

Impersonal impersonals and personal third persons: an argument for binary [\pm PART]

There is debate about the representation of person features, e.g. privative vs. binary, the status of third person, etc. (Harley & Ritter 2002, Nevins 2007, Grishin 2023, a.m.o.). Here, I compare the representation of third person and a null impersonal pronoun, which I represent as pro_x , in Passamaquoddy (Eastern Algonquian). I argue that pro_x is wholly underspecified for person (cf. Egerland 2003, Ackema & Neeleman 2018, a.o.), while third persons bear a feature [$-$ PART] not found on speech act participants (SAPs; first or second person), which are [$+$ PART] (Nevins 2007, Grishin 2023). This tripartite division between [$+$ PART] SAPs, [$-$ PART] third persons, and underspecified pro_x naturally falls out from a feature system with binary [\pm PART]; privative [\pm PART] only generates a two-way distinction between [\pm PART] and underspecified (cf. similar arguments for binary number in Harbour 2011, Kouneli 2021). I thus provide support for binary person features and dedicated third person features. Uncited data comes from my fieldwork with four Passamaquoddy speakers.

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| <p>(1) a. Kis-oka-n welaqik. PFV-dance_{AI-N} last.night ‘There was dancing last night.’</p> <p>b. Kisi= pkon-a sakom PFV= pick_{TA-3OBJ} chief wolaku. yesterday ‘A chief was elected yesterday.’</p> <p>(2) a. Sikte-wocu-lti-n welaqik. very-freeze_{AI-PL-N} last.night ‘People were freezing last night.’</p> <p>b. Waht weckuwya-mok eci= wolinaqah-k. over.there IC.come.here_{AI-X.CJ} IC.much= be.beautiful_{II-CJ} ‘When one comes here from there, it is very beautiful.’ https://pportal.org/dictionary/waht-wahte-wahta</p> | <p>Impersonals and unspecified subjects: There are several ways of expressing impersonals in Passamaquoddy, e.g. 2SG forms or <i>wen</i> ‘who; someone, anyone’. I focus on a set of verb inflections often called “unspecified subject” forms (1), found with both intransitives and transitives. There is debate whether these involve a syntactically-present impersonal subject or whether these are passives. Following morphological arguments from Dryer (1996), Lochbihler (2012), and Oxford (2014), I take these to be impersonals. I also provide a new syntactic argument for this, observing that this construction is possible with unaccusatives (2), which cannot passivize, lacking an external argument (Perlmutter & Postal 1977, 1984, Legate, Akkuş, Šereikaitė, & Ringe 2020:§6, a.o.). But if there is such a null impersonal pronoun pro_x, we have to ask:</p> |
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What is the featural make-up of pro_x ? It must be specified for number, as there is number agreement with unspecified subjects (3). Importantly, we can show that this number agreement is sensitive to morphosyntactic number rather than semantic plurality, as it’s incompatible with singular plurality-denoting subjects, like *psi-te wen* ‘everyone’ when it’s the subject of a collective predicate (4). Note also that the possibility of

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| <p>(3) a. kis-oka-n PFV-dance_{AI-N} ‘there was dancing’</p> <p>b. kis-oka-hti-n PFV-dance_{AI-PL-N} ‘(many) people danced’</p> | <p>(4) a. Psi=te wen kisi= maqehe-\emptyset all=EMPH who PFV= gather_{AI-\ddot{w}} ‘Everyone gathered.’</p> <p>b. *Psi=te wen kisi= maqaha-htu-\emptyset all=EMPH who PFV= gather_{AI-PL-\ddot{w}} Intended: ‘Everyone gathered.’</p> | <p>real syntactic agreement with pro_x is an additional argument against a passive analysis of unspecified subject forms (cf. discussion of “fake” agreement with passive agents in</p> |
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Legate 2014). In addition to number, pro_x is also specified for animacy, always being animate (Lochbihler 2012, Oxford 2014), as it’s only compatible with verb stems that take grammatically animate subjects (something sensitive to grammatical, not semantic animacy; Goddard 2002, Dahlstrom 2015, Grishin 2023; data omitted for space). In contrast, as we’ll see, pro_x isn’t specified for person, being truly “impersonal”.

Third person vs. impersonal: Examining various verbal agreement patterns indicates that third persons are specified [$-$ PART] while pro_x is underspecified for [\pm PART]. I focus on two loci of ϕ agreement in Passamaquoddy: (i) C, targeting third persons only (Bliss 2013:234, Grishin 2023, 2024b) and never agreeing with pro_x ; and (ii) T, targeting animates only and with exponents that distinguish third person, lack of person, and failed agreement, allowing us to differentiate agreement with third persons from agreement with pro_x .

First, C agrees omnivorously for third person, indicating it's specified to only interact with third persons (e.g. [INT:−PART]; see Grishin 2023, 2024b for data and justification). (Throughout, I assume that feature copying is *coarse*: probes copy *all* features of the goal, not just what they're specified for; Baier 2018, Coon & Keine 2021, Joshi 2021, a.o.).

While C (bolded) indexes the number of third persons (5), it never indexes the number of pro_x (6), indicating that pro_x a matching goal for C. Thus, pro_x can't be specified [−PART].

Moving on to T, I focus on verbs inflected in the SUBORDINATIVE MODE, the inflectional paradigm found in CP-less clauses (Grishin 2024a), to avoid complications of dissimilatory morphological interactions between C and T (Oxford 2017, 2020); above we focused on the INDEPENDENT, the default in matrix declaratives. In the subordinative intransitive paradigm in (7), note that (i) first, second, and third person subjects show a person prefix (*nt-* '1', *kt-* '2', or *ʔ-* '3') as well as a pluralizing suffix (*-n* '1PL', *-(y)a* '2/3PL'); (ii) inanimates and impersonals lack a person prefix; and (iii) all forms feature the "formative" *-n(e)*, a default exponent of T when it has ϕ -features (Xu 2022), *except for inanimates*, which feature the formative *-w̃*, the default exponent of T when it lacks ϕ features entirely (Oxford 2020, Xu 2022). Following Oxford (2019), I take the person prefix, formative, and pluralizing suffixes to be Fissioned exponents of T. From these observations, I conclude that (i) T never agrees with inanimates, as *-w̃* appears only when T lacks ϕ features entirely (e.g. as a result of failed Agree); (ii) T can agree with pro_x , as *-n(e)* indicates that T has successfully copied features; and thus (iii) the absence of person prefixes and pluralizing person suffixes with pro_x subjects must be because they lack certain features found on first, second, and third persons, i.e. person features (recall from above that pro_x is specified for number and animacy, so the difference can't lie there). Thus, pro_x must be underspecified for [±PART]. (I provide a full analysis of morphology and syntax of T agreement taking into account agreement patterns in impersonal-subject transitives in the final version of this paper.)

A privative non-alternative: We thus have evidence for a tripartite division between [+PART], [−PART], and underspecified, which privative [PART] cannot generate. To try to save the privative account, we could invoke an additional privative feature to generate more categories, like a feature [3] found only on third persons (Bondarenko 2020, Grishin 2023, Bondarenko & Zoppi 2024). This could create a distinction between [PART] (SAPs), [3] (third persons), and underspecified (pro_x). But, all else being equal, this also predicts that [PART] and [3] should be able to co-occur – but there doesn't seem to be evidence crosslinguistically for any person category specified [PART, 3]. If this is a principled gap, we would need to rule out this combination. Stipulating that [PART] and [3] cannot co-occur morphosyntactically (e.g. Grishin 2023) merely reinvents binary features in privative guise ([PART] = [+PART], [3] = [−PART]), assuming [+F, −F] can't co-occur. Alternatively, we could try to derive this gap semantically, giving [PART] and [3] incompatible denotations. However, since third person expressions easily refer to author and addressee (e.g. *the person speaking/listening, everyone in the conversation*, etc.), the semantics of third person (whatever it is) cannot be incompatible with the semantics of [(+PART)]. **Conclusion:** Binary [±PART] better accounts for the facts than privative [PART].

- (5) a. opu-Ø-Ø (6) a. opi-n
 sit_{AI}-w̃-SG sit_{AI}-N
 's/he sits' 'one sits'
 b. opu(-ltu)-w-**ok** b. opu-lti-n(***-ok**)
 sit_{AI}(-PL)-w̃-**PL** sit_{AI}-PL-N(***-PL**)
 'they sit' '(many) people sit'

(7) Subordinative intransitive paradigm

| | SG | DU (≥2) | PL (≥3) |
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| 1EXCL | <i>nt-...-n</i> <i>1-...-N</i> | <i>nt-...-ne-n</i> <i>1-...-N-1PL</i> | <i>nt-...-lti-ne-n</i> <i>1-...-PL-N-1PL</i> |
| 1INCL | — | <i>kt-...-ne-n</i> <i>2-...-N-1PL</i> | <i>kt-...-lti-ne-n</i> <i>2-...-PL-N-1PL</i> |
| 2 | <i>kt-...-n</i> <i>2-...-N</i> | <i>kt-...-ni-ya</i> <i>2-...-N-2/3PL</i> | <i>kt-...-lti-ni-ya</i> <i>2-...-PL-ne-2/3PL</i> |
| 3AN | <i>ʔ-...-n</i> <i>3-...-N</i> | <i>ʔ-...-ni-ya</i> <i>3-...-N-2/3PL</i> | <i>ʔ-...-lti-ni-ya</i> <i>3-...-PL-N-2/3PL</i> |
| 3IN | | ...-w̃ ...-w̃ → <i>default, no AGR</i> | |
| IMPERS | | ...-n ...-N | ...-lti-n ...-PL-N |