

Advanced language puzzle:

‘our’ in Nukuoro, Federated States of Micronesia

Solution

Each of the examples below contains a possessive pronoun which can be translated as ‘our’; they are all different in form and meaning.

- Find out what distinguishes the pronouns from each other. What categories play a role? (Hint: start by comparing 1 and 12, then 1 and 9, then 1 and 13. Then compare 6, 8 and 7; and compare 2, 10 and 3.)
 - 1 and 12 show that the number of the possessor plays a role: are “we” two people (1) or more than two (2). two people = dual, more than two = plural
 - 1 and 9: in 1, ‘our’ is inclusive: you and I. In 9, it is exclusive: I and others, but not you.
 - 1 and 13 show that o and a possession plays a role, as explained in the puzzle: ‘our brother’ (1) = o-possession, ‘our child’ (13) = a-possession.
 - 6, 7 and 8 show that the number of things possessed is also important: ‘our Father’ (6) = singular (one); ‘our friends’ (8) = dual (two), ‘our feet’ (7) = plural (more than two)
- Make a table showing the different forms.

	number of things possessed:					
	singular		dual		plural	
	o-possession	a-possession	o-possession	a-possession	o-possession	a-possession
Dual incl.	<i>t^haau</i> (11)		<i>luootaaau</i> (5)		<i>otaau</i> (1)	<i>ataau</i> (13)
Dual excl.	<i>temaaau</i> (4)	<i>temaaau</i> (2)		<i>luaamaau</i> (10)	<i>omaaau</i> (9)	<i>amaau</i> (3)
Plural incl.	<i>t^haateu</i> (15)				<i>otaateu</i> (12)	
Plural excl.	<i>temaateu</i> (6)		<i>luoomaateu</i> (8)		<i>omaateu</i> (7)	<i>amaateu</i> (14)

- Can you predict the missing forms?
 (2) and (4) show that when the possessed thing is singular (there is only one), there is no distinction between o- and a-possession: the same form is used (*t^haau* is historically **tetaau*; *t^haateu* is historically **tetaateu*.)

	number of things possessed:				
	singular	dual		plural	
	o-/a-possession	o-possession	a-possession	o-possession	a-possession
Dual incl.	<i>t^haau</i>	<i>luootaaau</i>	<i>luaataau</i>	<i>otaau</i>	<i>ataau</i>
Dual excl.	<i>temaaau</i>	<i>luoomaaau</i>	<i>luaamaau</i>	<i>omaaau</i>	<i>amaau</i>
Plural incl.	<i>t^haateu</i>	<i>luootaateu</i>	<i>luaataateu</i>	<i>otaateu</i>	<i>ataateu</i>
Plural excl.	<i>temaateu</i>	<i>luoomaateu</i>	<i>luaamaateu</i>	<i>omaateu</i>	<i>amaateu</i>