

**The case of impersonal pronouns**  
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**Introduction** By comparing dedicated impersonal pronouns (*one* in English; *man* in German) in Germanic languages and East-Asian languages, I show that there are at least three types of impersonal pronouns. I argue that all have a different (deficient) feature make-up, which interacts with case licensing. Across Germanic, impersonal pronouns that can have an existential reading are restricted to subject position. This is explained if lacking phi-features is what permits the existential reading, but also entails that the pronoun must lack KP, hence may only occur with unmarked/nominative case. East Asian languages appear to challenge this account – allowing an existential reading in object position. I argue that the problem is only apparent – if one adopts the view of Saito (2007) that these languages lack abstract Case licensing altogether, the cross-linguistic distribution of the impersonal pronouns is explained.

**Data** Summarized below, there are three impersonal pronouns (A/B/C) based on the readings.

		A.		B.		C.
		I	II	I	II	
		Japanese, Korean	Chinese	Vietnamese ( <i>ngươi ta</i> )	Dutch( <i>men</i> ), German ( <i>man</i> )	English ( <i>one</i> ), Icelandic ( <i>maður</i> )
<b>Reading</b>	∇		✓		✓	✓
	∃		✓		✓	✗
	- human		✓		✗	✗
<b>Position</b>	Subject	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Object	✓	✗	✓	✗	✓

**Table 1: Summary of properties of impersonal pronouns**

All three types allow generic readings (∇) referring to ‘people, including you and me’ (a.o. Siewierska 2011). The sentence ‘*When one is in Italy, one eats pasta*’ is grammatical in each language. An existential reading (∃), referring to ‘someone’ is only allowed in group A & B. Recently, it has been discovered by Holmberg & Phimsawat (2015, H&P) that in Thai it is possible for the impersonal pronoun to refer to non-humans. The same holds for the (null) pronoun in Japanese, Korean and Chinese, all in group A (1a).; but the pronouns in all other languages (group B. (1b) and C. (1c)) refer only to humans (examples based on P&H2015).

- (1) Intended: If **an animal or plant** gets a lot of nutrition, it grows faster.
- a. takusan eiyoo-o      tore-ba      hayaku seityoo-su-ru      [Jap.]  
a.lot    nutrition-ACC    take-COND.    fast      grow.up-do-PRES
- b. \*Neu **ngươi ta** co    nhieu chat-dinh-duong thi **ngươi ta** se lon nhan    \*[Viet.]  
If IMP      have plenty nutrition      then IMP      will grow fast
- c. \*If **one** gets more nutrition **one** grows faster      \*[Eng.]

Not all pronoun types are allowed in different syntactic positions. As shown in table 1., all pronouns are grammatical in subject position, with the readings discussed above. An asymmetry arises when looking at object position. The pronouns in group C. are grammatical there; Group A. and B. are split. In group A. the Chinese pronoun cannot occur as an object (2b), the Japanese and Korean pronoun can (2a); In group B. The Dutch and German pronoun pattern as Chinese (2d), and the Vietnamese pronoun patterns with Japanese and Korean, (2c).

- (2) Intended: This story tells **people** that stealing is wrong
- a. I    chayk-un    hwumchinunkes-ul    napputa-ko    iyakihan-ta      [Korean]  
this book-TOP    stealing-ACC      bad-C      tell-DECL
- b. \*Zhege gushi gapsu touqie shi budui de      \*[Chinese]  
this    story tell    stealing is not-right DE
- c. Chau chuyen nay bao **ngươi ta** rang an trom la    khong dung      [Vietnamese]  
CL    story    this tell IMP      that stealing COP NEG    right

d. \*Dit verhaal vertelt **men** dat stelen slecht is.

\*[Dutch]

This story tells IMP that stealing wrong is

e. This story tells **one** that stealing is wrong

[English]

**Impersonal pronouns are deficient** I argue, following (Ackema and Neeleman 2016; Egerland 2003; Holmberg and Phimsawat 2015) that impersonal pronouns lack certain layers of functional material, which explains the different readings and the syntactic distribution. (3) gives the different pronoun structures, the letters refer to the types in table 1.

(3) a. A. [ N ]                      b. B. [ HUMAN [ N ] ]                      c. C. [  $\phi$  [ HUMAN [ N ] ] ]

All impersonal pronouns lack D, and therefore are never used referentially. Type A. lacks all functional material and therefore has no restrictions on the readings it can have: Since there is no HUMAN feature (following Sigurðsson and Egerland 2009, P&H), it can refer to non-humans; it can be generic, since a generic operator can bind the pronoun (Krifka et al. 1995); it can have an existential reading, since there are no features that restrict the pronoun to always include the speaker or addressee. The same reasons hold for type B. for the generic and existential readings. Since it has a HUMAN feature, it needs to refer to humans. The last type also has a phi-bundle. Following (Ackema and Neeleman 2016), this phi-bundle restricts the pronoun such that it always needs to include the speaker and the addressee. This means that it cannot get an existential reading, since this reading does not necessarily include the speaker or the addressee. Thus the type of deficiency explains what readings are allowed.

**No phi-layer means no K(ase)P(rojection)** I argue that it is not possible to project a KP layer if intermediate functional layers are missing, more specifically if there is no phi-layer. This is similar to the approach to clausal restructuring where higher projections are not active in the absence of intermediate active projections (Wurmbrand 2014, 2015). While truncated projections are possible (Wurmbrand 2014, 2015), the presence of higher projections entails lower ones. Moreover, I take nominative to be the non-case: it does not require a KP layer, other cases do (Andrews 1982, Bittner & Hale 1996, Neeleman & Weerman 1999).

This explains the distribution of AII, BII and C. First of all, C. has enough functional structure to occur as an object, since it has a phi-bundle (3c). This means that a KP can be projected when necessary. As summarized in table 1, AII and BII are ungrammatical in object position. This follows since accusative is not the unmarked case and therefore a KP layer needs to project. The feature make-ups of both A. and B. are too deficient, they lack at least a phi-bundle, and therefore they cannot project a KP layer, (3a,b).

**No Case means no restrictions** Saito (2007) argues that languages such as Japanese do not have real Abstract case licensing. In languages with KP, lacking phi restricted a pronoun to subject (caseless) position, explaining a correlation between interpretation and grammatical position. In languages that lack Case-licensing altogether, this correlation need not hold. Saito's proposal thus explains the distribution of the pronouns in AI and BI: the Japanese and Korean pronoun does not have any functional material and therefore can have all three impersonal meanings. Moreover, since there is no formal case licensing, the pronouns can occur as an object and subject. The same goes for the overt Vietnamese pronoun: It has the same feature make-up as Dutch *men*, (3b), and therefore allows the same readings. It differs from *men* in that there is no case licensing in Vietnamese and therefore this pronoun is allowed in object position, whereas *men* is not. The readings that are allowed in subject position are preserved in object position: Korean and Japanese allow non-human readings in object position, whereas the Vietnamese pronoun does not. Finally, this means that even though Chinese has the same pronoun as in Japanese and Korean, it has a different distribution because the pronoun is not grammatical in object position. This difference follows if there is abstract Case in Chinese (Li and Wei 2014; Li 2014).

**Selected references:** Ackem & Neeleman 2016 *A grammar of person* Ms • Homberg & Phimsawat 2015 *Newcastle & Northumbria Working Papers in Linguistics* • Saito 2007 *The Linguistic Review* • Bittner & Hale 1996 *LI* • Sigurðsson & Egerland 2009 *Studia Linguistica*