

Subject Pronominal Expression in Mandarin

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In Mandarin, subjects may be expressed by overt or null pronouns. So far, most research of subject pronoun use concerns languages with inflectional morphology (e.g. Spanish and Portuguese) and few studies have been conducted to examine the variation of this variable in the speech of a language without inflectional verbal system such as Mandarin.

This study investigates the variation of subject pronominal expression in Mandarin. The data were collected from twenty Chinese native speakers in three discourse contexts including informal conversations, elicited narratives, and teacher classroom speech. Multivariate analysis of 8,507 tokens revealed that switch reference and subject person/number proved to have the strongest effects, followed by sentence type and specificity of subject referent. The general patterns are 1) Switch in subject surface form favors overt pronouns and no switch favors null; 2) Singular and +animate subjects tend to be associated with overt pronouns and plural and –animate ones with null; 3) Statements and questions slightly favor overt subject pronouns, while imperatives favor null; and 4) Subjects with specific referents are more likely to be realized than those with nonspecific referents.

As to the social factors, occupation, age, and gender were shown to have significant effects. Teachers, older people, and females tend to use overt subject pronouns more than students, younger people, and males. Although discourse context was not significant in this study, we suggest caution about this result because this factor group largely overlapped with age and occupation in our data and played an important role in our further explorations of the different patterns between teachers and students, especially in regards to the effect of subject person/number. Overall, this study revealed that Chinese subject pronoun use is best explained from multiple perspectives and there are often interactions among the factor groups.