3rd Person Personal Pronoun: a Universal Category?

Michael Cysouw

0. Abstract

The term '3rd person personal pronoun' has a long tradition in linguistic theory and it is undoubtedly a useful description of elements such as 'he', 'she' and 'they', found in all Westeuropean languages.[1] It is argued here though that the cross-linguistic status of this category is troublesome. After a short discussion about the cross-linguistic method the division of pronouns in three 'persons' is discussed, and it is shown that there are languages with two or four persons. Then the definition of 'personal pronoun' is discussed, and it is shown that there are languages where the barrier between pronouns and demonstratives is not clear. There even exist languages where all anaphoric elements should properly be called demonstratives. Another analysis of 'personal pronouns' is considered, and the common solution to fill missing categories with 'zeros' is dismissed as being only a patch (and no 'solution') to a failure of the theory.

1. Introduction

The notion third person is a useful notion to describe for instance the form-oppositions found in the english pronoun system (see Table 1). And not only in English, but in a lot of languages in the world it is a useful notion. It is even claimed to be a universal category by Greenberg:

> 'Universal 42: All languages have pronominal categories involving at least three persons and two numbers.' (Greenberg 1963:96)

I will claim in this paper that 'third person personal pronoun' is not a universal linguistic category, as the classic definition of this category is not suitable for many languages and a proposed redefined category is not found in all languages of the world. First I will make a short comment about the methodology used in §2. In §3

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the term 'third person' is discussed and in §4 the term 'personal pronoun'. In §5 a redefinition of 'third person personal pronoun' as 'intersubjective deictic' is proposed and §6 summarizes the argumentation.

Table 1: English personal pronouns

	1		2	3			
	Sing.	Plur.		Masc.	Sing. Neut.	Fem.	Plur.
Subj.	I	we	you	he	it	she	they
Obj.	me	us		him		her	them
Poss.	my	our	your	his	its		their

2. On the cross-linguistic method

Linguistic research can be done in many different ways; one of them is to use the cross-linguistic method. The cross-linguistic method is defined here as a resaerch method that uses data from a wide variety of languages to search for the fuzzy barriers of what is possible and what is not possible in human language. Languages as different as possible are investigated. The more variation in actual occurring structures is taken into account, the stronger the theory that succeeds to incorporate them. There are different ways in which this method can be used. The first and most prominent way to use the cross-linguistic method is in typology. In this field different possibilities to encode a certain function of language are distinguished, the so called 'types'. It is then shown in a representative sample of the world's languages that a strong skewing in this set of abstract possibilities to use language is attested. Certain possibilities are found much more than others, and this deviation from chance is then to be explained. A common step towards an explanation is to show a correlation with other, seemingly independent, typologies. Very strong correlations are called 'universals' (Comrie 1981).

A second way to use the cross-linguistic method is to test an existing theory about human language. Most generative theories about language for instance are developed based on English. To validate such a framework other languages have to be examined. This research can either substantiate the claims being made by showing that other languages than English can be described with the same assumptions, or show gaps in the theory and propose improvements (see Huang (1995) for an example of this methodology). In this paper I want to use the cross-linguistic method in this second way, to test a theory. The theory to be tested is not any generative framework, but the classic tradition to describe language. In this framework an analysis of language is made on the basis of certain categories, as for example 'third person personal pronoun'. My case will be one of refuting this classic notion by showing the problems it has in accounting for certain structures in 'exotic' languages.

3. What is a 'third person'?

The use of the term 'person' dates back at least to the first century BC when the Alexandrine grammarian Dionysius Thrax used it in his *Ars Grammatica*. He states that the persons (prósopa, 'faces, persons') are three, the first being the source of the utterance, the second the one to whom the utterance is addressed, and the third whom (or what) the utterance is about (cited in Greenberg 1993:9).[2] The definition of first and second person, or 'speaker' and 'hearer', seems to be cross-linguistically valid; all languages seem to be able to express the notions 'I' and 'You'.[3] The notion 'third person' is much more troublesome. In *The Philosophy of Grammar* Otto Jespersen argues against the definition of third person as 'the person or thing being talked about' because also the first and second person are captured by this definition. When a first person element is used in an utterance, it is this person, the speaker, whom the utterance is about. If somebody states 'I am ill' then the utterance is about the 'I'. The same holds for the second person. Jespersen concludes:

> 'The real contrast thus is between (1) the speaker, (2) spoken to, and (3) neither speaker nor spoke to. In the first person one speaks of oneself, in the second of the person to whom the speech is addressed, and in the third of neither.' (Jespersen 1924:212)

In other words: a third person is a negatively defined category; it is everything that is not first or second person. Or in the formulation by Lyons:

> 'The term 'third person' is negatively defined with respect to 'first person' and 'second person': it does not correlate with any positive participant role.' (Lyons 1977:638)

This negative definition is problematic though with languages that have an additional person, distinct from what we normally would call first, second or third. This extra person is found in some languages that show an 'inclusive/exclusive' distinction in the first person plural, as it is called in the traditional terminology. The inclusive/exclusive opposition is the distinction between two kinds of 'we'; the inclusive variant meaning 'we two, hearer and speaker' and the exclusive variant meaning 'I, the speaker, together with others *not you*, the hearer'. The traditional

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[2]   This division in three persons is used not only in the descriptive tradition of Greek and Latin. Also in the Sanskrit, the Hebrew and the Arabian grammatical tradition the notion of first, second and third person is found. For a more extensive account see Greenberg (1993).

[3]   Possible counterexamples are discussed in the literature. Well known problematic cases are Wintu and Kawi (cf. Mühlhäusler and Harré 1990: 106-110). A defense of the universality of 'I' and 'You' can be found in Wierzbicka (1996:36-38).

analysis of this phenomenon is to treat it as a subcategorization of a person/number category: the first person dual or plural occurs in two variants (cf. the status of gender in pronominal paradigms). If we look at the following paradigm of dative pronouns from Rembarrnga (a Gunwinguan language, spoken in Northwestern Australia) this analysis obviously misses the morphological generalization. In Table 2 the traditional analysis is shown: it does not show much structure: no regularity of form is found in the rows or columns. In Table 3 a different analysis is proposed with the 'inclusive first person dual' interpreted as a category of person, tentatively called '1+2'. Now the morphological structure of the paradigm is clearer; the elements in each row in Table 3 show a strong similarity in form.[4] Although not every language showing the traditionally called 'inclusive' should be analyzed as having an extra category of person, the Rembarrnga kind of structure is a regular occurring phenomenon in the world's languages (cf. Greenberg 1988).

Table 2: Rembarrnga dative pronoun forms – traditional analysis (McKay 1978, cited in Mühlhäusler and Harré 1990:65)

	Singular	Dual	Trial	Plural
1st	ngɨnɨ	yɨkkɨ (incl.) yarrbbarrah (excl.)	ngakorrbarrah	yarrɨ
			ngakorrɨ	
2nd	kɨ	nakorrbbarrah	nakorrɨ	
3rd	nawɨ (masc.) ngadɨ (fem.)	barrbbarrah	barrɨ	

Table 3: Rembarrnga dative pronoun forms – proposed analysis (McKay 1978, cited in Mühlhäusler and Harré 1990:66)

	Minimal	Unit Augmented	Augmented
1st	ngɨnɨ	yarrbbarrah	yarrɨ
'1+2'	yɨkkɨ	ngakorrbarrah	ngakorrɨ
2nd	kɨ	nakorrbbarrah	nakorrɨ
3rd	nawɨ (masc.) ngadɨ (fem.)	barrbbarrah	barrɨ

To define third person as not being first or second is not enough for these cases, as the 1+2 person would belong in that category too. It is of course no problem to simply add a person and proclaim the third person as being neither first, second nor 1+2. This is the solution often used in dichotomous-feature analyses of the person-distinctions. The different persons are analyzed with two features: [± speaker] and [± hearer]. The inclusive person is easily added as the fourth possibility [+ speaker, + hearer] as shown in Table 4.

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4   As the added category '1+2' is not a singular in the literary sense, different terms are used by McKay to express the distinctions traditionally referred to as 'numbers'. 'Minimal' is simply the basic set of person categories, 'unit augmented' is this basic category plus one extra participant, 'augmented' is the basic category plus some not further specified number of extra participants.

Table 4: Speaker-hearer feature analysis

	± speaker	± hearer
1st	+	−
2nd	−	+
3rd	−	−

'1+2'	+	+

Now we have seen these possibilities of language, what does it mean to proclaim a third person being zero marked? This is a very common practice in analyzing languages, just as an example take the agentive pronominal paradigm of Chickasaw (a Muskogean language spoken in Southeastern US) in Table 5.

Table 5: Agentive affixes in Chickasaw (Payne 1982:359)

	Singular	Plural
1st	…-li	(k)il-…
2nd	is(h)-…	has(h)-…
3rd	Δ	Δ

One option why this is done is that the zero is added because of the assumption that a third person pronominal element, as we know it in European languages, should be found in all languages, but is not found here. As we have seen in Rembarrnga, there is a possible '1+2 person' in language, also not found in Chickasaw, so there should be a second zero added for this person-category. Another option is that the definition of the category 'third person' is seen as a positive definition, and therefore the category should be accounted for. As we have seen with the argument from Jespersen there is no such positive definition. The description of the function of a third person as we know it in European languages is a negative one; it is something else than 'speaker' or 'hearer'. So if this negative category is not found, as in Chickasaw, the category could just as well not exist. From this point of view the paradigm in Table 5 only shows two categories of person.

4. What is a 'personal pronoun'?

The term 'pronoun' shows similar problems: it is problematic to define it in such a way that phenomena of 'exotic' languages are not forced into a pattern found in European languages. The classic definition can be extracted from the etymology of the word: 'pro' - 'noun', instead of a noun, an element being in place of a noun.[5]

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[5] This is still a commonly used definition. For instance in the wonderful 'Encyclopedia of Language and Linguistics' pronoun is defined as 'a word that can substitute for a noun or noun phrase (or clause) or words of similar type' (Asher 1994:5161).

Lyons criticized this view on two points, first that it should read 'noun phrase' instead of 'noun' and second:

> 'to say that pronouns are primarily substitutes … is to imply that their anaphoric function is more basic than their deictic function. …[But] it is deixis that is the more basic of these two kinds of pronominal reference.' (Lyons 1977:637)

If we narrow our view to the personal pronouns, the problem with the substitution-view of pronouns becomes immediately clear if we start to look for an element for which 'I' or 'you' are substitutions. It is nonsensical to analyze them as substitutes for the linguistic expression 'the speaker' or 'the hearer', as almost all utterances where the expression 'the speaker' is used it can *not* be substituted by 'I'. The uses of 'I' and 'the speaker' show a remarkable complementary distribution: 'I' is used to refer to the person that is uttering the word 'I'. 'The speaker' on the contrary is used to refer to another speaking person, not the one who is uttering the words 'the speaker'. If a chairman says: 'the speaker is Miss Johnson' he does not mean 'I am Miss Johnson'. The expressions 'I' and 'you' are basic; they are no substitutes, they are deictic elements referring to a person present in the speech-act. Deictic elements directly refer to something not linguistic, as opposed to anaphoric elements that refer to other linguistic elements:

(1)   *The boy* fell from his bicycle. **He** was in great pain.

But purely anaphoric elements do not exist, linguistic elements that can be used anaphorically can also be used in a deictic sense:

(2)   Who is the boy that fell from his bicycle? **He**! (pointing at him)

The distinction between deictic and anaphoric use of pronouns is a useful semantic distinction, but the distinction is often not made in the grammar of a language, or only as two prototypical ends of a continuum. Both deixis and anaphoric use can be seen as a form of referentiality: pronouns are elements that point to something, either extra-linguistically or linguistically present. The problem with this general definition of pronouns as referential elements is the occurrence of another set of referential items in language: demonstratives. In the deictic-anaphoric dichotomy demonstratives normally are deictics, but can be used anaphorically as well:

(3)   Deictic: Take **this** with you. (Mom giving a cap to her son)

(4)   Anaphoric: I *went skating*. **That** was great. [6]

Cross-linguistically the dividing line between personal pronouns and demonstratives is often fuzzy. For the Inuit variant spoken in West-Greenland the pronouns as described by Fortescue are given in Table 6:

Table 6: Pronouns in West-Greenlandic Inuit (Fortescue 1984:253)

	Singular	Plural
1	uanga	uagut
2	illit	ilissi
3	una	uku

The third person pronouns are better analyzed as being demonstrative items. Their morphology fits in nicely with the other demonstrative items in West-Greenlandic Inuit, as shown in Table 7.[7]

Table 7: Singular demonstratives in West-Greenlandic Inuit (Fortescue 1984: 261-262)

manna	this
una	that
innga	that yonder
sanna	that (way) down there
kanna	that down there
panna	that (way) up there
pinnga	that up there
qanna	that in/out there
kinnga	that outside (the house)
anna	that in the north
qanna	that in the south

The distinction between (European style) pronouns and demonstratives is often not so clear, neither to define, neither by the morphological structures found in 'exotic' languages. Also the distinction deictic-anaphoric is no distinction that gives a good categorization of morphological oppositions in languages.[8]

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[6] Anaphoric reference with demonstratives seems to be the unmarked case when reference is made to an action.

[7] Only the singular forms are given in table 6. The plural are regularly fromed by using '-ku' instead of 'nna'. The suffixes '-nnga' that occur in some forms are phonetically licenced variants because of the 'i' before the '-nna' (Fortescue 1984:334)

[8] Note that Fortescue mentions an 'anaphoric' prefix 'ta-' for demonstratives in West-Greenlandic Inuit (1984:143, 254).

5. Redefining the categories

A possibly better way to categorize referential elements that occur in language is by an opposition between subjective elements and intersubjective elements. Subjective elements are those elements whose referential properties depend on the speaker. Elements like 'I' and 'you' are used with different referents when different persons are speaking. Intersubjective elements on the other hand are elements that can be used by all speech-act participants alike. Both speakers in a conversation can talk about 'he' meaning the same person (intersubjectivity), but when they use 'I' they both mean a different person (subjectivity). Demonstrative elements are likewise subjective as they depend on the place where the speaker speaks:

(5)   speaker 1: **that** is a beautiful hat you're wearing.
        speaker 2: thank you, I bought **this** one yesterday.

Demonstratives can also be used with the place where the speech-act takes place as the 'subjective' viewpoint and then both speaker and hearer use the elements identically; in this situation they use demonstratives intersubjective:

(6)   speaker 1: **That** is a nice restaurant over there.
        speaker 2: You mean **that** Indian one?

The category traditionally called 'third person personal pronoun' is always intersubjective. There is no conversation possible where the speakers talk about something, and the first uses 'he' to refer to someone, but the second has to use 'it' because he is a different speaker.[9] From a cross-linguistic point of view it is better to talk about 'intersubjective referential elements' than about 'third person personal pronouns'. The interesting consequence of this view is that there turn out to be languages that do not have intersubjective referential elements at all, in other words: the category is not universal.[10] From the above shown data from West-Greenlandic Inuit it may seem that there are no intersubjective elements here, as the 'third person

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[9] Of course it CAN happen, almost everything can happen in language if you create the proper context But if a change in intersubjective element occurs, it is always a statement in itself. One could think of a discussion about whether certain animals should be given partly 'human rights', for instance restricting the use of test animals in laboratories. An interaction between an animal rights-defender and an opponent could be as follows:
     defender: You can't put electrodes in a living monkey. It'll hurt **him**.
     opponent: No, **it** won't feel pain as we know pain.
     The opponent makes an implicit statement about his view of the inhumanity of the monkey by using the neutrum pronoun. The switch in use depends thus on the faith of the speaker, a kind of political subjectivity.
[10] The demonstrative category itself is probably universal, although it can occur with very differing semantic oppositions of the elements (Wierzbicka 1996:42).

pronouns' are in fact demonstratives. But in the inflectional system of the language intersubjective elements are found (Fortescue 1984:288-289). The extreme case that neither independent nor inflectional intersubjective elements are attested turns up in some Australian Aboriginal languages. An example is the Pama-Nyungan language Yidin (spoken in Northwestern Australia) where only first and second pronouns and demonstratives exist, and no person inflection on the verbs. The Yidin text given in the grammar shows no referential items to others than speaker or hearer. Only if needed contextually, a complete proper name is repeated for disambiguation (Dixon 1977). For a quick overview of this relatively common phenomenon in Australia see Dixon (1980:356-362).

6. Conclusion

The traditional notion of 'third person personal pronoun' is a good description of phenomena found in many languages in the world, but there are also many languages where this notion does not fit. We have seen that there are languages with either two or four persons, making a distinction in first, second and third person not a good starting point for cross-linguistic analysis. By assuming that all languages have a three-way person distinction, a faith about language is imposed on the structure of some languages. The category 'personal pronoun' also raises problems as the boundary with demonstratives is often rather fuzzy. The proposed solution is twofold. The traditional category 'personal pronoun' is split up in two categories, a subjective and an intersubjective one. The traditional notion of third person personal pronoun is restated as being an 'intersubjective deictic' item: an item that can be used by all speech-act participants alike to refer to something. This can be seen as a positive formulation of the traditionally negative notion of 'third person'. The second part of the proposal is that this category of intersubjective referential items can be nonexistent in languages. There are languages where no linguistic elements exist that fit this function.[11]

The people using this kind of language probably do not lack the notion of referring to something, but the specialized linguistic means to do so independent of the place, time or person speaking is not grammaticalized. One way for such specialized intersubjective deictic elements to arise is from demonstratives. Demonstratives are subjective elements, but the point of reference can change. Demonstratives normally take the speaker as the centre on which the expression has to be evaluated, but they can also be used taking instead the whole speech-act situation,

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[11]   In this formulation the category 'inclusive first person', or '1+2', is also an intersubjective deictic as both speech-act participants can use the same item referring to the same object. It is interesting to note that also this category of intersubjective referential items can be nonexisting in language.

speakers and hearers included, as the reference point. Probably this possibility to use demonstratives in an intersubjective way may lead to a grammaticalization of specialized intersubjective deictic elements out of demonstratives.

An important element of this proposal is the handling of nonexistence of a category. There is but a thin line between proposing a category and allowing it to be filled by a zero element or allowing the whole category to be non-existent. The distinction between these two possibilities is not of great influence on descriptional practices, but it is important for the development of a theory about human language. Proposing a linguistic category like 'third person personal pronoun' is the reflection of a theory about language. This theory proposes that language should have linguistic means to express the category. What should we do if we find a language that does not express that category by any specially 'designed' element? In a strict Popperian way of falsification we would have to search for a new theory, but this step is almost never taken. The obvious solution is to temporarily fill the gap in the theory with some kind of patch, an ad hoc solution to be able to go on with the theory. To use such a patch is an accepted practice in science, but it still is a sign of weakness for the theory. To proclaim a certain category to be zero in a language is thus best interpreted as a patch, a weakness in the descriptional paradigm. The more zeros needed, the weaker the theory. If zeros keep popping up, the theory and the categories of this theory should be reconsidered.

If the diversity of languages in the world is considered, it turns out that the traditional category 'third person personal pronoun' can be zero, but first or second person not. This difference is accounted for by proposing the categories 'subjective' and 'intersubjective' deixis. The fact that the category 'intersubjective deixis' does not exist in certain languages does imply that this category has no place in any form of universal grammar. The notion 'third person personal pronoun' should thus be used very carefully regarding 'exotic' languages as the use is often on the verge of ethnocentrism, of moulding other languages to the form of languages more familiar to us.

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