From “Yesterday’s Morphology” to “Today’s Syntax”: Two cases from Besemah

The study of grammaticalization has long held that over time an independent word loses phonological material becoming a clitic and eventually an affix by processes such as phonetic decay. Besemah, a Malayic language of southwest Sumatra, evinces a conflicting pattern by which synchronic alternations of the third person pronoun enclitic =nye/anye ‘3’ and the preposition sandi/isan di= ‘from’ have undergone innovations that have added phonetic material.

The third person enclitic =nye shows morphophonemic variation depending on whether the root is vowel-final as in (1) or consonant-final as in (2); [ɲə̃] surfaces after a vowel-final root, while [ŋə̃] surfaces after a consonant-final root.

1) [bini] ‘wife’ + [ɲə̃] → [biniɲə̃] ‘his wife’
2) [yumah] ‘house’ + [ɲə̃] → [yumahɲə̃] ‘his house’

Following the nominalizing suffix -an, the enclitic =nye demonstrates an unexpected alteration by which =nye is appended with the low central vowel [a], yielding a phonological word anye [aɲə̃] as in (3) below.

3) [bata?] ‘carry’ + [an] → [bataʔə̃n] ‘s.t. carried’ + [ɲə̃] → [bataʔə̃n] [aɲə̃] ‘his carried thing’

In a similar fashion, the preposition sandi ‘from’ is an independent phonological word that can occur as a complex of the phonological word isan and the general locative proclitic di= collectively meaning ‘from’. The sandi/isan di= alternation is shown in (4) and (5).

4) aku mbatak kawe sandi kebun
   1SG. carry coffee from garden
5) aku mbatak kawe isan di=kebun
   1SG. carry coffee from LOC=garduen
   ‘I carried the coffee from the garden’

The =nye/anye ‘3’ and sandi/isan di= ‘from’ alternations demonstrate a similar pattern by which there is a canonical form =nye and sandi and a more phonetically robust alternate form anye and isan di=. From a synchronic perspective these forms are not surprising.

However, from a diachronic viewpoint, these alternations are unexpected under a grammaticalization analysis. The clitic =nye is straightforwardly reconstructed as *ña for Proto-Malayic by Adelaar (1992:125) and *ni-a for Proto-Malayo-Polynesian by Blust (1977a:11). Based on evidence from other Malayic languages, sandi is reconstructed as *sa-N-di, consisting of the indefinite marker *sa, the nasal ligature *-N- and the locative marker *di (Uri Tadmor, pers. comm.). These reconstructions are more similar to the canonical forms in Besemah =nye and sandi, while the phonetically robust forms anye and isan di=, in fact, appear to arise from innovations of the canonical forms. That is, the a- in anye and the i- in isan di= are instances of phonetic strengthening. Crucially, these phonetically robust forms are not the remnant of some older form.

Based on the evidence above, this paper claims that =nye and sandi have undergone phonetic strengthening rather than the more usual process of phonetic decay. This claim is further supported by data collected during recent fieldwork in the Besemah highlands as well as evidence from other Malayic languages of southwest Sumatra. Finally, an explanation of the apparent phonetic strengthening is proposed.
References