiian the possessive can either come before or after the noun; in Fijian and many kindred tongues it can only come before. If we can find in those tongues any survivals of the possessive after the noun then it is clear that the Hawaiian usage is the original one.

We do find such a survival in the Lauan dialect: it is preserved in one single idiom *a medha¹ ona*; the cause of it, the reason why.

This is not a living usage, for it is a solitary example, occurring as a set formula. You cannot use *ona* that way whenever you think fit, or find new applications for it: tradition has consecrated this idiom, not the laws of Fijian grammar.

Ona after nouns survives also in Rotuman, though more extensively than in Fijian; it has there come to mean "of" before proper nouns. That is precisely the reason of its survival: it has become equivalent to a preposition, and therefore remains in the position affected by prepositions. *E. g.*

ri on fata: the house of this man, literally "the house of him, this man."

In Tongan the ordinary possessive occupies the same position as in Fijian; but the emphatic possessive comes after the noun.

If we compare the position of one and the same possessive in different languages we are led to the same conclusion as by studying survivals. The *ta-* possessive occurs in Hawaii both before and after the noun, in Wallis island it always comes before, in Eddystone always behind, *e. g.*

W. Is. *ko tana fa'e*: his mother,

Ed. Isl. *na mani tana*: his basket.

Even the suffixed possessive, so called, is not always suffixed. Most Fijian dialects say: *yavangu*: my leg, but some say *nggu yava*. In Eddystone they say, *nggua nene*.

All these facts can only be explained one way: originally the possessive, or more properly the pronoun in the oblique cases had the choice of two positions, but in most Polynesian and Melanesian languages it has been confined to one position only, the other has disappeared, leaving only some survivals.

A FRENCH PARALLEL

It may be asked how such a change may occur. We cannot answer why: we can only insist that such things do happen, are in fact not uncommon. It is not a process conceived solely by the

¹ *th* like English *th* in *the, this*.

imagination without the aid of facts. We need go no further than just cross the Channel to find an exact parallel. Latin enjoyed great freedom of construction; Old French still preserved the option of placing the adjective before or after the noun. Modern French, especially colloquial French, has very little choice left it in this matter.

CULTURE-FUSION AGAIN

If any one still insists on knowing why so many Melanesian and Polynesian dialects should have lost their ancient freedom, we can do no more than suggest one possible explanation, namely culture contact, only not in the manner propounded by Dr. Rivers.

It certainly was not indifferent originally whether the possessive came before or after the noun, just as it is not quite indifferent whether the adjective or the noun comes first in French; some nuance must have been conveyed by the position. Such a nuance would naturally escape invaders who did not possess it, just as most Northern Europeans will miss the fine shade of distinction between "un parfum délicieux" and "un délicieux parfum." Not seeing any difference between the two positions they would drop one and keep only that which seemed more euphonious or which accorded better with their own idiom.

That however is pure speculation; it may be a good working hypothesis; more facts are required to make it into a positive theory. We know so little about the causes of linguistic changes: it is possible that social and economic changes react upon language; the growth or decay of culture must certainly enrich or debase it; the whole subject is as yet so obscure that would-be explanations can never be more than interesting suggestions.

PSYCHOLOGICAL FACTORS

It is fashionable always to give a psychological explanation of customs. Many readers will be disappointed at being offered an historical account instead. There is nothing to be disappointed at; a psychological discourse would have taught us nothing new, if it could have taught us anything at all. It is of course self-evident that mental processes must be involved in the rise and de-

cline of every custom: without mind no custom; but customs exist all over the world and in myriads; if we want to study their relation to mind, modern European customs will serve our turn as well, nay better, than any others. Take survivals, for instance: there would be no survivals if the mind of man was not made the way it is; but if we want to know what is the exact peculiarity that causes them we can investigate it at home more conveniently and thoroughly than in the Pacific. Survivals are as common amongst us as anywhere; if these will not suffice it will avail us nothing to collect more from the Antipodes. Mental processes are involved in the passage from a loose to a rigid order of the sentence; but such developments occur in Europe as well as in the Pacific; they are to outward view exactly similar, so presumably their mental causes are similar. We do not every time a munitions factory is blown up recapitulate all the chemical and physical processes that came into action; these are the same for all; what we want to know is the antecedents. So in philology: we seek for antecedents, we want to know what were the conditions out of which the present state of affairs has developed.

Many will ask what interest can reside in Melanesian possessives if they are not used to throw light on Melanesian mentality. The answer is none at all for the general public. The origin and development of Melanesian possessives interests the specialist only; it interests him as one stone in the edifice he is laboriously building up. The general public is only interested in the edifice as a whole, which is the history of civilization in the Pacific, which is itself but part of a greater whole, the History of Human Culture.

OXFORD, ENGLAND.