

# A Comparative Study of Chamling and English Indefinite Pronouns

Krishna Bahadur Rai  
Associate Professor  
Diktel Multiple Campus  
pakharibas3@gmail.com.

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.3126/dmcj.v10i9.90571>

## Abstract

*The Chamling and English languages originate from two language families: Sino-Tibetan and Indo-European, respectively. As a result, their systems of indefinite pronouns differ significantly. Additionally, Chamling-speaking children find it challenging to learn English indefinite pronouns. Therefore, this study aims to examine the indefinite pronoun systems of these languages and compare and contrast them to identify similarities and differences. This helps to reduce the interference of Chamling's indefinite pronouns in learning English indefinite pronouns for children who use Chamling as their first language. The study employed a descriptive linguistic approach. Data on Chamling was collected through unstructured interviews with native speakers in Bamrang, Diktel, and Nerpa during field visits. In English, indefinite pronouns are categorised based on their syntactic and morphological features, including compound pronouns and "Of construction" pronouns. Moreover, compound pronouns are further subdivided into universal, assertive, non-assertive, negative, and quantitative categories. English indefinite pronouns also include the "some", "any", and "no" series. In contrast, quantitative indefinite pronouns are not part of a series, whereas Chamling indefinite pronouns are classified into two groups: those derived from interrogative forms and non-personal pronouns that include the suffix <i>. The other category comprises indefinite pronouns formed by attaching the <puni> suffix to the first group of Chamling indefinite pronouns.*

## Keywords

Assertive, interference, non-assertive, personal, non-personal, universal

## Background

A pronoun, as defined in the grammatical classification of words, refers to a closed set of items that can be used to replace nouns, thereby avoiding repetition and making our communication more fluent and comprehensive (Stoian, 2023). Every language possesses a distinctive pronoun system, characterised by varying numbers and categorisation that differ markedly from one language to another. Therefore, "pronouns are the most heterogeneous and contradictory parts of speech in terms of morphology and semantics" (Muryasov, 2021). In English, the pronoun system includes personal, possessive, relative, interrogative, demonstrative, distributive, and indefinite pronouns. Conversely, other scholars identify eight distinct types of pronouns in English, which include personal, possessive, reflexive, interrogative, demonstrative, indefinite, reciprocal, and relative pronouns (Aarts et al.,

2014; Stoian, 2023). Similarly, the Chamling language features personal, relative, interrogative, demonstrative, distributive, and possessive pronouns, as well as indefinite pronouns (Rai, 2023).

English and Chamling belong to two different language families: Indo-European and Tibeto-Burman, respectively. As a result, they employ different kinds of pronoun systems. The number and use of indefinite pronouns in these languages show notable differences. English has a wider range of indefinite pronouns than Chamling.. Consequently, children who are native speakers of Chamling find difficulties in learning English pronouns, mainly due to the impact of their mother tongue.

The objectives of this study were to identify the contrast in the indefinite pronouns of Chamling and English, in addition to examining the influence of Chamling indefinite pronouns on the learning of English indefinite pronouns by children whose mother tongue is Chamling.

This study concentrates solely on the systems of indefinite pronouns in Chamling and English. Moreover, it aims to compare and contrast the pronoun systems of Chamling and English through morphological, syntactic, and semantic perspectives. A descriptive linguistic approach is used to analyse these pronoun systems. The primary data regarding the Chamling pronoun system were collected from the areas of Bamrang, Diktel, and Nerpa.

## Literature Review

Every language has a system of pronouns. The variety and types of pronouns vary from one language to another. Although pronouns are an obligatory closed category within languages, systems of pronouns vary across languages. Different scholars have explored the pronouns of various languages, noting that the pronoun systems are not identical. Additionally, scholars have studied pronouns in different languages, discussing various categories, their formation, and functions. This section of the research provides a brief overview of indefinite pronouns and the findings of various scholars, which helps to establish the context for this study.

## Indefinite Pronoun

Old English did not have indefinite pronouns, and demonstrative pronouns were used to refer to non-specific or indefinite nouns, while new indefinite pronouns were introduced to the language in early modern English, which was spoken from the 15th to the 17th century (Normamatova, 2023). Indefinite pronouns are used to refer to a person, an object, or a group of people or items without specifying their reference. Moreover, Stoian (2023) states that "the indefinite pronouns do not refer to someone in particular". He additionally claims that indefinite pronouns starting with "every" represent a complete quantity, whereas those beginning with "some" suggest an indefinite quantity. Furthermore, pronouns that start with "no" are used in affirmative sentences that express a negative meaning. Similarly, Alexander (2003) asserts that indefinite pronouns, which signify an unknown subject or object, are referred to. They do not refer to a specific person, place, thing, or idea. They refer to unspecified referents (Nkopuruk & Odusina, 2018). They show something or someone that is not exact or not limited. In English, there are different sets of indefinite pronouns, such as somebody, someone, and something; anybody, anyone, and

anything; everybody, everyone, and everything; nobody, no one, and nothing; whoever, whatever. Others are few, each, little, many, some, none, and one.

Rai (2024) conducted a comparative study of the pronominal systems in Nachhiring and English. He examined eight distinct categories of pronouns in Nachhiring in relation to their English equivalents. In this study, he found twelve indefinite pronouns, including Ulee (one), Chichha (few), Dumo (many), Heu (other), Usa (nothing), Aasasa (nobody), Haku (anything), U (something), Heuwa (somebody), Heuwa (someone/anyone), Khala (everyone/everybody), and Khalanga (everything).

Ahmed and Baskaran (2023) studied the pronoun system of the Sunuwar language. They divided indefinite pronouns into two parts, viz., positive and negative indefinite pronouns. Furthermore, they have found four positive indefinite pronouns such as *súi-súi* (anybody), *tei-tei* (anywhere), *mərəi-mərəi* (anything), and *genai-genai* (anytime). Additionally, they discussed four types of negative indefinite pronouns, such as *súijo* (nobody), *tekeijo* (nowhere), *mərəijo* (nothing), and *genaijo* (never).

Rai (2023) conducted a comparative analysis of the Chamling pronoun system in comparison to that of English. His study revealed seven distinctive types of Chamling pronouns. Moreover, he identified six types of indefinite pronouns, including *soi* (anyone, anybody, someone, and somebody), *dei* (anything), *irāi* (any), *soipuni* (nobody), *deipuni* (nothing), and *irāipuni* (none).

Stoian (2023) asserted that the narrow sense indefinite pronoun consists of four types: mid-scalar quantities pronoun (like few, several, and many), generic pronoun (such as one), identity pronoun, and universal quantifiers (such as all and every).

Dekier (2022) conducted research into assertive indefinite pronouns. In addition, he examined the syntactic structure of these pronouns along with their associated markers. His research focuses on three basic categories of assertive indefinite pronouns. These are non-specific, specific, unknown, and specific known indefinite pronouns.

Börjars and Burridge (2019) declared that indefinite pronouns convey concepts of indefiniteness and can be categorised into two distinct types: compound indefinite pronouns (e.g., somebody, anybody, and everybody) and another category of indefinite pronouns that either stand alone or are followed by 'of' (such as many, more, both, most, and neither).

Peters (2020) noted that indefinite pronouns can denote both animate and inanimate entities (p. 173). Additionally, he categorised compound indefinite pronouns into two groups based on their reference to either humans or inanimate objects. The pronouns referring to Humans include somebody, someone, everybody, and everyone, while those referring to inanimate objects consist of something, nothing, everything, and nothing.

Quirk & Crystal (2010) stated that “indefinite pronouns lack the element of definiteness which is found in the personal, reflexive, possessive, and demonstrative pronouns. Moreover, they discussed the two categories of indefinite pronouns based on their syntactic and morphological behaviour, such as compound and ‘Of’ pronouns. Furthermore, they introduced four categories of compound indefinite.

Koshy (2009) conducted a study into the use of indefinite pronouns in the Pnar language, which belongs to the Mon-Khmer family and is spoken in Meghalaya, India. His research revealed that Pnar's indefinite pronouns lack stems that denote their ontological categories, indicating that they do not have a distinct presence or series. Additionally, he found that in Pnar, the bases for indefinite pronouns are identical to those of interrogative pronouns.

Haspelmath (1997) stated that indefinite pronouns, such as pronouns whose main function is to express indefinite reference. Additionally, he also categorised indefinite pronouns into major categories based on origin: derived from a pronoun and derived from interrogative pronouns. He further stated that there are two methods for deriving "interrogative-based" indefinite pronouns: (a) the morphological identity between interrogative pronouns and indefinite pronouns, and (b) the necessity for interrogative pronouns to incorporate a quantificational particle or affix to create indefinite pronouns.

Greenbaum (1996) posited that indefinite pronouns can be categorised into two main groups, with the primary group comprising four interconnected subsets. These subsets include assertive pronouns (such as some, someone, somebody, and something), non-assertive pronouns (including any, anyone, anybody, anything, and either), negative pronouns (which encompass none, no one, nobody, nothing, and neither), and universal pronouns (featuring all, everyone, everybody, everything, both, and each).

Eastwood (1994) asserted that indefinite pronouns, including "anyone," "someone," and "everyone," serve to denote individuals or objects, or collections thereof, without providing specific identification. The terms "someone" and "somebody" indicate an unspecified individual within affirmative statements or inquiries. Conversely, "anyone" and "anybody" pertain to an unspecified individual within interrogative or negative contexts. The term "everyone" encompasses an entire group of individuals, while "no one" signifies the absence of any individual within a group. The pronouns "something" and "anything" denote unspecified or unnamed entities. "Something" is restricted to use in affirmative statements or questions, whereas "anything" can appear in negative statements, questions, and affirmative contexts. The term "nothing" indicates the nonexistence of any objects or entities, while "everything" refers to the totality of available objects. When "nothing" is employed in a positive statement, "anything" can be utilised in a negative statement to convey a similar meaning.

Indefinite pronouns are classified according to different criteria. Therefore, types and differences in different languages. There are mainly four kinds of indefinite pronouns: assertive (somebody, something, and somewhere), Affective (anybody, anything, and anywhere), free choice (anybody, anything, and anywhere), and negative (nobody, nothing, and nowhere) (Haspelmath 1997; Quirk, 2006).

The various researchers discussed in this body of work study the use and classification of indefinite pronouns in different languages and contexts. Rai (2024) and Rai (2023) analyzed the Nachhiring and Chamling languages along with English, uncovering distinctive indefinite pronouns such as Ulee (one) and soi (anyone), while emphasizing both

similarities and differences across languages. Conversely, Ahmed and Baskaran (2023) focused on Sunuwar, classifying indefinite pronouns into positive and negative categories, such as *súi-súi* (anybody) and *súijo* (nobody). Stoian (2023) classified indefinite pronouns according to their meaning and quantity, which includes mid-scalar, generic, identity, and universal pronouns. Meanwhile, Dekier (2022) examined assertive pronouns, segmenting them into non-specific, specific, unknown, and specific known types. Furthermore, other researchers such as Börjars and Burridge (2019), Peters (2020), and Greenbaum (1996) further classified indefinite pronouns into compound and 'of' pronouns, and differentiated them based on their reference to humans or inanimate objects. Moreover, Quirk & Crystal (2010) and Haspelmath (1997) also examined the syntactic and morphological characteristics of indefinite pronouns, whereas Koshy (2009) emphasized the application of interrogative-based indefinite pronouns in Pnar, a Mon-Khmer language. The research conducted by these scholars collectively demonstrates the variety of indefinite pronouns across different languages, concentrating on their classification, syntactic behavior, and the cross-linguistic construction of these pronouns, which includes the use of assertive, negative, and universal pronouns.

## **Methodology**

This study employed a descriptive linguistic method to analyse to carry out research work. Qualitative research aims to achieve an in-depth comprehension of the phenomenon being studied (Polit & Beck, 2010). Therefore, nine Chamling language speakers from Bamrang, Diktel, and Nerpa were purposefully selected to collect data for the study of Chamling indefinite pronouns. Moreover, a semi-structured interview was employed to collect data from the participants. After developing interview guidelines, the researcher visited the research sites and collected data from the selected participants. The secondary data regarding English indefinite pronouns was collected from various research articles, grammar texts, and dictionaries, including works by Eastwood (1994) and Richards and Schmidt (2013).

Following Creswell and Creswell's (2014) six-step method (which includes collecting data, preparing the data for analysis by transcribing notes, reviewing the data to grasp a general understanding, coding the data with labels, coding the text for descriptions, and coding the text for themes), the data were analysed and interpreted.

## **Results**

In this section, indefinite pronouns of Chamling and English are taken into consideration. The indefinite pronoun system of each language is separately presented and analysed from different perspectives, such as structure, semantics, and typology.

### **Chamling Indefinite Pronouns**

In the Chamling language, an indefinite pronoun refers to a person or thing but is not specific. The Chamling language consists of two categories of indefinite pronouns. The first category is the addition <i>.In contrast, the second category of indefinite pronouns is formed by attaching the <puni> suffix to the pronouns from the first group of Chamling

indefinite pronouns. The first category of indefinite pronouns in Chamling is illustrated in Table 1.

**Table 1**

*Indefinite Pronouns of Chamling*

| Chamling      | English                          |
|---------------|----------------------------------|
| <i>so + i</i> | anyone/anybody/ somebody/someone |
| <i>de+ i</i>  | anything                         |
| <i>irā+ i</i> | any                              |

Table 1 shows that the first two indefinite pronouns are derived from two distinct interrogative pronouns, specifically "so" (who) and "de" (what), through the addition of the <i> suffix, whereas "irāi" is derived from a non-personal pronoun. In the Chamling language, the term "soi" covers the meanings of anyone, anybody, somebody, and someone. Likewise, the term "dei" is used to convey the meanings of anything and something.

The indefinite pronoun "dei" is similarly used to cover the meanings of both anything and something. Additionally, the Chamling language employs the pronoun "irāi" to signify the concept of "any."

Another Category of indefinite pronouns in Chamling is developed by adding a suffix <puni> belongs to the first category of indefinite pronouns. These are negative indefinite pronouns. This category is shown in Table 2.

**Table 2**

*Indefinite Pronouns in Chamling*

| Chamling                      | English |
|-------------------------------|---------|
| <i>soi + puni = soipuni</i>   | nobody  |
| <i>dei + puni = deipuni</i>   | nothing |
| <i>irāi + puni = irāipuni</i> | none    |

This category, as illustrated in Table 2, comprises three indefinite pronouns, all of which are classified as negative pronouns. These pronouns inflectional <puni> first category of indefinite pronouns in Chamling, *soipuni*, *deipuni*, and *irāipuni* pronouns.

The indefinite pronoun "khyāko" distinguishes itself from the first and second categories of pronouns. This category of indefinite pronoun is created without the addition of any affix.

The Chamling indefinite pronouns further classify into derivated (*soi*, *dei*, *soipuni*) and non-derivated or root pronouns (*khyāko*).

Some uses of indefinite pronouns are given below.

- (a) Chamling: *soi tāenākhāi nyo*.  
English: Anybody can come.
- (a) Chamling: *depuni mimui*.  
English: Nothing is ready.
- (b) Chamling: *irāipuni rō cyo*.  
English: None ate rice.
- (c) Chamling: *soi rō cyoko*.  
English: Someone has eaten rice.

### English Indefinite Pronouns

As in Chamling, English indefinite pronouns are used to indicate person, thing, and event without specifying a particular. Based on their morphological and syntactic characteristics, these pronouns can be categorised into two main types: compound indefinite pronouns and “Of- pronouns”. Furthermore, compound indefinite pronouns can be further subdivided into four distinct categories: universal, assertive, nonassertive, and negative (Quirk & Crystal, 2010). Consequently, this study suggests that English compound indefinite pronouns can be effectively divided into five categories: universal, assertive, non-assertive, negative, and quantitative. Table 3 illustrates all these categories of indefinite pronouns.

**Table 3**

*Compound Indefinite Pronouns in English*

|               | Personal Reference                   | Personal Reference                   | Non-personal Reference                |
|---------------|--------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Universal     | Everybody                            | Everyone                             |                                       |
| Assertive     | Somebody                             | Someone                              |                                       |
| Non-assertive | Anybody                              | Anyone                               |                                       |
| Negative      | Nobody                               | No one                               |                                       |
| Quantitative  | Some, many, few, Several enough, all | Some, many, few, Several enough, all | Some, many, few, several, enough, all |

As shown in Table 3, the categories of universal, assertive, quantitative, and non-assertive pronouns are collectively referred to as positive indefinite pronouns in the English language. In contrast, there exists only one category of indefinite pronouns that is classified as negative, which includes pronouns such as nobody, nothing, and no one.

Some indefinite pronouns can be formed by combining four base words with the additions “of” body, one, and thing.

Every: everybody, everyone, everything

Some: somebody, someone, something

Any: anybody, anyone, anything

No: nobody, no one, nothing (Stoian, 2023)

Furthermore, the definite pronouns somebody, someone, anybody, anyone, nobody, and no one are used to refer to both male (s) and female (s) (Alexander, 2003). Additionally, the previously mentioned indefinite pronouns in English are categorised according to the "series" categories, which consist of “some”, “any”, “every”, and “no” series (Hasplemath, 1997).

Conversely, quantitative indefinite pronouns do not belong to any series. The “of” indefinite pronouns are shown in Table 4.

**Table 4***"Of Construction" Indefinite Pronouns in English*

|               | Count        |                        | Non-count     |
|---------------|--------------|------------------------|---------------|
|               | Singular     | Plural                 | Singular      |
| Universal     | each(of)     | all (of)               | all (of)      |
|               | all (of)     | Both (of)              |               |
| Assertive     | some(of)     | Some (of)              | Some (of)     |
| Mutual        |              | Many (of)              | Much (of)     |
|               |              | More (of)              | More (of)     |
|               |              | Most (of)              | Most (of)     |
| Paucal        | One (of)     | few(of)                | A little (of) |
| One           | Any (of)     | fewer (of) less (of)   | less (of)     |
| Non-assertive | Either (of)  | fewest (of) least (of) | least (of)    |
| Negative      | None (of)    | any (of)               | any (of)      |
|               | Neither (of) | none (of)              | none (of)     |
|               |              | few (of)               | little (of)   |

Quirk &amp; Crystal (2010)

As exemplified in Table 4, the category of "of construction" indefinite pronouns in English can be classified into several types: universal, assertive, mutual, paucal, non-assertive, and negative. These categories are further subdivided into countable and non-countable forms. Countable indefinite pronouns can exist in both singular and plural forms, while mutual and paucal pronouns lack singular forms. In addition, all non-countable indefinite pronouns are singular in nature.

The English indefinite pronouns previously discussed can be classified into three distinct categories based on number: singular pronouns (including anyone, anybody, anything, everyone, and everything), plural pronouns (such as several, few, both, and many), and those that can function as both singular and plural (for instance, all, any, more, most, and some).

## Discussion

The indefinite pronoun systems of Chamling and English differ regarding their formation process, categories, and number of pronouns. However, in both languages, the indefinite pronoun shows a person, thing, or event without specification. This analysis highlights the main similarities and differences between the indefinite pronouns of the Chamling and English languages.

English indefinite pronouns are classified into categories based on the morphological and syntactic characteristics, such as compound and 'Of' indefinite pronouns, whereas Chamling consists of three categories of indefinite pronouns, and the first category includes pronouns that are derived from interrogative forms and non-personal pronouns by the addition of the suffix <i>. Moreover, the second category of indefinite pronouns is formed by attaching the <puni> suffix to the pronouns from the first group of

Chamling indefinite pronouns, and the third category of indefinite pronouns is independent words such as khyāko/ khyāpā (other).

English compound indefinite pronouns are further divided into universal, assertive, non-assertive, negative, and quantitative categories. Additionally, they are divided into personal reference and non-personal reference, while the indefinite pronouns of Chamling does not have such a classification.

‘Of’ indefinite pronoun of English that classifies into seven categories, and all are categorised into count and non-count based on the countability, whereas English indefinite pronouns categorise into based on series, such as some series, ‘any series’, ‘no series’, and ‘every series’ whereas Chamling indefinite pronoun does not have such a series system.

English indefinite pronouns are categorised into positive (such as universal, assertive, and non-assertive) and negative (such as “no” series and neither).

The Chamling indefinite pronoun “dei” can be used to refer to someone, somebody, anyone, and anybody, while the English indefinite pronouns someone, somebody, anyone, and anybody are used to convey distinct meanings.

In Chamling, the first category of indefinite pronouns derives from interrogative forms and non-personal pronouns by the addition of the suffix <i>. Similarly, the second category of the Chamling indefinite is formed by attaching the <puni> suffix to the pronouns from the first category of Chamling indefinite pronouns. In contrast, English indefinite pronouns are classified into main categories: compound and “of” pronouns. Moreover, Compound indefinite is classified into four sub-categories: universal, assertive, negative, and quantitative, whereas the Chamling indefinite pronoun does not have this classification system.

Chamling indefinite pronouns can function in both singular and plural contexts, whereas English indefinite pronouns, which are divided into either singular or plural, though some indefinite pronouns can be used in both forms.

## **Conclusion**

This study reveals that the systems of indefinite pronouns in two separate languages, Chamling and English, differ in their formation, categories, and usage. Furthermore, the indefinite pronoun systems of these two languages vary concerning their language families and structural characteristics. While both languages use indefinite pronouns to denote unspecified persons, things, or events, English features a more complicated and structured system. This English indefinite pronoun system includes series-based, compound, and "Of" construction pronouns, with distinct differences between affirmative and negative forms. Conversely, the indefinite pronouns in Chamling primarily derive from interrogative and non-personal roots with additional suffixes, and they do not possess the complex series and classifications that are characteristic of English. Although these languages both fulfil the essential role of expressing indefiniteness, the differences may create difficulties for children who speak Chamling as they learn English. Understanding these similarities and differences can assist in minimising the interference caused by Chamling's pronoun system in the process of learning the English language.

## References

- Aarts, B., Chalker, S., & Weiner, E. (2014). *The Oxford dictionary of English grammar*. OUP.
- Ahmed, I., & Baskaran, S. G. (2023). Pronouns in Sunwar. *Literature (JOELL)*. Vol 10, No. 3 (July-Sept.).
- Alexander, L. G. (2003). *Longman English Grammar*. UK: Pearson Education Limited.
- Börjars, K., & Burridge, K. (2019). *Introducing English grammar*. Routledge.
- Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2014). *Research desing: qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods approaches* (Vol. 54). United State of America: Sage Publications.
- Dekier, J. (2022). Assertive indefinite pronouns: a morphosyntactic analysis Twierdzace zaimki nieokreslone: analiza morfoskładniowa.
- Eastwood, J. (1994). *Oxford guide to English grammar*. Oxford University Press.
- Greenbaum, S. (1996). *English grammar*. Oxford University Press.
- Haspelmath, M. (1997). *Indefinite pronouns* (p. 380). Oxford University Press.
- Koshy, A. (2009). Indefinite pronouns in Pnar. *Mon-Khmer Studies*, 38, 41-56.
- Muryasov, R. Z. (2021). The Pronouns in the system of the parts of speech. *International Journal of Language and Linguistics*, 9(4), 145-154.
- Nkopuruk, I., & Odusina, K. S. (2018). The English pronouns and their usage. *Nigeria: Tai Solarin University of Education*.
- Normamatova, K. (2023). Hisorical progress of indefinite pronouns. *Journal of New Century Innovations*, Vol. 29, Issue 2.
- Peters, P. (2020). English usage: Prescription and description. *The handbook of English linguistics*, 615-635.
- Polit, D. F., & Beck, C. T. (2010). Generalization in quantitative and qualitative research: Myths and strategies. *International journal of nursing studies*, 47(11), 1451-1458.
- Rai, E. (2024). *Contrastive Analysis of Pronominal Systems of Nachhiring and English* [Doctoral dissertation, Tribhuvan University]. Faculty of Education.
- Rai, K.B. (2024). *Chamling and English pronouns: A contrastive study* [MPhil thesis, Nepal Open University]. Faculty of Social Sciences & Education.
- Richards, J. C., & Schmidt, R. W. (2013). *Longman dictionary of language teaching and applied linguistics*. Routledge.
- Quirk, R. (2006). *A university grammar of English*. Pearson Education India.
- Quirk, R., & Crystal, D. (2010). *A comprehensive grammar of the English language*. Pearson Education India.
- Stoian, A. M. (2023). Pronouns in the English Language. *Revista de Științe Politice. Revue des Sciences Politiques*, (80), 92-98.