

Person shift in Thai pronouns: a feature-geometric approach

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1. Introduction

- Person shift is a phenomenon observed in speech in many languages. It is when a pronoun appears in a different context from its canonical use.

(1) (Individual speaking to a close friend/spouse who is clearly not in a good mood)

a. Uh-oh, **we**'re in a good mood!

Cf. Uh-oh, you're in a good mood!

(Nurse talking to patient)

b. How are **we** feeling today, Mr. Smith?

Cf. How are you feeling today, Mr. Smith?

- Brown and Levinson (1987) claims that the speakers in (1a) and (1b) are expressing solidarity with the addressee by including themselves in the situation.
- This person shift can be viewed as a **pragmatic phenomenon**. The choice of the pronoun reflects the speaker's **intention or attitude**.

- Thai also exhibits pronominal person shift in speech.

(2) A: **khaw** waa tua-eng uan laew na
 1 think self gain weight already particle
 'I think that you have gained some weight, baby¹.'

B: mai mee khrai **khaw** kit baep thəə rok baa
 NEG have who 3 think like 2 particle crazy
 'Nobody thinks like you, you crazy!'

2. Person shift in Thai pronouns

- Some possibilities of terms used by the speaker depending on who is being addressed.

(3) a. **phom** kit waa ruang nii dii
 1 think that story this good
 b. **Pae** kit waa ruang nii dii
 (name) think that story this good
 c. **phii** kit waa ruang nii dii
 brother think that story this good

¹ I add 'baby' to show that the conversation is between a couple, which is the only context where 'khaw' and 'tua-eng' are used together to refer to the speaker and the addressee respectively. If it is not between couples, then the speaker intends to sound like a couple.

d. Ø kit waa ruang nii dii
 think that story this good
 ‘I think that the story is good.’

- Cook (1968) and Campbell (1969) report that interpersonal relationships play an important role in choosing the reference term in Thai.
- Harley and Ritter (2002) claims that Thai does not have real pronouns because it allows noun substitutes and does not show subject-verb agreement. They conclude that Thai does not have person features (see discussion on features in Section 3).
- I insist that Thai has a pronominal system and makes use of person features. Thai does make use of pronouns in a formal situation. Pronouns are the default form of reference used when no other terms are appropriate.
- Table 1 presents a list of personal pronouns in Thai.

Table 1: Thai personal pronouns

	masculine	feminine	both genders
1 st person	phom	chan/dichan	raw
2 nd person		thəə/khun/than/kae	
3 rd person			khaw
3 rd person non-human			man

- In speech, all pronouns in the rightmost column (those without gender distinction) may exhibit person shift. (4) – (9) show the reference shift in Thai pronouns.

(4) kit waa khaw chop **raw** proh arai
 think that 3 like 2 because what
 ‘Why do you think he likes you?’ (1 > 2)

(5) dai fang khwamkhit khong **thəə** laew
 get listen thought of 3.female already
 ‘After hearing her thought...’ (2 > 3)

(6) aacaan **than** bok hai puak-raw yut
 teacher 3 tell give 1 pl stop
 ‘The teacher told us to stop.’ (2 > 3)

(7) **kae** mai hai chan pai nai loei
 3 NEG give 1 go where particle
 ‘He/she does not let me go anywhere.’ (2 > 3)

(8) **khaw** waa **tua-eng**² uan laew na
 1 think 2 gain weight already particle
 ‘I think that you have gained some weight, baby.’ (3 > 1)

(9) mai chop **man** loei ai puak-dekwan
 NEG like 3 particle derog. plu-motorcyclist
 ‘I don’t like them motorcyclists.’ (0 > 3)

Table 2: Person shift in Thai pronouns

Pronouns	Canonical		Shifted to
raw	1	>	2
thəθə, kae, than	2	>	3
khaw	3	>	1
man	0 ³	>	3

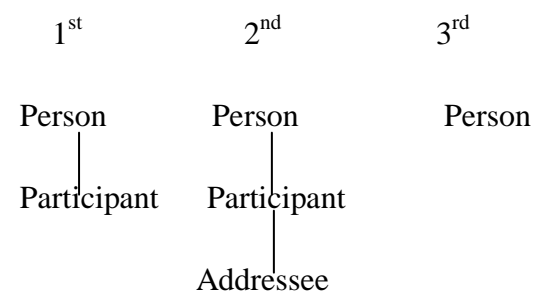
² *tua-eng* literally means ‘self’. It can be pronominal meaning ‘you’ showing intimacy between the speaker and addressee. I will not deal with this topic here and leave it for future research.

³ I use number 0 to represent a non-human third person and number 3 to represent a human third person.

- The shift in reference is obviously caused by some sociolinguistic factors such as closeness, hierarchy or attitude between the speaker and addressee (see Kullavanijaya, 2000 and Palakornkul, 1972).
- However, the shift is not random but systematic and predictable and therefore, I am interested in the mechanism that allows the pronoun to be systematically shifted to a specific person.
- **I propose that Thai manipulates the feature make-up within a pronoun. It deletes or inserts a feature that is more marked.**

3. A feature geometric analysis

- Pronouns are composed of a bundle of Phi-features: person, number and gender (Harley and Ritter, 2002).
- Feature geometry of person features.

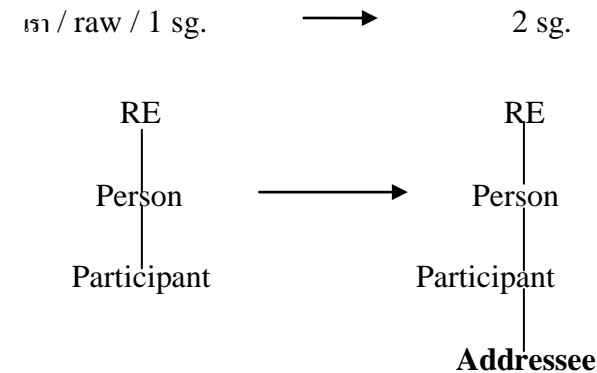


- Features are hierarchical. The lowest feature is more marked than the higher ones and the marked features imply the unmarked features.
- From this geometry, third person is unmarked because it has only one feature [person] and second person is the most marked because it has three features [person[participant[addressee]]].
- Languages treat 3rd person differently from 1st and 2nd, and, moreover, indicate that 3rd person is unmarked, relative to the other persons.
(Forchheimer 1953:6)
- 3rd person agreement is often zero, 1st/2nd person agreement is overt.
- Many languages have no 3rd person pronoun — or at least no nominative form.
- 3rd person is much more subject to objective subdivisions such as class, gender, and location.

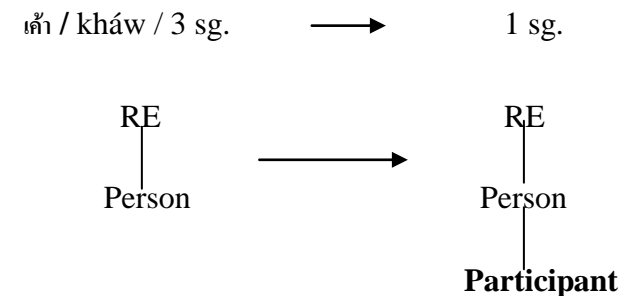
Gender shift under Feature Geometry

1. Feature insertion: **Thai allows the more marked feature to be inserted in the geometry.**

- For first person, if the marked feature is added, it gives second person.

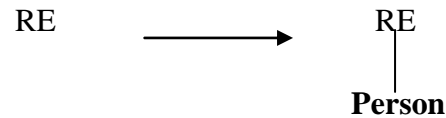


- For third person, if the marked feature is added, it gives first person



- For non-human, if a person feature is added, it gives third person.

มัน /man/ 3 sg. non - human → 3 sg. human



- This gives us 1 > 2, 3 > 1 and 0 > 3.

2. Feature deletion:

I stipulate that once we exhaust all person features (no further feature can be added), then the next operation is “deletion”. This takes place with second person. The more marked features are deleted, leaving only the unmarked feature [person] behind. This gives us 2 > 3.

เธอ /thəə/ 2 sg. → 3 sg. fem

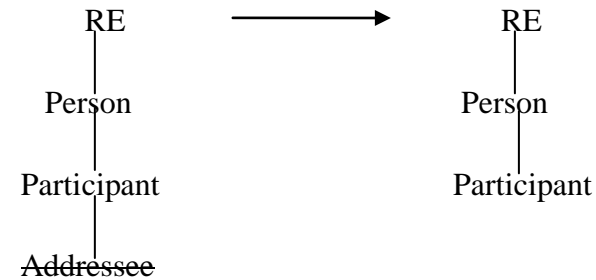
แก /kææ/ 2 sg. informal → 3 sg. informal

ท่าน /thân/ 2 sg. formal → 3 sg. Formal



If we only delete the most marked feature [addressee], we should expect second person to be shifted to first person. This is exactly what happens to noun substitutes such as หนู /nuu/ (lit. ‘mouse’), which can be used both for first and second person.

หนู /nuu/ 2 sg → 1sg



Other kinship terms work the same way (*pii*, *nong*, *paa*, etc.). They can refer to both the speaker and the addressee.

4. Discussion

- A feature geometric analysis offers a systematic and organized way to understand pronoun shift in Thai.
- Although Thai does not have person agreement, person features are still useful for organizing pronouns and explaining person shift in a systematic way.
- Feature deletion and insertion are not something new. They are operations that cause changes in nominal agreement. For example, in Nishnaabemwin (Piriyawiboon, 2007), an animate noun may have inanimate agreement if its person feature is deleted.

Remaining questions:

- Do we have another option that accounts for the shifting?
- Why does *thəə* / *thəə*/ gain a gender feature [female] when it is shifted to third person?

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