Singular Pronominal Marking

Or: exotic aspects of some Germanic languages

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1 Introduction

In the history of the Germanic languages, the pronominal inflection has deteriorated. From an original paradigm with six different forms in Proto-Germanic, only fragments remain in the West Germanic languages German, Dutch and English. Nothing is found anymore in the North Germanic languages, with the notable exception of Icelandic. The pieces of the pronominal inflection that remain in the present-day languages are rather remarkable. Sometimes there is no difference anymore between first and second person, as in English, or between second and third person, as in Dutch. Together with the loss of inflectional categories, the Germanic languages developed the need for an obligatorily marked overt subject; they became non-pro-drop. There is often a causal relation implied between these two developments.

If there is indeed a causal relation between the loss of inflectional marking and the loss of pro-drop, it is of interest to test this hypothesis by looking at other languages that have impaired pronominal paradigms. In this article, I will limit myself to a comparison of *singular* pronominal marking in the languages of the world. Surprisingly, it turns out that impaired singular marking as in Dutch and in English is rather unusual among the languages of the world. In this respect, the exotic is among us.

2 Method and Definitions

This study is part of a larger project to make an overview of the diversity of the pronominal marking in the languages of the world. To achieve this goal, I

compare the descriptions of languages from all over the world on their pronominal marking. Depending of what is taken as a language, and what a subvariety, the amount of languages that is included in the present study differs. For the present purpose, exact counts, and consequently the trouble of a precise definition of a 'language' is superfluous. The examples in this article come from a database with information on roughly a few hundred languages.

An important assumption underlying the present work is that the pronominal *paradigm* is the locus of comparison. Languages can, and mostly do, have more than one pronominal paradigm; e.g. an inflectional paradigm, an independent paradigm, a subject paradigm, an object paradigm, etc. The structures of these paradigms will be compared, not languages as a whole. In a sense, a language is seen here as a complex structure that can use different 'instruments' to achieve its goal. The different pronominal paradigms of a language are such instruments. I refrain from assuming a priori that one of these instruments will be the most 'basic' for the language in question. It will be the instruments that are compared, not the languages as a whole. The instrument in question, a pronominal paradigm, is defined as a group of paradigmatically equivalent morphemes that show at least an opposition between marking of the speaker and the addressee (Cysouw 1998:28-31, to appear).

There are a few definitional aspects that have to be taken care of. Singular pronominal marking may seem a straightforward (sub)category of linguistic structure from a West European point of view, but it is in need of a much more precise definition before it can successfully be applied to the linguistic variation of the world's languages. First, the use of the word 'singular' has to be taken literal for the course of this article: the forms that will show up in this section mark one *singular* person or any other singular object. A problem is the 'inclusive'. In some languages the *inclusive* – a special kind of pronominal marking that includes reference to the speaker and the addressee – behaves morpho-syntactically like a singular person, although it is semantically plural. In general, the relation between the semantic and the structural analysis of an inclusive is problematic (Greenberg 1988). Inclusive markers, together with all other semantic plural markers, are disregarded here. Second, the forms used for singular marking in some languages can also be used if there is more than one person indicated. In these languages number marking is not obligatory or even non-existent. These forms are still included as 'singular' marking. The third proviso is that subcategorisations are disregarded. Pronominal paradigms that show distinctions to gender, honorifics or whatever other distinctions languages grammaticalize, are not included in the present overview. With this proviso, there

is only a restricted group of paradigms left that all have a minimal system for singular pronominal marking. In these minimal systems there are maximally three different morphemes: one for speaker, one for addressee – these two categories define the paradigms to be included at the outset – and one for any other marking. Only those paradigms that show a traditional distinction between first, second and third person in their morphology are included in this section. The Latin inflectional pronominal paradigm is exemplary; three suffixes, '…-o', '…-s' and '…-t', and nothing more. Paradigms that have more morphemes for the marking of singular participants have to sit this one out. Paradigms that have *less* than these three morphemes will be the crux of this article.

3   Syncretisms in the Singular

The three morpheme paradigm, like the Latin inflection, occurs frequently in the languages of the world. Still, syncretism of these categories are found. I have found examples of pronominal paradigms with less than three singular morphemes in Germanic, in non-Austronesian languages from New Guinea and otherwise in incidental cases spread out over the rest of the world. This kind of structure, which seems so familiar from an European point of view, turns out to be rather exotic among the languages of the world.

There are four theoretical syncretisms within the boundaries of the three persons. These four syncretisms are shown in Table 1, along with the basic case where all three persons are distinct. For identification, the five possibilities are named S_A through S_E, 'S' standing for singular. Possibilities S_B and S_C clearly are paradigms of person marking, as both have an opposition between speaker and addressee. Possibilities S_D and S_E, however, do not show such an opposition. The opposition between the marking for speaker and addressee is the defining characteristic of person marking, and, consequently, S_D and S_E do not mark person in the strict sense. Possibility S_D will be included in this section as a border case of person marking: it has an opposition between the speech-act participants and any other participant. However, possibility S_E is excluded.[1] In this section I will present an overview of the cases of syncretism that I have found in the languages of the world.

	S_A	S_B	S_C	S_D	S_E
speaker, '1'	A	A	A	A	
addressee, '2'	B	B	B		A
other, '3'	C		A	B	

Table 1: A priori possible syncretisms

3.1   Syncretism Type S_B

Syncretism of type S_B, i.e. an opposition between speaker and the rest, is for instance found in the Dutch inflectional pronominal marking.[2] In the Dutch present inflection on verbs, there is an opposition between a bare stem used for the first person singular, shown in (1a), and a stem with a suffix '…-t' used for second and third person, shown in (1b).[3]

(1)   a.   Ik   loop-∅.
           1SG.PRON   walk-1SG
           'I walk'
      b.   jij/hij/zij/het   loop-t
           2/3SG.PRON   walk-2/3SG
           'You walk.', 'He/she/it walks.'

In Dutch it is necessary to add an independent pronoun. However, this is not a necessary requirement for all human languages. In Lengua (Mascoian, Paraguay) the pronominal prefixes show a syncretism of type S_B, exemplified in (2). Different from the Dutch situation, it is not necessary in Lengua to add an independent pronoun. It is left to the hearer to use pragmatical inference to identify the referent. Independent nouns (or pronouns) can, for completeness or emhpasis, be added, as shown in (2c).

(2)   a.   Ék-çl̄ïngkyïk.
           1-go
           'I go.'
      b.   Ab-l̄ïngàé.
           2/3-hear/feel
           'You hear/feel.', 'He/she/it hears/feels.'
      c.   Ab-waaktêyïk   sēnçlït.
           2/3-return   man.DEM
           'That man returns.'   (Susnik 1977:98-99)

The pronominal suffixes in Chitimacha (Gulf, USA) also show a syncretism of type S_B, shown in examples (3). It is not felt necessary to clarify the ambiguity of the 'non-first' suffix:

'The [non-first inflection] includes reference to either second or third person, and the actual reference in particular situations depends on the context. Ambiguity may be avoided by the use of the [independent] personal pronoun … , but apparently the possibility of confusion is not as great as one might suppose, for sentences without independent pronouns are very common.' (Swadesh 1946:324)

(3) a.   Get-ik.
           beat-1SG
           'I beat.'
     b.   Get-i.
           beat-2/3SG
           'You beat.', 'He/she/it beats.'   (Swadesh 1946:317)

Syncretism of type S_B is relatively common in New Guinea (see for instance the references in (Haiman 1980:xl). Among these languages the morpheme for the combined second and third person is sometimes zero; the opposite of the Dutch case, where the first person morpheme was zero. A zero 2/3-morpheme is for instance found in Wambon (Awyu-Dumut, Irian Jaya), exemplified in (4).

(4) a.   Andet-ep-mbo.
           eat-1SG-PAST
           'I ate.'
     b.   Andet-∅-mbo.
           eat-2/3SG-PAST
           'You/he/she/it ate.'   (Vries 1989:24)

Just as in Lengua and Chitimacha, there is no syntactic need to use an independent pronoun in Wambon to clarify the reference of the impoverished pronominal paradigm. I have made some counts in two Wambon texts from the description by De Vries (1989) to substantiate this. I will concentrate on the marking of first person subjects, and compare the Wambon structure with the structure of the English translation by de Vries. This kind of comparison is filled with pitfalls; the structure of Wambon differs strongly from English (Wambon uses, for instance, structures like switch-reference and serialisation) and the

translation can consequently only give a rough identification of the meaning of the original. Noteworthy, the English translations consists of syntactically correct sentences of English, although the style is rather poor. This probably reflects the intention of the translator to translate the Wambon text as literal as possible. I interpret the translation as being the closest possible reflection of the original stories in syntactically correct English. From this assumption it is possible to compare the way pronominal elements are used in the structure of the languages. I used two texts, 'the pig hunt' (p. 117-118) and 'Sawing' (p.120-128) that were chosen because they show numerous first person subject.[4] For Wambon, I counted the number of verbs marked for first person subject, and the number of independent first person pronouns – functioning as subjects. In the English translations also the independent first person subject pronouns were counted. As there is no first person marking on verbs in English, the number of finite verbs with a first person subject were counted. The results are presented in Table 2. The independent pronouns of Wambon hardly occur (only 9 cases) compared to the English translation (80 cases). The ratio of finite verbs per pronoun gives a rough indication of the differences in use of the independent pronouns. Wambon uses one pronoun for 8.2 finite verbs, against English 1.2. The use of the independent pronoun in Wambon is probably not determined by a regular syntactic structure, like in English. The function of the independent pronoun of Wambon is to put emphasis on the subject.[5]

	Wambon	English
Finite Verbs	74	92
Independent Pronoun	9	80
Finite Verbs per Pronoun	8.2	1.2

Table 2: 1st person marking compared between Wambon and English

From the counts in Table 2, it can be concluded that the Wambon person-inflection functions roughly like the English independent pronouns. However, this person-inflection in Wambon has a syncretism of second and third person. Even though this language has an impaired person-marking system, it is not necessary to use the independent pronouns instead. This shows that the common argument that English makes obligatory use of its independent pronouns *because* of the impaired inflectional system does not hold. As can be seen from the Wambon case, it is possible for a human language to have an impaired inflectional pronominal system, but still not make obligatory use of the independent pronouns.

To conclude this survey of syncretism type S_B, I present an example from Africa. In Kenuzi-Dongola (Eastern Sudanic, Sudan/Egypt) there is a regular syncretism between second and third person, through all tenses and aspects. The examples in (5) are form the Dongola dialect. The status of the independent pronouns is unclear from the description by Reinisch (1879).

(5) a.   Ai   tóg-ri.
           1SG.PRON   beat-1SG
           'I beat.'
     b.   Er   tóg-im.
           2SG.PRON   beat-2/3SG
           'You beat.'
     c.   Ter   tóg-im.
           3SG.PRON   beat-2/3SG
           'He/she/it beats'   (Reinisch 1879:67)

3.2   Syncretism Type S_C

Syncretism of type S_C and S_D seem to be rarer than the ones of type S_B. I know of only three occurrences of type S_C and three of type S_D. This difference between type S_B and the other syncretisms is not significant, because the numbers overall are too low to allow any definitive conclusions. An example if syncretism of type S_C is found in Koiari (Koiarian, Papua New Guinea).[6] There are portmanteau suffixes for person-tense-mood in Koiari, displaying a typical Papuan realis-irrealis opposition. In the realis, the first person singular is in all tenses equivalent to the third person singular (using the suffix '…-nu' or '…-ma') but different from the second person singular (using a suffix '…-nua' or '…-a'). This is shown for the realis-past suffixes in the examples in (6).

(6) a.   Da   ereva-nu.
           1.PRON   see-1/3.PAST
           'I saw it.'
     b.   A   ereva-nua.
           2.PRON   see-2.PAST
           'You saw it.'
     c.   Ahu   ereva-nu.
           3.PRON   see-1/3.PAST
           'He/she/it saw it.'   (Dutton 1996:24)

Different from Wambon, this defective pronominal paradigm is supplemented by independent pronouns in Koiari. All examples in the short grammatical sketch by Dutton (1996) have an overt subject, either by an independent pronoun or a full noun phrase. The use of an independent pronoun does not add emphasis. Pronoun are fronted to add emphasis, and there is a special suffix '…-ike' used in those cases. If such an emphatic pronoun is used, the 'unmarked' independent pronoun still shows up in the sentence, as is shown in (7). This indicates that the independent pronoun is obligatorily used.

(7)   Da-ike,   kailaki-ge   da   guramarero.
       1.PRON-EMPH   PLACE-LOC   1.PRON   sit [7]
       'I live at Kailiki', 'I am the one who is living at Kailiki.' (Dutton 1996:64)

Syncretism of type S_C is also found in Germanic. Currently, it is found in the preterit inflection of 'weak' verbs in Icelandic (Thráinsson 1994:158-161). The morpho-phonological form of the suffixes falls apart in 6 classes, but all show the same structural S_C syncretism. This syncretism in the preterit was also found in some precursors of the current Germanic languages, notably in Gothic, Middle Dutch (Schönfeld 1959:144-146) and in Old English (Robertson and Cassidy 1954:141).

Another example of a syncretism of type S_C comes from Ika (Chibchan, Peru). Most morphology in Ika is suffixal, but there are pronominal prefixes. For the marking of the subject there is only one prefix in the singular, a second person 'nʌ-…'. There is no overt marking for the other singular participants. This is a syncretism of type 2, with a zero for the combined 1st/3rd person marking.

	Immediate Past		*Past*		*Far Past*
1	∅-tšua	uwin	∅-tšua	ukuin	∅-tšua-na-rua
2	nʌ-tšua	ukuin	nʌ-tšua	užin	nʌ-tšua-na
3	∅-tšua	ʌwin	∅-tšua	užin	∅-tšua-na

Table 3: Ika singular person marking (Frank 1985:89)

However, all syncretism vanishes once other marking is taken into account. There is ample use of auxiliaries, which incorporate tense and evidentiality. Interestingly, the time deixis interferes with the person deixis. In Table 3 the paradigms of the past tenses are shown. Note that the auxiliary 'ukuin' is used for immediate past in the second person, but for unmarked past in the first person, thus implying some person deixis. It is unclear whether these auxiliaries

should be interpreted as tense markers or as person markers. The grammarian concludes:

> 'Considered as markers of 'degree of relevance' or 'distance between verbs and reference point', the [auxiliaries] make more sense. Person, time and (un-)witness all enter into the relationship between an event and the speech situation.' (Frank 1985:90)

Note that the independent pronouns (Frank 1990:26) are not used obligatorily. Indeed, most of the participant reference besides the discussed inflectional marking is zero in Ika discourse (Frank 1990:121-122).

3.3 Syncretism type S_D

English is also one of these 'exotic' cases that show syncretism in the marking of singular participants. English has a syncretism of type S_D in its inflectional marking, '…-∅' for first and second person, '…-s' for third person. The same situation, but with opposite markedness is found in the present tense of Hunzib (Nakh-Dagestanian, Dagestan). The present tense suffix has two allomorphs, '…-č(o)' being used with first or second person, and zero for third person. Examples are shown in (8).

(8)   a.   Də   hĭyaa-č   ɔ̃cu.
           1.PRON   open-1/2.PRES   door
           'I (shall) open the door.'
      b.   Mə   bok'o.l-čo   heλe.
           2.PRON   gather-1/2.PRES   walnut
           'You will gather nuts.'
      c.   Oλul hĭyaa-∅   ɔ̃cu.
           Dem   open-3.PRES   door
           'He/she opens the door.'   (Berg 1995:83)

Another type S_D syncretism can be found in Waskia (Isumrud, Papua New Guinea). Waskia has, just like Koiari, a typical Papuan realis-irrealis distinction in the verbal inflection. The realis marking consists of three tenses: present, past habitual and past simple. All three have a type S_D syncretism. The forms of the present tense are shown in (9). Examples (9a,b) show the suffix '…-sam', that is used both with first and with second person. Example (9c) shows the suffix '…-so' that is used with third person.

(9) a.   Ane   itakta   yu   na-sam.
          1.PRON   now   water   drink-1/2.PRES
          'I am drinking water now.'   (Ross and Paol 1978:67)
     b.   'Ai ni   ait   omu   arigi-sam   i?
          hey 2.PRON bird   DEM   see-1/2.PRES   WH
          'hey, do you see that bird?'   (Ross and Paol 1978:112)
     c.   Gagi   kaemkasik   ko   nagu-so.
          NAME   evil spirit about   fear-3.PRES
          'Gagi fears the evil spirit.'   (Ross and Paol 1978:49)

Independent pronouns are regularly used to clarify the subject, like in examples
(9a,b). The grammarian remarks that the subject is normally overtly present:

> 'In unmarked sentences, … the subject is *not* normally omitted from
> declaratives and questions, but it is often deleted from imperatives. It is
> also missing in al impersonal sentences.' (Ross and Paol 1978:8,
> emphasis added, MC)

In the grammar, there are not enough examples of first or second person subjects
to check this statement. However, relative to the 46 inflected verbs in the
included text (counting all three persons, imperatives omitted), there are only 26
overt subjects (46%). Slightly more than half of the subjects are omitted in this
text (Ross and Paol 1978:110-115). This indicates that the presence of a subject
is not really obligatory, although it is common.

4   Conclusion

A syncretism between first, second or third person singular pronominal reference
is found in the Germanic languages. Syncretisms are found in the pronominal
inflection of Dutch, Icelandic and English. This feature is rather exotic in the
languages of the world, but it can be found in other languages as well.
Noteworthy, among the Papuan languages of New Guinea it is found regularly. I
have shown examples from Wambon, Koiari and Waskia, but this is surely not
an exhaustive list of this phenomenon in New Guinea. In other parts of the world
I have found only incidental cases: Lengua, Ika (both from South America),
Chitimacha (North America), Dongola (Africa) and Hunzib (Caucasus). Close
relatives of these languages do not show any syncretism of the marking of
person.

With only 11 cases out of a sample of a few hundred languages this is indeed rather a marginal feature of the languages of the world. Generalizations are troublesome with so few cases, but a few conclusions seem viable. First, all examples of person syncretism are found in inflectional marking. I have never encountered a language with a set of independent pronouns that show a syncretism.[8] A clear opposition between the categories 'speaker' and 'addressee' is probably felt necessary in the independent pronouns. Note though, that for most languages of the world, the independent pronouns are only used in emphatic contexts or in isolation. Second, it is not necessary for a language with an impaired inflectional paradigm of person to add independent pronouns for clarification. It is no necessity for a language to distinguish consequently between the three persons in the singular. The common argument, that the independent pronouns in English and Dutch became obligatory because the pronominal inflection wore off, is not valid.

5   Notes

[1] One could think of French inflectional person marking as an example of a syncretism type S_E. There is no person marking in the singular (in pronunciation; there is of course a difference in writing), but there is an inflectional difference in the plural between the first and second person: 'chantons'-'chantez'. To my knowledge, this situation is unique in the world's languages. I choose to hold on to my definition of person marking, which asks for an opposition between speaker and addressee, and consequently interpret French as an exception. Note that the opposition 'chantons'-'chantez' does not clearly oppose speaker to addressee as the addressee can be included in the reference of 'chantons' (the 'inclusive' reading of the first person plural).

[2] Here I refer to the inflection in Standard Dutch. The different Dutch dialects show a wide variety of syncretisms. All the different types distinguished in Table 1 are found within the dialectal variation of the Netherlands (Berg 1949:7).

[3] In the Germanic languages, the same syncretism is found in the present inflection in Icelandic 'weak' verbs. These verbs all have a zero first person singular, and identical marking for second and third person. The morphemes that are used for the combined second/third person differ according to the class of the verb (Thráinsson 1994:158-161).

[4] I counted first persons singular *and plural* for these texts. In the plural there is also a syncretism between the second and the third person, so the markedness

situation is comparable to the singular. If I had only counted the singular, the amount of instances would have been much smaller, and the results less clear.

[5] To make a better argument, the use of the independent pronouns should of course be investigated from the structure of the discourse. A full analysis of the Wambon-discourse is beyond the scope of the present work. Impressionistically, it seems like the independent pronouns in Wambon are indeed used on turning points of the story.

[6] In the closely related language Ömie there is also some $1^{st}/3^{rd}$ syncretism, notably in the present tense (Austing and Upia 1975:544).

[7] This verb is in an irrealis tense, which is not marked for person (Dutton 1996:23).

[8] Laycock (1977:36) mentions from his own fieldnotes two Papuan language, Morwap (Irian Jaya) and Amanab (Papua New Guinea), that purportedly show a syncretism of type S_B in their independent pronouns. The value of these observations is questionable, as Laycock himself notes. In Imonda, a close relative of Amanab, there is no indication of a syncretism (Seiler 1985:44).

6   References

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