

# Impersonal pronouns in Formosan languages: A synchronic overview and an unexpected diachronic twist

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While personal pronouns in Formosan languages have been the focus of exhaustive studies since the early 1990s (see, for instance, Huang et al. 1998, Li 1997), there is a category that has been overlooked, that of *impersonal* pronouns.

Personal pronouns are referential expressions marked for person (first and second, typically lacking grammaticalized third-person clitics), number (singular and plural; Zeitoun 2009), and case. In the first-person plural, they distinguish between inclusive vs. exclusive forms. In contrast, impersonal pronouns do not have any established reference; they are invariable in person and number though they might be marked for case.

Impersonal pronouns are found in languages spoken in southern Taiwan, including Kanakanavu (Zeitoun & Teng 2022b, in preparation), Saaroa (Zeitoun & Zeitoun 2022a) and Rukai (Zeitoun 2007, Zeitoun in preparation), see Table 1. Though they are actually quite productive, it is sometimes difficult to pin down their semantic value. Different treatments have been proposed in the literature: in Saaroa, they are treated as first-person pronouns, and more specifically “special pronominal forms” (Li 2023) or have been assigned another category and reanalyzed as a “politeness” marker (Pan 2012:212).

**Table 1: Impersonal formatives in Kanakanavu, Saaroa and Rukai**

Kanakanavu and Saaroa	Rukai	
	Mantauran	Tona, Budai, Labuan
<b>-kia</b>	<b>-mao</b>	<b>-made</b>

The goal of this study is two-fold: first, to examine the form and usage of impersonal pronouns on the synchronic perspective, based on the framework proposed by Gast & van der Auwera (2013); second, to explore, to some extent, their historical developments. On the diachronic level, different hypotheses can be proposed. In Kanakanavu and Saaroa, impersonal pronouns may have originated through the grammaticalization of the third-person pronoun. The Siraya nominal forms **-mado**, **-mädo**, **madu** ‘the self’ (Adelaar 2011:340) appear to have spread via parallel drift into Rukai and Paiwan, which form a geographical cluster. However, in a surprising twist, these forms gave rise to the impersonal form **-made** in Tona, Budai and Labuan

(Zeitoun in preparation), while simultaneously serving as the base of third-person singular and plural nominative, genitive and oblique pronouns, as well as the reflexive pronoun in Paiwan (Ferrell & Tjakisuvung 2023).

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