Overt versus Zero Pronouns in Mandarin Chinese *

Ruyue Bi

University of California, Berkeley

Abstract

The distribution of Mandarin overt and zero pronouns in donkey sentences is compatible with what has been found in Japanese. Most cases can be accounted for by a distinction of binding methods: specifically, overt pronouns must be dynamically bound, and zero pronouns could be either dynamically bound or interpreted via the $E$-type strategy. However, in both languages, the classic “every farmer who owns a donkey beats it” sentence behaves unexpectedly. To resolve this inconsistency, an additional criterion, unique versus anaphoric definites, is introduced. This approach also sheds light on the syntactic representation of pronouns in Mandarin.

1 Introduction

It is well-established that many East Asian languages, such as Mandarin and Japanese, exhibit radical ‘pro’ drop – given the proper discourse context, both the subject and the object pronoun of a sentence can be freely omitted. Unlike ordinary “pro-drop” languages, for example Spanish and Italian, that usually show rich verbal agreement systems, radical ‘pro’ drop languages, interestingly, often do not have verbal inflection. Hence, very little direct evidence can be utilized to infer the status (person, number, gender, etc.) of the omitted pronoun. Huang 1984 discusses the subject-object asymmetry of the null pronoun, specifically in terms of which nominal expressions are permissible as the antecedent. Consider the following set of examples:

(1) a. Zhangsan, shuo [ta$_{i/j}$ bu renshi Lisi.]
     Zhangsan say he not know Lisi
     ‘Zhangsan said that he did not know Lisi’

b. Zhangsan, shuo [∅$_{i/j}$ bu renshi Lisi].
     Zhangsan say not know Lisi
     ‘Zhangsan said that (he) did not know Lisi’ [Huang 1984:537]

c. Zhangsan, shuo [Lisi bu renshi ta$_{i/j}$.]
     Zhangsan say Lisi not know him
     ‘Zhangsan said that Lisi did not know him’ [Huang 1984:538]

d. Zhangsan, shuo [Lisi bu renshi ∅$_{i/j}$.]
     Zhangsan say Lisi not know
     ‘Zhangsan said that Lisi did not know (him)’ [Huang 1984:537]

*Many thanks to Luhua Chao and Yvette Wu for providing their judgments on the Mandarin examples, and to Peter Jenks, Emily Clem, and Amy Rose Deal for helpful discussion and constructive comments on the earlier stage of this paper.
In (1-a) and (1-c) where an overt pronoun occupies the subject and the object position, respectively, of the embedded clause, *ta* ‘he/him’ can refer to either the subject of the matrix clause *Zhangsan* or someone else in the discourse context. According to Huang, this is also the case for (1-b) in which the subject of the embedded clause is replaced by a null pronoun. However, the reading of *ta* referring to *Zhangsan* is not admissible in (1-d), when the null pronoun occurs in the object position. This inconsistency clearly suggests that a zero pronoun is not the simple deletion of its overt counterpart.

Moreover, I would like to make a new observation that in (1-b), although both readings are accessible, the subject null pronoun in the embedded clause more naturally refers to the matrix subject *Zhangsan* than to the contextually salient individual.

To attempt an explanation of the above-mentioned asymmetries, I closely examine the differences in distribution between Mandarin overt and zero pronouns in this paper. Section 2 provides basic background discussion of pronouns and their binding strategies. Section 3 replicates the examples in Kurafuji 1998 on Japanese overt versus zero pronouns, and demonstrates that the same basic conclusion holds in Mandarin: overt pronouns can only be dynamically bound, while both a dynamic binding and an *E*-type strategy are available to zero pronouns. However, this criterion alone cannot account for all example sentences. To resolve the issue raised by classic “every farmer who owns a donkey beats it” sentence, I incorporate the analysis of Mandarin definiteness in Jenks 2017 (which in turn builds from Schwarz 2009, 2013), and draw parallels both between overt pronouns and familiarity definiteness, and between zero pronouns and uniqueness definiteness. Section 4 concludes the paper and raises additional questions to be studied.

## 2 Pronominal Binding

### 2.1 Types of Pronouns

Assuming the existence of a linguistic antecedent, Nouwen 2014 categorizes pronouns into three distinct types: co-referential, bound and *E*-type.

Co-referential pronouns have type $e$ antecedents, and can refer across sentence boundaries. In (2), the pronoun *she* refers to Mary, and *him* refers to John.

(2)  
(a) Mary says she is friends with John.  
(b) Mary is friends with John. She invited him to the party.

Bound pronouns, not considering reflexives, have quantificational DPs (type $<<e,t>,t>$) as their antecedents, and their referents co-vary with their antecedents. In (3), it hardly makes sense to ask who specifically the pronoun *they* refers to.

(3) Few girls say they are friends with John.

Proving the existence of the third category, *E*-type pronouns, is considerably more subtle. Evans 1980 is among the first to analyze them in detail.

(4) [Evans 1980:339]
3.1 Pronouns and Their Corresponding Binding Strategies

Kurafuji 1998 presents evidence in Japanese illustrating the distinct distribution of overt and zero pronouns in donkey anaphora contexts. He argues that the differences in their distributions are caused by differences in strategies available for anaphora resolution: overt pronouns must be dynamically bound, and zero pronouns could be either dynamically bound or interpreted via the E-type strategy. The same set of sentences used by Kurafuji is replicated in Mandarin to test whether this conclusion can be extended.

The first set of sentences (6)-(8) exemplifies cases where both overt and zero pronouns can occur with equal level of acceptability:
(6) **Narrative Sequence**

Zhangsan you che, ta_i/∅_i zai cheku li.
Zhangsan have car (it) in garage inside.
‘Zhangsan has a car. It is in the garage.’

(7) **Conditional**

Zhangsan ruguo mai shu, jiu hui du-wan ta_i/∅_i.
Zhangsan if buy book then will read-finish (it)
‘If Zhangsan buys a book, he finishes reading it.’

(8) **Conditional with Symmetric Interpretation**

ruguo qiangdao yudao ling-yi-ge qiangdao_j, ta_i/∅_i hui deng yi-yan ta_j/∅_j.
if bandit encounter another-one-CL bandit (he) will glare one-CL (him)
‘If a gangster passes by another gangster, he will glare at him.’

Both dynamic binding and an E-type strategy can be used to explain (6) and (7). In (6) the antecedent of the subject pronoun, either overt ta or zero, is the bare NP che ‘car’, the object of the preceding sentence; in (7) the antecedent of the object pronoun is the bare NP shu ‘book’, the object of the dependent clause. Note in (6), it has been reported that the pronoun referring to Zhangsan, the subject of the preceding sentence, is also a valid reading.

In (8) the subject pronoun of the main clause, either overt ta or zero, refers to the subject of the dependent clause, and the object pronoun refers to the object. As Kurafuji points out, previous literature, including Kratzer 1995, has argued that an E-type strategy is inadequate for interpreting symmetrical cases such as (8). Hence, dynamic binding needs be available for both overt and zero pronoun interpretation.

The second set of sentences (9)-(11) demonstrates cases where only zero pronouns can occur. They are also contexts where Chierchia 1992 claims an E-type binding strategy is needed:

(9) **Narrative Sequence**

mei-ge chanpin_i dou bei zixi jiancha guo. ranhou ∅_i/*ta_i/*?tamen bei
every-CL product all PASS carefully inspect GUO then (*it)/?they PASS
zhuang-jin xiangzi.
pack-in box
‘Every product was inspected carefully. Then they were packed in the box.’

(10) **Paycheck Sentence**

chule Zhangsan, mei-ge-ren dou ba gongzika_i gei-le qizi. Zhangsan ∅_i/(ba
except Zhangsan every-CL-person all BA paycheck give-PERF wife Zhangsan
*ta_i) gei-le qingfu.
give-PERF mistress

---

1. The gloss of Mandarin data mostly follows Huang, Y.-h. A. Li, and Y. Li 2009: **ba** = ba construction expressing “affectedness”, **CL** = classifier, **DE** = pre-nominal modification marker **de**, **DEM** = demonstrative, **GUO** = experiential aspect marker **guo**, **PASS** = passive, **PERF** = perfective.
2. This sentences involves the Mandarin **ba**-construction, where the marker **ba** is mandatory when followed by an overt nominal expression, but has to be omitted when there is a null pronoun.
‘Except Zhangsan, everyone gave his paycheck to his wife. Zhangsan gave his to his mistress.’

(11) **Bathroom Sentence**

```
zhe-dong lou yaome mei-you weishengjian_i, yaome ∅/i*ta, jiu zai qiguaide difang
this-CL building either not-have bathroom or then in weird place

‘It is the case either that this building does not have a bathroom or that it is in a funny
place.’
```  

In (9), the intended antecedent of the subject pronoun, *chanping* ‘product,’ is universally quantified
in the preceding sentence. Note that the passive marker *bei* in the second sentence is optional when
following a zero pronoun, but mandatory if the subject is overt. Interestingly, the sentence becomes
acceptable, although not as natural, if the subject is the pronoun *tamen* ‘they,’ 3rd-person plural,
referring to “every product” as a collective.

In (10), the intended antecedent of the direct object pronoun, *gongzika* ‘paycheck,’ is in the scope
of a non-c-commanding universal. Note that *ba* is obligatory as part of special *ba* construction
denoting “affectedness” in Mandarin when the direct object is overt. We cannot obtain the intended
meaning here if the pronoun were overt *ta* ‘it’.

In (11), the intended antecedent of the subject pronoun, *weishengjian* ‘bathroom,’ is in the scope of
negation. Kurafuji discusses an alternative account of bathroom sentences (Roberts 1989), which
assumes that (11) is equivalent to (12):

(12) ```
zhe-dong lou yaome mei-you weishengjian_i, ruguo you, ∅/i*ta, ye zai qiguaide difang
this-CL building either not-have bathroom if have (it) or in weird
difang
place

‘It is the case either that there is not a bathroom or that if there is a bathroom, it is in a
funny place.’
```  

As it is the case in Japanese, both zero and overt pronouns are now grammatical in (12), which
renders the assumption invalid.

Therefore, since zero pronouns in (9) to (11) are interpreted with an *E*-type strategy, we reach the
same basic conclusion for Mandarin as Kurafuji did for Japanese: both dynamic binding and an
*E*-type strategy should be available for the interpretation of zero pronouns, while only dynamic
binding is available for overt pronouns.

However, as Kurafuji points out, there is a seemingly problematic case for this analysis. An overt
pronoun is required in the Japanese counterpart of the classic donkey sentence “every farmer who
owns a donkey beats it:”

(13) ```
[Rel Ronbun_i-o yon-da] dono gakusee-mo sore_i hihanshi-ta.
paper-ACC read-PAST which student-∀ it-ACC criticize-PAST

‘Every student that read a paper criticized it.’
```  

[Kurafuji 1998:136]

A similar phenomenon can be observed in Mandarin. In (14), an overt pronoun *ta* has to be present
for the sentence to be grammatical:
Every farmer who owns a donkey beats it.'

Kurafuji resolves this issue by proposing a different syntactic structure for Japanese -mo ‘∀’ from the one for English every, which leads to a QR movement of ‘every student’ out of relative clause. This proposal is based on the observation that when a quantificational adverb taitee ‘mostly’ is added in front of the pronoun sore ‘it’, (15-a) can have the reading in (15-b), i.e., “every student who reads papers criticized most of the papers read:”

(15) a. [RelRonbun-o yon-da] dono gakusee-mo taitee sore-o/∅ i hianshi-ta. paper-ACC read-PAST which student-∀ mostly it-ACC criticize-PAST ‘Every student that read a paper criticized most of the papers he read.’
   Kurafuji 1998:137
b. ∀x[student′(x) → MOSTy[paper′(y)∧read′(y)(x)][criticize′(y)(x)]]
   Kurafuji 1998:138

Note that English sentence (16) does not have the reading in (15-b):

(16) Every student who read a paper mostly criticized it. Kurafuji 1998:139

This analysis does not seem to have a straightforward application in Mandarin. The universal quantifier mei appears to be more aligned with English every. Therefore, to resolve the issue put forward by (14), an additional criterion proposed by Jenks 2017 is discussed in the following section.

3.2 Unique and Anaphoric Definites

Jenks 2017, building from the concepts of German ‘weak’ and ‘strong’ definite articles proposed in Schwarz 2009, demonstrates a distinction between the definite expressing uniqueness (unique definite) and the one expressing familiarity (anaphoric definite) in Mandarin. Specifically, the former is realized with a bare noun, and latter with a demonstrative, except in subject position. Consider the following donkey sentences:

(17) a. mei-ge you lüzi_i de nongfu dou hui da [*(na-tou) lüzi_i]. every-CL have donkey DE farmer all will beat that.DEM-CL donkey ‘Every farmer who owns a donkey beats the donkey.’
   b. mei-ge you lüzi_i de nongfu dou hui da lüzi_i. every-CL have donkey DE farmer all will beat donkey ‘Every farmer who owns a donkey beats donkeys.’

In (17-a), the demonstrative DP na-tou lüzi refers to the specific donkey owned by the farmer, while we can only get the reading “all the donkey-owners beat donkeys in general” in (17-b). Notice that (17-a) is essentially equivalent to (14), repeated below:
(18) \(=(14))\) mei-ge you lizi, de nongfu dou hui da ta_{i}/*\emptyset_{i}.
    every-cl have donkey de farmer all will beat *(it)
    ‘Every farmer who owns a donkey beats it.’

There appears to be a correspondence between the overt pronoun \(ta\) and the demonstrative, and one between the zero pronoun and the bare noun. Two earlier examples are re-examined to further establish the connection, and to ensure the comparability of the Kurafuji 1998 and Jenks 2017 theories.

The first example is where both overt and zero pronouns can occur:

(19) a. \(=(7))\) Zhangsan ruguo mai shu, jiu hui du-wan ta_{i}/\emptyset_{i}.
    Zhangsan if buy book then will read-finish (it)
    ‘If Zhangsan buys a book, he finishes reading it.’

b. Zhangsan ruguo mai shu, jiu hui du-wan [na-ben shu].
    Zhangsan if buy book then will read-finish this.DEM-cl book
    ‘If Zhangsan buys a book, he finishes reading the book.’

c. Zhangsan ruguo mai shu, jiu hui du-wan shu.
    Zhangsan if buy book then will read-finish book
    ‘If Zhangsan buys a book, he finishes reading the book.’

Both (19-b) with a demonstrative DP and (19-c) with a bare noun have the intended meaning as in (19-a).

The second example is where only a zero pronoun is permissible:

(20) a. \(=(10))\)
    chule Zhangsan, mei-ge-ren dou ba gongzika, gei-le qizi. Zhangsan
    except Zhangsan every-cl-person all BA paycheck give-PERF wife Zhangsan
    \emptyset_{i}/(ba *ta_{i}) gei-le qingfu.
     give-PERF mistress
    ‘Except Zhangsan, everyone gave his paycheck to his wife. Zhangsan gave his to his mistress.’

b. *chule Zhangsan, mei-ge-ren dou ba gongzika gei-le qizi. Zhangsan ba
    except Zhangsan every-cl-person all BA paycheck give-PERF wife Zhangsan BA
    [na-zhang gongzika] gei-le qingfu.
     that.DEM-cl paycheck give-PERF mistress
    ‘Except Zhangsan, everyone gave his paycheck to his wife. Zhangsan gave his paycheck to his mistress.’

c. chule Zhangsan, mei-ge-ren dou ba gongzika gei-le qizi. Zhangsan ba
    except Zhangsan every-cl-person all BA paycheck give-PERF wife Zhangsan BA
    gongzika gei-le qingfu.
     paycheck give-PERF mistress
    ‘Except Zhangsan, everyone gave his paycheck to his wife. Zhangsan gave his paycheck to his mistress.’
In (20-b), we cannot obtain the intended meaning – it is Zhangsan’s paycheck that he is giving to his mistress. Instead, na-zhang gongzika ‘that paycheck’ refers to a contextually salient individual previously mentioned in the discourse. On the other hand, (20-c) is equivalent to (20-a).

The table below summarizes the three examples discussed:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>(21) Distribution in non-subject position</th>
<th>ta</th>
<th>demonstrative</th>
<th>∅</th>
<th>bare noun</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>book sentence (7)</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>paycheck sentence (10)</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>donkey-owner sentence (14)</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In conclusion, the overt pronoun ta appears to have the same distribution as a demonstrative, and the zero pronoun has the same distribution as a bare noun, when they are not in the subject position of a matrix clause.

It is considerably more complicated when pronouns occur in subject position, where, as Jenks 2017 argues, both anaphoric and unique definites can be realized with a bare noun. Then our current theory would suggest that, given the proper context, zero pronouns should always be acceptable in subject position. Further investigation is needed in this regard.

4 Conclusion: Initial Questions (Partially) Answered

Now let’s return to the initial questions that motivated this paper, specifically why an object zero pronoun in the embedded clause referring to Zhangsan is not permissible in (22), and why the reading of a subject zero pronoun referring to Zhangsan, on the other hand, is somehow more natural in (23):

(22) (=(1-d)) Zhangsan_i shuo [Lisi bu renshi ∅_{i/j}].
    Zhangsan say Lisi not know
    ‘Zhangsan said that Lisi did not know (him)’ [Huang 1984:537]

(23) (=(1-b)) Zhangsan_i shuo [∅_{i/j} bu renshi Lisi].
    Zhangsan say not know Lisi
    ‘Zhangsan said that (he) did not know Lisi’ [Huang 1984:537]

First, consider the following set of examples addressing the issue raised in (22):

(24) a. Zhangsan shuo Lisi bu renshi [ta (zhe-wei xuesheng)].
    Zhangsan say Lisi not know him (this.DEM-CL student)
    ‘Zhangsan said that Lisi did not know him_{i/j}.’

b. Zhangsan shuo Lisi bu renshi [zhe-wei xuesheng].
    Zhangsan say Lisi not know this.DEM-CL student
    ‘Zhangsan said that Lisi did not know him_{i/j}.’

c. Zhangsan shuo Lisi bu renshi [(xuesheng)].
    Zhangsan say Lisi not know student

...
'Zhangsan said that Lisi did not know him.'

The reading of the object nominal referring to a contextually salient individual, who is not Zhangsan, is available in all three cases. It referring to Zhangsan is completely licit in (24-a); the judgment varies in (24-b), largely depending on intonation; and the reading is unanimously rejected in (24-c). This observation seems to suggest that the overt pronoun in Mandarin has the representation shown on the left, where DemP, sister to Pro, is deleted, and that the zero pronoun has the representation on the right, where NP is deleted:

Secondly, in terms of (23) where a zero pronoun occurs in the subject position, Zhangsan is its preferred reading, since the demonstrative interpretation is more straightforward. This hypothesis corresponds directly with Jenks 2017’s conclusion that an demonstrative interpretation of the bare noun is prioritized when possible.

In conclusion, both criteria, dynamic versus E-type binding and unique versus anaphoric definites, are needed to predicate the distribution of Mandarin pronouns in donkey anaphora contexts. In my subsequent studies, I hope to explore the possibility of unifying the two and to give a semantic account of how meanings are composed in this type of sentences.

Interestingly, there is a potentially problematic case, extended from a set of examples listed in Cheng and Huang 1996 and in Jenks 2017, that I have yet to figure out how to account for. This inconsistency may be explained by specific properties of *wh- words in Mandarin.

(25) a. ni jiao shei jin-kai, wo dou jian ta.
    you ask who enter, I all see him/her
    'Whoever you ask to come in, I’ll see him/her.'  [Cheng and Huang 1996:130]
    b. ni jiao shei jin-kai, wo dou jian na-ge ren.
    you ask who enter, I all see that.person
    'Whoever you ask to come in, I’ll see that person.'  [Cheng and Huang 1996:130]
    c. ni jiao shei, jin-kai, wo dou jian ∅.
    you ask who enter, I all see him/her
    'Whoever you ask to come in, I’ll see him/her.'  [Cheng and Huang 1996:130]
    d. *ni jiao shei jin-kai, wo dou jian ren.
    you ask who enter, I all see person
    'Whoever you ask to come in, I’ll see person.'  [Jenks 2017:12]
More questions remain to be explored. For example, why does plurality improve the acceptability of an overt pronoun in the narrative sequence where the intended antecedent is universally quantified?

References