

## Generic pronouns and phi-features: evidence from Thai

How are generic pronouns interpreted, including null generic pronouns where they occur, and how do they fit in a general theory of null categories? These are questions that we will attempt to answer based on facts from Thai, a language with highly frequent use of null pronouns/arguments without involvement of agreement morphology, a radical pro-drop language, so called. In Thai, the inclusive generic pronoun (corresponding to English *one*) is obligatorily null.

- (1)  $\emptyset$  *tham dii dâay dii*  
do good get glory  
'One does good deeds and gets glory [in return].'

Not all pronouns can be null, though. The quasi-inclusive generic pronoun (corresponding to English *we*) must be overt.

- (2) *\*(raw) kin cee nay dʰan tùlaakhɔm*  
we have vegetarian food in month October  
'We have vegetarian food in October.'

The exclusive generic pronoun (corresponding to English *they*) must also be overt (except where the locative can be interpreted as headed by an abstract nominal 'people', binding the pronoun).

- (3) *bon kò nîi sùanyài \*(khǎw) plùuk chaa khǎay*  
on island DEM mostly they grow tea sell  
'On this island they grow and sell tea.'

We will present an explanation of these facts, embedded in a theory of null pronouns following Phimsawat (2011) and Holmberg (2010).

A null argument in Thai always looks for an antecedent to provide it interpretation. If there is no controlling linguistic antecedent for the null argument in a higher clause, then a discourse topic will be a potential antecedent. If there is no suitable discourse topic, the speaker and the addressee are always available as local antecedents of the null argument. The default referential reading of a null argument is therefore the speaker, or, where the speaker is pragmatically an unlikely referent, the addressee. Generic pronouns need not have an antecedent, and typically don't have one. This explains, at least in part, why the generic pronouns in (2) and (3) must be overt: they have no antecedent in a higher clause or in the discourse, and they do not refer to the speaker or addressee (although (2) includes the speaker in its reference), so they cannot be null. How come the inclusive pronoun in (1) is necessarily null, though?

We propose that the generic reference is due to a generic operator in the CP-domain. The operator is the same for the three types of generic reference (1), (2) and (3). The difference between them is their phi-features. In (2), the pronoun has 1PL features, restricting the reference to people in general including the speaker but excluding the addressee. In (3), the pronoun has 3PL features, restricting the reference to people in general other than the speaker and the addressee. In (1), finally, the pronoun has no phi-features, meaning that it refers to people in general without restriction, therefore including the speaker, the addressee and any other people. That is to say, the inclusive reading of the generic subject in (1) does not come from the operator or from anywhere else but from the absence of restriction. The unrestricted reading is necessarily inclusive. The claim that the feature make-up also explains why (1) is null: It has no phi-features, so there is nothing to pronounce.

The broad cross-linguistic generalisation is that a pronoun can be null if its features can be recovered from the local context or if it lacks phi-features altogether. A paradigm case of local recovery is the incorporation of the subject pronoun in T in languages with rich agreement (Roberts 2010, Holmberg 2010), where the subject pronoun is = a copy not spelled out. Another is control of a null argument by a SPEAKER feature in the C-domain in radical pro-drop languages (Sigurðsson 2004), or control of a null argument by a null topic feature in the C-domain, itself controlled by an extra-sentential antecedent. The generic subjects in (2) and (3) don't meet these conditions, and have phi-features, so they have to be pronounced.

Holmberg (2005) observed that null-subject languages have either a null 3SG referential pronoun, *or* a null 3SG inclusive generic pronoun. Languages in the former class have a designated overt personless generic pronoun (such as *se* in Romance null subject languages), or they resort to overt indefinite pronouns like 'anyone' or a noun meaning 'people' to convey inclusive generic meaning. Languages of the latter class, the partial pro-drop languages, have a more restricted use of referential null subjects but have a null inclusive generic pronoun. The case of Thai shows that this complementary distribution is not universal: A language can have null referential 3SG subjects *and* a null inclusive generic subject pronoun, even in the same contexts. It appears, however, that this is found only in languages or constructions where there is no phi-feature agreement, including finite clauses in radical pro-drop languages and infinitival clauses in other languages. This is explained if agreement requires access to a nominal with inherently valued phi-features. With no unvalued phi-features in T, there is no need for a subject with phi-features, hence the possibility of a null inclusive generic pronoun in finite clauses in Thai and inclusive generic PRO in non-finite clauses in, for example, English. This will explain, at least in part, why the null inclusive pronoun in Finnish, a partial pro-drop language, does have phi-features triggering agreement: this is because the unvalued phi-features of T need it.

The inclusive generic null subject in (1) has the structure [uD, N], where [uD] is a feature of anaphoric expressions, broadly speaking, which needs to be assigned a referential index or generic reference as a value. In (1) it gets generic value by GEN in CP. The generic pronouns in (2) and (3) have the structure [uD[ $\phi$  [N]]], [uD] assigned a value by GEN. We shall argue, following Phimsawat (2011), that referential null arguments in Thai and radical pro-drop languages generally are also phi-featureless, made up of just [uD[N]]. They are therefore dependent on having their reference assigned via 'generalised control', including control by a null topic or a SPEAKER or ADDRESSEE feature in the C-domain. In this perspective Thai has no null pronouns, only null nouns. Pronouns, as in (2) and (3), have  $\phi$ -features and are therefore pronounced.

## References

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