

Subjectivity of Chinese and English Null/Pronoun Personal Subjects: A Grounding Analysis

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This article addresses the different degrees of subjectivity conveyed by null/pronoun personal subject in Mandarin Chinese and English daily conversations, based on its nominal and clausal grounding strategies.

The null/pronoun personal subject refers to the alternative usage of null and pronominal forms in a subject position (i.e., the unexpressed \emptyset vs. I in examples 1-2). Null subjects are rich in Chinese but rare in English (Li & Bayley, 2002; Torres Cacoullos & Travis, 2014). Despite the stark difference in frequency, they found that the variation systematically occurs in each language based on contextual, syntactic, and social factors. This variation is also theoretically supported by Langacker (2008), who proposed that the difference between the two subject forms is motivated by the degrees of subjectivity. However, how the degrees of subjectivity are grounded? What are the differences between persons, and is there any cross-linguistic difference? Questions like these require further investigation.

(1) A: \emptyset 就这一次坐了公交车, (null subject)

'I took the bus just for this time,'

因为我今儿逛街买东西了。(pronominal subject)

'Because I went shopping today.'

(2) A: I went and \emptyset got a wet rag and \emptyset wiped it off the car=.

We seek to answer the questions, building on the nominal and clausal grounding in Cognitive Grammar (CG) defended by Langacker (2008, 2017). In CG, grounding refers to those expressions that establish a connection between the ground (i.e., the speech event, its participants, and the immediate circumstances) and the conceptual content evoked by a nominal or finite clause. A finite clause with or without a subject expression indicates different degrees of subjectivity. Null subjects indicate subjective reading, while pronoun subjects indicate objective reading.

Experimentally, we support this hypothesis with evidence from the potential factors (verb type, tense-mood-evidentiality markers, preceding subjects, persons and conjunction) based on the nominal and clausal grounding strategies. In clausal grounding, the events are grounded by the types of verbs (cognitive, dynamic, and others) or the tense, mood, and evidentiality markers. At the super-clausal level, the subjects are grounded by the common ground, such as given information provided by their preceding clauses and different personal subjects (first-person, second-person, and third-person) representing speakers, hearers, and third parties.

By calculating the factors in mixed-effects models based on a comparative corpus of ten hours of casual conversation in Chinese and English, we find that Chinese null/pronoun personal subjects are more sensitive to the tense-mood-evidentiality of the predicate than those of English. In Chinese, the mood is statistically significant ($\beta = 0.87959$, $p < 0.01$), indicating that null subjects will be more likely to convey subjective readings than pronominal subjects. In contrast, it is not significant in English. English null/pronoun personal subjects are sensitive to the preceding subjects ($\beta = 4.2399$, $p < 0.001$). Null subjects are more likely to be used when they have the same reference with their preceding subjects, and pronominal subjects tend to occur when they are coreferential with their preceding subjects. These results further indicate that Chinese null subjects convey more subjective readings than English ones.

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