

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 antecedent¹; 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 Surintramont (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.

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

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

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:* วันนี้ขอเล่าเรื่องดีๆของเยาวชนสักวัน
Today Ø tell good story about young people once
English: ‘Today let me tell a good story about young people once’
- 1.2) *Thai:* เชื่อว่าหลายคนไม่เคยไปชม
Ø believe that many people not used to visit
English: ‘I believe that many people have never been there’

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:* ถ้าจะเถียงว่าไปทางเครื่องบินก็ได้
if Ø argue that Ø go by plane can
English: ‘If you argue that you can go by plane...’
- 2.2) *Thai:* บินตรงจาก ก.ท.ม ไม่เห็นยาก
Ø fly directly from Bangkok Ø 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.

Finding 3 Zero anaphora as third-person singular/plural SUBJECT.

For example

- 3.1) *Thai*: เด็กชาย...เล่าให้ฟังว่าเห็นสภาพคนติดยาในชุมชนแล้วรู้สึกสงสาร เพราะเป็นที่ รังเกียจของสังคม
The boy...tell \emptyset listen that \emptyset see condition addicts in community then \emptyset feel pity because \emptyset are disgusted by society.
English: 'The boy told me that he felt pity when he saw addicts' condition in the community because they were disgusted by society'.
- 3.2) *Thai*: ลองคิดภาพคนขึ้นเข้าแถวยาว...เมื่อถึงคิวได้ก้าวเข้าไปยืนในร้านที่มีไฟสว่าง
ไสว ปูพื้นพรมนุ่มจนแทบลงนอนได้นั้น จะมีความสุขขนาดไหน
 \emptyset may imagine people in long queue...when \emptyset reach the turn \emptyset able to step in to the well-lit shop laid with carpet so soft that \emptyset can almost lie down, \emptyset will have what happiness
English: 'You may imagine people in long queue...when they reach their turn and step into the well-lit shop laid with carpet so soft that they can almost lie down, how would they feel happy?'

In examples 3.1) and 3.2), it is noticeable that zero anaphors occur at several positions in one sentence and they refer to different persons. This particular characteristic is different from English zero anaphor which refers to one antecedent in one sentence.

In 3.1), the first zero anaphor occurs as the OBJECT of the verb 'tell' and performs the PATIENT role but this is not the focus of this present study. Those who are interested in details about the semantic roles of zero anaphora in Thai may read about them in my previous investigation (Intratrat 2003).

The second and third zero anaphors in 3.1) refer to the boy, so they are third-person singular SUBJECTS of the verbs 'see' and 'feel'. The last zero anaphor refers to the addicts who were disgusted, so this is the third-person plural SUBJECT of the verb 'disgust' and performs the PATIENT role.

In example 3.2), the first zero anaphor refers to the reader so it is the second-person SUBJECT of the verb 'imagine'. The four zero anaphors that follow in the sentence refer to the people who have been waiting in a long queue. They are the third-person plural SUBJECTS of the verbs 'reach', 'step', 'lie' and 'feel'.

Finding 4 Zero anaphora as first/ second/ third-person or all-person SUBJECTS.

For example

- 4.1) *Thai*: สมัยนี้ของกินอะไรก็ตาม กินแล้วไม่ทำให้อ้วน ไม่มีไขมันจะได้รับความนิยม
nowadays any food \emptyset eat \emptyset not make \emptyset fat \emptyset not contains
any fat will receive popularity
English: 'Nowadays, any food I/ you/ they/ whoever eats, that doesn't make me/you/ them/ whomever fat and doesn't contain fat, will be popular'.

- 4.2) *Thai*: หันซ้ายแลขวาไปตามท้องถนน...เป็นต้องได้เห็นและได้ยินเสียงรถจักรยานยนต์ ดังกระหึ่มไปทั่วบริเวณ
When Ø turn left, Ø look right...Ø must see and hear motorcycles roaring go all the area.

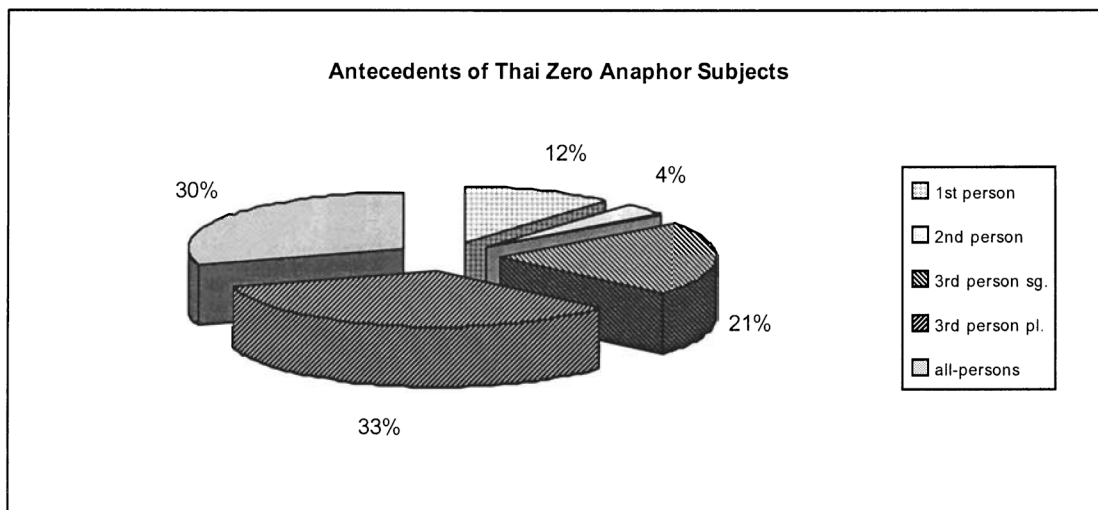
English: 'When I/ you/ they/ whoever turns to the left or looks to the right, I/ you/ they/ whoever must see and hear motorcycles roaring all over the area.'

In the above examples, zero anaphors occur as SUBJECTS of the verbs 'eat', 'make' and 'contain' in 4.1) and the verbs 'turn', 'look' and 'see' in 4.2). They can refer to the writer himself, the reader or someone in general, whoever it is, any food or consumers in 4.1 or pedestrians in 4.2). These zero anaphors refer to the first/second/ third persons or all-persons. The antecedent here is sometimes ambiguous and can be interpreted differently and subjectively. Nevertheless, it is acceptable in Thai though not in English.

Statistics of the findings

From the total occurrence of entire zero anaphora in the data, the group with third-person singular and plural antecedents occurs the most frequently, which constitutes 55.07%. The second in frequency is the all-person antecedent type at 29.88%, the third is the first-person antecedent type at 11.52%. The least frequent group is the second-person antecedent type, which constitutes only 3.6%. The pie chart of this statistics is shown below:

Chart 1: Antecedents of Thai Zero Anaphor Subjects



Interpretation of the findings

From the statistics, most Thai zero anaphor subjects in the data refer to third-person singular and plural antecedents. It can be interpreted that this phenomenon is natural since the data came from narrative types of writing. Because it is the one-way communication from a writer to the readers, the 'given information' then mostly concerns the third party. Consequently, the zero anaphors referring to third-person antecedents frequently occurs. Different phenomenon may occur in face-to-face conversations, dialogues, letters and songs when the speaker corresponds directly with the listener or seems to do as such. In this situation, the first-person and the second

person are not necessarily mentioned and tend to be omitted as zero anaphors referring to first and second-person antecedents more than other types.

As for the all-person antecedent, the second highest percentage type in this study, it can be interpreted that in some informal writing, the writer may want to construct a friendly atmosphere or to convince the readers to accept his ideas. He would appear to be less detached from the readers when he uses zero anaphora referring to all-person antecedents because he seems to integrate into the same group as the readers or whoever in general. It is also possible that, according to Thai social etiquette, the proper address terms to individual persons cause difficulties for the writer because he doesn't know who his readers will be, so zero anaphora is a convenient alternative.

6. Conclusion

From the investigation, Thai zero anaphor which occurs as the SUBJECT and performs an AGENTIVE role can refer to first, second, or third person, singular or plural. Moreover, it can refer to all persons according to individual interpretation. In one sentence, there may be more than one zero anaphor and each one may refer to different persons, as in examples 3.1 and 3.2 above. The occurrence of Thai zero anaphor subjects is abundant and they can refer to more antecedents than their English counterparts. The hypothesis of the study is evidently proved true.

We can compare the characteristics of Thai and English zero anaphor SUBJECTS as follows:

Table 1: *Comparison between Thai and English Zero Anaphor Subjects*

Zero Anaphor Subject	1st/2nd/3rd person	1st + 2nd + 3rd person	one or two in one sentence	more than two in one sentence	same antecedent	different antecedent
Thai	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
English	✓	✗	✓	☆	✓	✗

☆ There are some occurrences but very rare. English uses other grammatical devices, for example, a noun phrase from infinitive or gerund in the place of zero anaphora.

7. Discussion

It is clearly seen that zero anaphor SUBJECTS occur abundantly and freely in Thai. They can perform more functions in the sentence and express more meanings than in English. These different characteristics may cause problems to Thai students. When they speak or write English, the interference from Thai may cause them confusion then they inclined to drop their SUBJECTS and thus commit grammatical errors. In order to raise the students' awareness, and to help them eliminate these errors, English teachers may prepare supplementary and remedial exercises based on these different characteristics between Thai and English mentioned in this study.

Foreigners who study Thai may apply the results of this study when they are confronted with ambiguous interpretations of zero anaphora. Considering the frequent

occurrence of third-person and all-person antecedents- both types constitute about 84% of the entire occurrence of zero anaphor subjects- they tend to be a refuge for non-Thai natives who are not acquainted with this typical characteristics of the Thai language.

The researcher would also like to suggest for further studies about interpretation of zero anaphora in other Southeast Asian languages that would enrich the global knowledge of linguists and language students.

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