

The Pragmatic Distribution of Personal Pronouns in Falam Chin

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Introduction: Talk Overview

2

- ▶ Falam Chin (ISO 639-3 cfm), a South Central Tibeto-Burman (Chin) language, has two distinct sets of personal pronouns which encode information structure content
 - ▶ The distribution of pronominal forms is sensitive to the discourse context, namely whether the pronoun's referent is in focus or not

Introduction: Falam Pronouns

3

	1 st Person	2 nd Person	3 rd Person
Singular	<i>keimah</i>	<i>nangmah</i>	<i>amah</i>
Plural	<i>kanmah</i>	<i>nanmah</i>	<i>anmah</i>

Table 1. Falam Chin “Standard” Personal Pronouns

	1 st Person	2 nd Person	3 rd Person
Singular	<i>kei</i>	<i>nang</i>	<i>ani</i>
Plural	<i>kan</i>	<i>nan</i>	<i>anni</i>

Table 2. Falam Chin “Contrastive” Personal Pronouns

1. Amah kha rak sawm aw (King 2010, p. 83)
 3SG.STD TOP then invite IMP.SG
 ‘Invite him.’

2. Kannih cu Laimi kan si nan, (King 2010, p. 85)
 1PL.CONT TOP Lai-people 1PL be but
nannih cu Kawlmi nan si.
 2PL.CONT TOP Burmese-people 2PL be
 ‘We are Lai people, but you are Burmese.’

Introduction

5

- ▶ The double pronoun system is a well-known feature of Chin languages
- ▶ Hakha Lai (Central sub-branch)
 - ▶ Lehman and Van Bik (1997)
 - ▶ Ceu Hlun (2007)
- ▶ Falam (Central sub-branch)
 - ▶ King (2010)
- ▶ Thadou (Northern Peripheral sub-branch)
 - ▶ Haokip (2019)
- ▶ Few studies investigate the contextual conditions of their distribution

Introduction

6

- ▶ This account updates the classification of personal pronouns in Chin languages using new data from Falam
- ▶ “Standard” pronouns (with suffixal *-mah*) are used in conventionally-defined **focus** contexts
 - ▶ i.e., when the pronominal referent **is** among the generated set of alternatives triggered by the preceding context
- ▶ “Contrastive” (without suffixal *-mah*) pronouns are used **elsewhere**
 - ▶ i.e., when the pronominal referent **is not** among the generated set of alternatives triggered by the preceding context
- ▶ I also briefly address *null* pronouns

Introduction

7

- ▶ Background
 - ▶ Information Structure
 - ▶ Falam Chin
- ▶ The Study
 - ▶ Methodology
 - ▶ Results
- ▶ Analysis and Discussion
- ▶ Conclusion

Background: Information Structure

- ▶ The distribution of personal pronouns in Falam Chin is reflective of information structure properties of the sentences which contain them
- ▶ *Information Structure* refers to the structuring of sentences in different kinds of information blocks (Féry and Ishihara 2015)
- ▶ How 'the speaker accommodates his speech to temporary states of the addressee's mind, rather than to the long-term knowledge of the addressee' (Chafe 1976: 28)
- ▶ Common information structure notions include topic, focus, givenness, contrastiveness, etc.
- ▶ Information structure is encoded grammatically through several means, including syntax, morphology, and prosody

Background: Information Structure

9

- ▶ The **topic** constituent identifies the entity or set of entities under which the information expressed in the comment constituent should be stored in the *Common Ground* content (Krifka 2008)
 - ▶ Japanese *wa* Korean *-eun/-neun* (Lee and Shimojo 2016)
 - ▶ Hakha Lai *hi, kha, khi, cu* (Wamsley, forthcoming)
- ▶ **Focus** indicates the presence of alternatives that are relevant to the interpretation of linguistic expressions (Krifka 2008)
 - ▶ Q: [What fruit] do you want?
 - ▶ A: I want a [mango, banana, papaya, orange, grapefruit...]_{Focus}

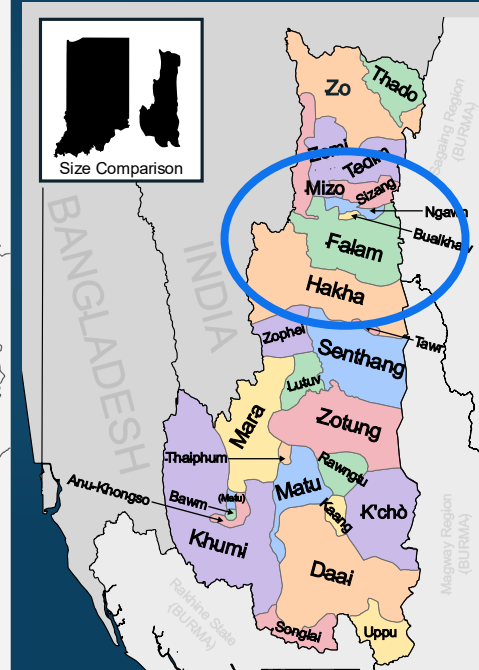
Background: Falam Chin

10

- ▶ Falam Chin is a South Central Tibeto-Burman (Chin) language
 - ▶ In Falam Township and surrounding areas
- ▶ Chin languages are spoken in Chin State in Burma as well as parts of India and Bangladesh
- ▶ There are an estimated 50+ Chin languages (Ethnologue)
 - ▶ 100,000 reported speakers of Falam (Ethnologue)



Map of Burma



The languages of Chin State

Background: Falam Chin

11

- ▶ Falam Chin (or Falam), like other Chin languages, has unique typological properties
 - ▶ SOV word order
 - ▶ Grammatical tone
 - ▶ High, Mid, Low, Rising, and Falling tones
 - ▶ Voiceless sonorants
 - ▶ Split ergativity
 - ▶ Pre- and post-verbal agreement marking
 - ▶ Double pronoun system

Background: Falam Pronouns

12

	1 st Person	2 nd Person	3 rd Person
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Table 2. Falam Chin “Contrastive” Pronouns

Background: Falam Pronouns

13

- ▶ Falam has three-way pronoun paradigm:
 - ▶ Focus pronouns with suffixal *–mah*
 - ▶ Contrast pronouns without suffixal *–mah*
 - ▶ Phonologically null pronoun
- ▶ Pronouns can be used in subject, object, noun complement, or in possessive expressions (King 2010)
- ▶ Falam personal pronouns appear to encode the same propositional content
 - ▶ “I like mangoes” = true if the speaker likes mangoes, false otherwise

3. Falam Pronouns Paradigm

a.	[Keimah]	hai	ka	duh	
	1.SG.FOC	mango	1.SG	like	
	‘I like mangoes’				
b.	[Kei]	cu	hai	ka	duh
	1.SG.CONTTOP	mango	1.SG	like	
	‘I like mangoes’				
c.	[]	hai	ka	duh	
	<i>pro</i>	mango	1.SG	like	
	‘I like mangoes’				

Previous Analyses

14

- ▶ Lehman and Van Bik (1997) on Hakha Lai:
 - ▶ The *mah* element is a focal marker, glossed as ‘one’
 - ▶ an empty category on the order of *pro*
 - ▶ Secondary pronominal form with *-nih* is ‘contrastive’

4. Hakha Lai Pronouns (Lehman and Van Bik 1997)

- a. **Anmah** cu laimi kan-si
1.PL.FOC CU Lai people 1.PL.S-be
“We are Lai people.” [simple statement of fact]
- b. **Kannih** cu laimi kan-si
1.PL.CONTCU Lai people.FOC 1.PL.SG-be
“We are Lai people.” [contrasting with another ethnic group]
- c. **Kannih** cu kan-kal lai
1.PL.CONTCU.FOC 1.PL-go IRR
“We will go (no matter who else may go/even though you do not).”
- d. **Kanmah** cu kan-kal lai
1.PL.FOC CU 1.PL-go IRR
“We will go.” [simple statement of fact]

Previous Analyses

15

- ▶ Ceu Hlun (2007) on Hakha Lai:
 - ▶ Overt pronouns **only** occur in focus contexts
 - ▶ “Focus” pronouns (with suffixal *–mah*) are used for *general* focus contexts, connoting “peculiarity”
 - ▶ “Contrast” pronouns (without suffixal *–mah*) are used for contrastive contexts, connoting “exceptionality”

5. Topic vs. Contrastive focus (adapted from Ceu Hlun 2007)

- a. **Keimah** taktak cu kaa-lio lai lo
1.S.FOC actually TOP 1.S.REFL-swim IRR NEG
“I myself (for one) am not going to actually swim [I’ve just come to watch the kids].”
- b. **Kei** cu kaa-lio lai lo
1.S.CONT TOP 1.S.REFL-swim IRR NEG
“I am not going to swim [You go, if you want].”

Previous Analyses

16

- ▶ Peterson (2017, p.260)
 - ▶ Cites Lehman and Van Bik (1997) to state that “the use of *-nih* with plural pronouns contrastively focuses the pronoun”
- ▶ Haokip (2019)
 - ▶ Thadou (Northern South Central) pronouns
 - ▶ Proposed analysis: *mah* means ‘self’ and functions as a marker of emphasis (p.92)
- ▶ Van Bik (2021)
 - ▶ Remarks on this contrast (p 382)
 - ▶ Proposed analysis: *mah* means ‘self’ and is otherwise hard to define (p. 382)

Background: Summary

17

- ▶ Falam Chin exhibits a three-way pronoun distinction
 - ▶ “Focus” pronouns
 - ▶ “Contrast” pronouns
 - ▶ Null *pro*
- ▶ To now, an in-depth analysis of their function and distribution has been elusive
- ▶ The optimal way to analyze the distribution of personal pronouns in Falam is with reference to information structure, that is pragmatic discourse-level meaning

Methodology

18

- ▶ Data were obtained using a methodology described by Tonhauser and Matthewson (2015) which yields necessary empirical evidence on linguistic meaning
- ▶ Four crucial pieces of information:
 - ▶ Speaker information
 - ▶ Discourse context
 - ▶ Utterance
 - ▶ Judgement
- ▶ Collaboration with Ms. Em Em, a native speaker of Falam in her 20s from Sunthla
 - ▶ a member of the Chin Indianapolis community
 - ▶ Also speaks Hakha Lai, English, Burmese



1. Speakers are presented with linguistic contexts
 2. Speakers provide utterances appropriate for the context in a *translation task*
 3. Utterances are modified with other pronominal forms
 4. Speaker provides judgements of the modified utterances in a *judgement task*
-
- ▶ This methodology provides data which can inform a hypothesis of meaning
 - ▶ That is, when one form is acceptable or not in a given context is reflective of its function within the context

1. **Speaker Information:** Ms. Em Em, native speaker of Sunthla Falam
2. **CONTEXT:** David is going out to get fruit and he asks if Hiro wants some. Hiro says he does. David asks:
3. **Translation Task Elicitation**
 - A. David: What fruit do you want?
 - B. Hiro: I want a mango.
4. **Responses to Translation Task:**
 - a. Ziang thingthei saw na-duh?
Which fruit Q 2.SG-want
'What fruit do you want?'
 - b. **Kei** cu hai ka-duh
1.SG.CONT CU mango 1.SG-want
'I want a mango'

5. Modifications to Translation Task

Q: Ziang thingthei saw na duh?

- | | | | | | |
|----|------------------|-----|-----|--------|---|
| a. | [Kei | cu] | hai | ka-duh | ✓ |
| b. | [] | | Hai | ka-duh | ✓ |
| c. | [# Keimah | cu] | hai | ka-duh | ✗ |
| d. | [#Hai | cu] | | ka-duh | ✗ |

6. **Responses to Judgement Task:** The speaker judges whether the given sentential form is acceptable or not *in the given context*

- ▶ Although the data is not “natural”, it provides naturalistic judgements on the grammaticality/acceptability of pronominal forms in a hypothetical context
 - ▶ Speakers are able to judge acceptability even if they cannot provide explanations of grammatical function
- ▶ Elicitation data can support future research that makes use of naturalistic data

- ▶ Personal pronoun forms are distributed according to the **focus conditions** of the discourse context:
 1. Standard pronouns are used when the referent **is** among the set of alternative responses generated by the current question
 2. Contrastive pronouns are acceptable when the pronominal referent **is not** among the set of alternatives generated by the current question
 3. The null form *pro* is acceptable in contexts where the referent is part of the presupposed content of the question under discussion

Results: Standard Pronouns

24

- ▶ Standard pronouns are used when the referent is among the set of alternative responses generated by the current question
- ▶ When the referent **is** contrasted with a set of pragmatically-determined alternatives
 - ▶ Q: [Who] wants a mango?
 - ▶ A: [I, Liang, Emily, he, she...] _{Focus} want/s a mango
- ▶ When the referent is in focus position in the response
- ▶ Often in response to the question “who?”

6. **CONTEXT:** Art approaches a group of people with a basket of mangoes. He asks them:

A. Zo pawl saw hai a duh?
 Who group Q mango 3SG want
 ‘Who wants a mango?’

B. Keimah
 1.SG.FOC
 ‘Me’

- | | |
|-------------------------|---|
| a. Keimah | ✓ |
| b. Keimah=in hai ka duh | ✓ |
| c. #Hai (cu) ka duh | X |
| d. #Kei cu hai ka duh | X |
| e. #[] Ka duh | X |

(Scenario 27a)

7. **CONTEXT:** Art approaches a group of people with a basket of oranges. He asks them:

A. Zo saw dawhlei a duh?
 Who Q orange 3.SG like
 ‘Who likes oranges?’

B. Liang.

- | | | |
|--|---|----------------|
| a. Liang | ✓ | |
| b. Liang in a-duh | ✓ | |
| c. Amah in dawhlei a-duh (pointing) | ✓ | |
| d. #[] A duh (pointing) | X | |
| e. # Ani in cu dawhlei a duh (pointing) | X | |
| f. Ani in dawhlei a duh (pointing) | ✓ | (Scenario 31a) |

Results: Standard Pronouns

27

- ▶ In examples (6-7), the pronominal referent is among the set of alternatives generated by the question word *zo* ‘who?’
- ▶ Referential nominal expressions, such as *Liang* are acceptable
- ▶ Among pronouns, only “standard” forms are acceptable
- ▶ “Contrastive” pronouns are generally not acceptable
 - ▶ However, see response with pointing in (7f)

Results: Contrastive Pronouns

28

- ▶ “Contrastive” pronouns are acceptable when the pronominal referent **is not** among the set of alternative responses generated by the question word
- ▶ Basically an “elsewhere” form
- ▶ Often in complementary distribution with the standard pronoun based on the discourse context

9. **CONTEXT:** Art and Beverly just met. Art requests:

A. Na thu in sim aw
 2.SG.POSS gossip 1.SG.OBJ tell POL
 ‘Tell me about yourself.’

B. **Kei** cu hai ka duh
 1.SG.CONT TOP mango 1.SG like
 ‘I like mangoes.’

A. **Kei** cu hai ka duh ✓

B. **#Keimah** cu hai ka duh ✗

C. **#[]** Hai ka duh ✗

(Scenario 24a)

10. **CONTEXT:** David is going out to get fruit and he asks if Hiro wants some. Hiro says he does. David asks:

A. Ziang thingthei saw na duh?
 Which fruit Q 2.SG want
 ‘Which fruit do you want?’

B. [] Hai ka duh
 pro mango 1.SG want

- a. **Kei** cu hai ka duh ✓
- b. [] hai ka duh ✓
- c. []#Hai cu ka duh ✗
- d. #**Keimah** cu hai ka duh ✗

(Scenario 25a)

Results: Contrast Pronouns

31

- ▶ Contrast pronouns are acceptable when the pronominal referent **is not** among the set of alternatives generated by the current question
- ▶ In example (9), the set of alternatives includes whole propositions
- ▶ In example (10), the set of alternatives includes fruits
- ▶ Contrastive pronouns are allowed while standard pronouns are prohibited

Results: Null *pro*

32

- ▶ The null form *pro* is acceptable in contexts where the referent is part of the presupposed content of the question under discussion
 - ▶ When the referent is understood and is the presupposed referent in the question under discussion
 - ▶ When null *pro* is felicitous, the “contrast” is often also allowed
- ▶ The conditions for the null form require further investigation and are beyond the current scope of the project

12. **CONTEXT:** Jim asks Art if he would like a strawberry. Art says ‘no’. Jim then asks Art if he would like a banana. Art says ‘no’. Jim then asks:

A. Hai na duh kem maw?
 Mango 2.SG want Q Q
 ‘Would you like a *mango*?’

B. Hai cu ka duh ding
 mango TOP 1.SG want CONT
 ‘I would like a mango.’

- a. Hai cu ka duh ding ✓
- b. #**Keimah** (cu) hai (cu) ka duh ding ✗
- c. #**Kei** cu hai ka duh ding ✗

(Scenario 28a)

- ▶ In question-answer sequences, the distribution of personal pronouns in Falam is determined by the pragmatic context
- ▶ “Standard” pronouns are used when the referent **is** selected from among a set of pragmatically determined alternatives
- ▶ “Contrastive” pronouns are used when the referent is the sentence topic, when non-thetic statements about the referent are made
- ▶ Broadly, null *pro* is used when the referent is understood or “recoverable”

- ▶ This study contributes to ongoing research on personal pronouns, particularly their distribution in different pragmatic contexts
 - ▶ Falam (and other Chin languages) are unique in that there are two different pronominal forms to choose from, each with their own pragmatic properties
 - ▶ This research also contributes to ongoing investigations of pro-drop behavior as well as research on the syntactic properties of pronominal expressions in different discourse contexts
 - ▶ Uses a novel elicitation methodology to investigate the encoding of meaning

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36

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37

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Thank you

I will gladly answer any questions you have

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