THE INVISIBLE AGENT WITH GLOBAL MEANING:  
THAI ZERO ANAPHOR SUBJECTS

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1. Introduction  
In global communication, the insight of a language enriches the mutual understanding  
between foreign and native speakers. When compared with English, Southeast Asian  
languages possess several distinctive features that usually cause misleading, if not  
confusing, interpretation. The frequent occurrence of zero anaphora in Cambodian,  
Malay and especially Thai languages, is one dominantly typical characteristic.  

Usually, when a speaker assumes that the listener shares with him the same  
understanding or background knowledge, the noun phrase (NP) that refers to this ‘given  
information’ is omitted and appears in the sentence as a zero pronoun which is  
‘invisible’ but still meaningful.  

Compared with the English counterpart, zero anaphora occurs more frequently  
in Thai and can be classified into four types according to syntactic functions: SUBJECT,  
DIRECT OBJECT, INDIRECT OBJECT, and MODIFIER and four types of semantic  
roles: AGENTIVE, PATIENT, DATIVE/ BENEFACTIVE and GENITIVE and it  
outnumbers the English counterparts (Intratat 2003). No wonder this invisible agent  
with global meaning naturally causes problems to English speakers studying Thai and  
Thai students studying English alike.

Development of zero anaphora study  
We can find different terms such as ZERO ANAPHORA, ZERO ANAPHOR, ZERO  
PRONOUN, NULL ELEMENT and EMPTY CATEGORY. All of them refer to the  
same constituent but from different viewpoints. ZERO ANAPHOR or ZERO  
PRONOUN refers to the pronoun that is omitted from a sentence. ZERO ANAPHORA  
is the general term that focuses on the relation in which that pronoun is seen as linked to  
an antecedent\(^1\); NULL ELEMENT is mentioned in Generative Grammar when we talk  
about parts of speech such as null subject; EMPTY CATEGORY is named for a gap in  
the structure as analyzed in Government and Binding Theory.  

Zero anaphora has attracted interest from quite a few linguists for more than two  
decades. They started with Generative Grammar. Some Thai linguists for example  
Surinatrampont (1979), Kobsiriphat (1988) and Hoonchamlong (1991) worked with the  
process of analyzing and identifying antecedents for zero anaphora, applying  
Government and Binding Theory, but especially Control Theory.  

Other linguists turn away from Generative Grammar to Pragmatics Discourse  
framework. Fox (1993) provides an account of distribution of a subset of anaphora in  
English conversation and expository prose. Geluykens (1994) also shows evidence that  
the distribution of anaphora in English conversation can be determined by the  
interaction of two pragmatic principles: the Clarity Principle and the Economy Principle.  
Huang (1995) observes that a single or a few syntactic parameters may never be

\(^1\) a corresponding unit in the preceding context to which another unit, typically a later unit, refers.

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adequate in accounting for null subjects and null objects in several languages. He states that different languages may require different licensing and identification strategies, some of which are clearly pragmatic/discourse in nature. In his cross-linguistic study of 550 languages, Huang (2000) provides an account of binding theory and control theory as well as various other syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic approaches to anaphora. Gutman (2004) states further that only a detailed theory of discourse anaphora can account for the distribution of third-person pro-drop in Hebrew, Finnish and Rumanian languages.

In Functional Grammar framework, Givon (1995) studies about zero anaphora and compares the occurrence of this device in different languages. He finds that the majority of sentence subjects in Ute, English, and two English-based pidgins: Spanglish and Filipinglish, have more zero anaphor or pronouns rather than the full NPs. Shokouhi (1996) reports that the occurrences in full NP form are more numerous in Persian than in English due to the use of formulaic politeness expressions. Although zero anaphora has been found to be pervasive in Persian conversation, it is constrained by factors such as turn-taking, repetition, and other interactional features.

Interpretation and identification of zero anaphora
In languages other than English, Huang (1994) focuses on the pragmatic aspects of interpreting several types of anaphors, including zero anaphors in Chinese. He also presents a revised neo-Gricean pragmatic theory of anaphora (Huang 2000). (That is, the interpretation of certain patterns of anaphora can be made using general pragmatic inference, depending on the language user’s knowledge of the range of options available in the grammar, and of the systematic use or avoidance of particular linguistic expressions or structures on particular occasions). Matras (1997) focusing on spoken Kurmanji, a northwestern Iranian language, identifies tentative restrictions on zero anaphora in conjoined clauses.

In Thai, Aroonmanakun (1997) and (2000) studies zero anaphora in the approach of Natural Language Processing and assumes that the resolution of zero pronouns can be done at two levels: the sentence level and the discourse level. The resolution at the sentence level can be implemented on the basis of principles in a sentence grammar, which is in accordance with the Government and Binding Theory. Zero pronouns that cannot be resolved by the Government and Binding Theory are resolved on the basis of discourse principles.

In cognitive aspects, Long and De Ley (2000) are interested in the antecedent of an anaphor in dialogues and how the antecedent becomes the most activated entity in the reader’s discourse model. They suggest that readers use knowledge about the structure of dialogue to anticipate the antecedent of an upcoming anaphor.

From the syntactic-semantic viewpoint, this researcher investigated in 1994 the recoverability of the zero anaphora in conjoined and complex sentences. I found that the antecedent of zero anaphora in Thai can be recovered within three conditions as follows:

1. Syntactic condition: Zero anaphora may refer to specific head nouns in specific sentence structures.
2. Semantic and context condition: Zero anaphora may refer to specific head nouns according to the selectional restrictions between the verbs of zero anaphora and those probable head nouns.
Thai zero anaphor subjects

3. Implicit condition: Zero anaphora does not always refer to the closest noun phrase or to the noun phrases recoverable from the immediate context. The reader has to search the antecedent from the extra-linguistic context, from background knowledge or from pragmatic rules.

From my study (Intratat 2003), which is based on functional and cognitive approaches, this researcher observed that Thai zero anaphora performs more syntactic functions and semantic roles than their English counterparts. It is clearly seen that Thai zero anaphora may exist without any explicit antecedent in immediate context. It may refer to the antecedent at a greater distance later. Moreover, in some lyrics used as data, the antecedents are omitted throughout the whole lyrics. Due to the requirement of explicit antecedents in immediate context, English zero anaphora can not occur continuously but refer to different antecedents although this occurrence is acceptable in Thai.

From the study mentioned above, zero anaphora in Thai occurs most frequently in context of song lyrics when compared with pronouns and full NPs. It constitutes 57.05 per cent of the total occurrence of the three elements in the data. It is also remarkable that Thai zero anaphors can perform several semantic roles as well as pronouns or full NPs. The majority of zero anaphors occurs as the subject of the sentence and performs an AGENTIVE role. This is in the same trend as in other languages studied by Givon (1995) and Li (1997), but the difference is that the antecedent of the zero anaphora in Thai may not be explicit in the immediate context. Sometimes, this is implicit throughout the lyrics.

Since the majority of Thai zero anaphors occurs as the subject of the sentence, it would be interesting to investigate further to what extent they could be interpreted and what type of antecedent they could be identified as. In this study, the types of antecedents of zero anaphor subjects are analyzed and compared with English counterparts.

2. Purpose of the study
This article reports the study on the types of antecedents of Thai zero anaphor subjects and compared with their English counterparts. This analysis is aimed at supplying more background knowledge to English speakers who are studying Thai and making Thai students aware of their mother tongue interference in dropping SUBJECT when writing English. It is also aimed at reminding English teachers in designing English supplementary and remedial material for Thai students.

3. Hypothesis
This study set a hypothesis that Thai zero anaphor subjects can refer to more antecedents than their English counterparts.

4. Data
The data used in this study came from 5 contemporary newspapers and magazines namely, Matichon, Art and Culture Magazine, Sen Thang Setthee, Gourmet and Cuisine, and Tourism Authority of Thailand Magazine. Ten articles were randomly collected from each source from 1992 to 2003. The articles were studied and analyzed for zero anaphora occurring as the subject of a verb. These zero anaphors are further analyzed
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for the identification of their antecedents. Then they are classified and compared with equivalent English counterparts.

5. Findings

From the data, I found that when zero anaphora occurred as SUBJECT and performed AGENTIVE role, there are 4 types of antecedents as follows:

1. First-person SUBJECT
2. Second-person SUBJECT
3. Third-person singular/plural SUBJECT
4. First/second/third/person/all-person SUBJECT

Finding 1 Zero anaphora as first-person SUBJECT.
For example

1.1) Thai: วันนี้เขียนเรื่องตึคุ้มยอมการณ์สักวัน
   English: ‘Today I tell good story about young people once’

1.2) Thai เชื่อว่าหลายๆคนไม่เคยไปชม
   English: ‘I believe that many people not used to visit

In examples 1.1) and 1.2), zero anaphors occur as the SUBJECT of the verb ‘tell’ and ‘believe’ respectively. These subjects refer to the writer him/herself so the subjects in these two sentences are first person singular.

Finding 2 Zero anaphora as second-person SUBJECT
For example

2.1) Thai: ถ้าจะมีอะไรไปทางเครื่องบินก็ได้
   if I argue that I go by plane can
   English: ‘If you argue that you can go by plane…’

2.2) Thai: นี้ตรงจาก ก.ท.ม ไม่มีปัญหา
   I fly directly from Bangkok I see no difficulty
   English: ‘You can fly directly from Bangkok. You’ll have no difficulty’.

In these above examples, zero anaphors occur as SUBJECT of the verb ‘argue’, ‘go’, ‘fly’ and ‘see’. They refer to the particular person who is reading at that moment therefore these zeros are second-person SUBJECTS.

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