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# Two different categories of pronominal *ku* in Korean*

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**Kim, Kyumin. 2025. Two different categories of pronominal *ku* in Korean.** *Linguistic Research* 42(3): 603-625. Contrary to the traditional view that a pronoun is uniformly a DP, recent approaches have shown that a pronoun is not syntactically uniform but is realized as different categories (e.g., Dechaine and Wiltschko 2002; Patel-Grosz and Grosz 2017). I show that the behavior of the 3rd person singular pronoun *ku* in Korean provides support for the non-uniform view. I propose that the pronoun *ku* instantiates two different categories, pro-DP and pro-ϕP, by building on the interpretational differences of *ku*. The pronoun *ku* is ambiguous having referential or bound variable reading similar to pro-DP or pro-ϕP in other languages such as German or Halkomemlem (Salish). This paper also examines two important characteristics of the proposed structure of the pronoun *ku* - its determiner use and a null NP- which has not been addressed in the previous studies on *ku*. The pronoun *ku* as pro-DP is used as a determiner when the NP is overt, as identified by the non-uniform approach. This paper shows that this is possible as the pronoun and determiner share the same structural core, namely indexP. As for a null NP in the structure of the pronoun, I propose that the ϕ head is a licensor of an NP ellipsis by providing evidence from the distribution of plural *-tul*. This paper contributes to the current debate on the syntactic and semantic similarities between pronouns and definite descriptions (e.g., Elborne 2005, 2008). **(Chungbuk National University)**

**Keywords** pronoun, pro-DP, pro-ϕP, determiner, null NP, index

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## 1. Introduction

In traditional literature (e.g., Postal 1966; Abney 1987), a pronoun was viewed to be uniform as a DP. However, there have been studies that suggest that this uniform view may not be correct (e.g., Wiltschko 1998, 2002; Déchaine and Wiltschko 2002; Patel-Grosz and Grosz 2017). In work of Déchaine and Wiltschko (2002), for instance, it is claimed that pronouns are classified into at least three different categories, namely pro-DP, pro-ϕP, and pro-NP. Providing empirical evidence from various languages such as German, Halkomelem (Salish), Japanese, and English and so on, they have shown that the proposed syntactic classification of pronouns is necessary in accounting for different properties of pronouns across languages.

This paper provides support for the non-uniform view of pronouns by providing evidence from the distribution of the 3rd person singular pronoun *ku* in Korean that refers to a male entity (see footnote 16 for the discussion on its gender property). The starting point of this paper is the experimental studies in Han and K. Kim (2016) and K. Kim (2019) that have proposed that the pronoun *ku* may be realized as two different categories, pro-DP and pro-ϕP. Major evidence of their proposal comes from two different interpretational properties of pronoun *ku* supported by experiments that employed truth value judgment tasks. Although this paper builds on these experimental studies, it examines two important properties of pronoun *ku* that have not been investigated in those studies: (i) a determiner use of the pronoun *ku*, and (ii) the null NP in the proposed structure of pronoun *ku*. In the proposed typology of pronouns in Déchaine and Wiltschko (2002) and other preceding works such as in Wiltschko (1998, 2002), property (i) is identified as a property of pro-DP, and properties (i) and (ii) are those of both pro-DP and pro-ϕP. Regarding (i), a non-trivial issue is what makes a pro-DP behave like a determiner, and this will be addressed in this paper. Regarding (ii), a null NP in the structure of pronoun *ku* has been assumed by the previous studies on *ku*, but no account has been provided. Assuming some previous analyses on an NP ellipsis (e.g., Merchant 2001, 2014, 2019; Saab 2019), this paper motivates the ϕ head as a licensor of NP ellipsis in the structure of pronoun *ku* by building on the distribution of plural *-tul*.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. Section 2 briefly discusses different structures of pronouns and their different characteristics identified in the previous literature. This section also proposes two different structures of pronoun *ku*, pro-DP

and pro-ϕP, building on the interpretational properties of *ku* in comparison with pronouns in other languages. Section 3 examines another property of pro-DP, a determiner use, and addresses an important issue of what makes a determiner use available in a pro-DP structure. Section 4 provides an account of how the ϕ head licenses the null NP in the structure of pronouns. Section 5 is the conclusion.

## 2. Pronoun *ku* as pro-DP and pro-ϕP

Pronouns across languages are not uniform in their syntax, but are realized as different syntactic categories, namely pro-DP and pro-ϕP (Déchaine and Wiltschko 2002), as schematically illustrated in (1).[1] I discuss the properties of these two types of pronouns identified in Wiltschko (1998, 2002) and Déchaine and Wiltschko (2002) that will be necessary to understand the central proposals regarding the pronoun *ku* in this paper.

A pro-DP as in (1a) is referential and definite, and has the binding-theoretic status of an R-expression. Thus, it only refers and does not show a variable binding reading. A pro-ϕP in (1b) is an intermediate functional projection between N and D that encodes phi-features including number, gender, or person. Lacking with a DP-layer, a pro-ϕP does not have inherent semantics and it spells out relevant phi-features. Its binding-theoretic status is that of a variable like an ordinary Condition B pronoun. Unlike pro-DP, thus, it shows a variable binding interpretation.

(1) a. $[_{DP}\ [_{D'}\ D\ [_{\phi P}\ [\phi\ NP_{\varnothing}]]]]$ Pro-DP
b. $[_{\phi P}\ [_{\phi'}\ \phi\ NP_{\varnothing}]]$ Pro-ϕP

As illustrated in (1), a pro-DP always has ϕP and NP as sub-constituents. In both types of the pronouns, the NP position is null ($NP_{\varnothing}$). A *d*-pronoun in German (Wiltschko 1998) or an independent pronoun in Halkomelem (Salish) (Déchaine and Wiltschko 2002; Wiltschko 2002) are classified as pro-DP. Pro-ϕP is attested in German and English (Wiltschko 1998; Déchaine and Wiltschko 2002); for example, a personal pronoun in German or 3rd person pronoun in English belongs to this category. There

1 Déchaine and Wiltschko (2002) also identified another category of pronoun available across language, i.e., pro-NP, which I do not discuss for the purpose of this paper.

are other properties that distinguish these two different types of pronouns relevant to the current proposed account for the pronoun *ku*, and these will be discussed as the paper progresses.

In the subsequent section, I propose that the 3rd person singular pronoun *ku* in Korean is realized as two different categories, as pro-DP (1a) and pro-ϕP (1b). The view in which the pronoun *ku* can be realized as two different categories is not new. A similar proposal was suggested in the experimental studies in Han and K. Kim (2016) and K. Kim (2019). However, the focus of their study was on the acquisition of the pronoun *ku*, and only evidence for their proposal is two different interpretations available with the pronoun *ku* supported by the experimental result.

Although this paper builds on the study of Han and K. Kim (2016) and K. Kim (2019), this paper differs from their study as follows. In one, this paper embeds the distribution of the pronoun *ku* into a cross-linguistic context by comparing it to pronouns in other languages such as German and Halkomelem which are categorized as pro-DP or pro-ϕP. In another, it details the internal structure of pro-DP and pro-ϕP proposed for *ku*. Regarding the first issue, this section discusses the interpretational properties of *ku* in comparison with other languages. Regarding the second issue, in section 3, I discuss a determiner use of the pronoun *ku,* a property of which is available for a pro-DP only. In section 4, I further refine the internal structure of the pronoun *ku* by addressing the issue of a null NP in the pronoun structure.

### 2.1 Interpretation of the pronoun *ku*

Major evidence for the non-uniform view of pronouns comes from different interpretations that different types of pronouns exhibit. For example, German has two types of pronouns – personal and d-pronouns – that show different interpretational properties (Wiltschko 1998; Déchaine and Wiltschko 2002), that are predicted by the properties of pro-DP and pro-ϕP just discussed above.[2]

A personal pronoun shows the properties of pro-ϕP: it has a bound variable reading and behaves as a bound pronoun. By contrast, a d-pronoun

2 In proposing the structures of the pronouns in German and Halkomelem, Wiltschko (1998, 2002) does not use the terms, pro-DP or pro-ϕP. However, the identified properties of those pronouns are overlapping with those in Déchain and Wiltschko (2002). For consistency, I use pro-DP/-ϕP in this paper.

shows the properties of pro-DP: being referential and definite, it has no bound variable reading and cannot be used as a bound pronoun.

In German, personal (e.g, *er* 'he') and d-pronouns (e.g., *der* 'he') are similar in that they can be used pronominally as illustrated in (2) (Wiltschko 1998). In (2), *ihn* 'him' is a personal pronoun and *den* 'him' is a d-pronoun. In this case, they are used as a pronominal referring to a 3rd person male singular entity.

(2) Maria hat ihn/den gesehen.
Mary has him/d-pron seen.
'Mary has seen him.' (Wiltschko 1998: 144)

However, they differ in that a personal pronoun can be used as a bound pronoun, but a d-pronoun cannot, as shown in (3a). Also, a personal pronoun can be a bound variable, while a d-pronoun cannot be interpreted as a bound variable pronoun as shown in (3b).

(3) a. Peter$_i$ hat geglaubt, daß er$_i$/*der$_i$ dumm ist.
Peter$_i$ has believed that he$_i$/d-pron$_i$ stupid is.
'Peter$_i$ has believed that he$_i$ is stupid.'
b. Jeder Mann$_i$ glaubt, daß er$_i$/*der$_i$ dumm ist.
Every man$_i$ believes that he$_i$/d-pron$_i$ stupid is.
'Every man$_i$ believes that he$_i$ is stupid. (Wiltschko 1998: 144)

Turning to the pronoun *ku* in Korean, it can be used pronominally similar to the two types of pronouns in German, as illustrated in (4).

(4) Younghey-ka ku-lul po-ass-ta.
Yonghey-NOM 3sg-ACC see-PAST-DEC
'Younghey saw him.'

Interestingly, the pronoun *ku* is ambiguous in its interpretation (Han and K. Kim 2016; K. Kim 2019) in that it shows interpretations available for both personal and d-pronouns. Like a personal pronoun in German, *ku* can be interpreted as a bound pronoun 'his$_1$' (5a) or 'he$_1$' (5b). Similar to a d-pronoun, the pronoun *ku* also allows

a non-bound interpretation as shown by 'his$_2$' (5a) or 'he$_2$' (5b).[3]

(5) a. Minswu$_1$-ka ku$_{1/2}$-uy emeni-lul salangha-n-ta.
Minswu-NOM he-GEN mother-ACC love-PRS-DEC
'Minswu$_1$ loves his$_{1/2}$ mother.'
b. Minswu$_1$-ka {ku$_{1/2}$-ka} chwukkwu-lul
Minswu-NOM he-NOM soccer-ACC
cal ha-n-ta-ko sayngkakha-n-ta.
well do-PRES-DEC-COMP think-PRES-DEC
'Minswu$_1$ thinks that he$_{1/2}$ plays soccer well.'
(K. Kim 2019: 31)

Another similarity to a personal pronoun is that the pronoun *ku* shows a bound variable reading, as illustrated in (6).[4] The pronoun *ku* can be construed as a variable bound by the quantificational expression *motwu* 'everyone' within a single clause (6a) or across a clause boundary (6b).

(6) a. Motwu$_1$-ka ku$_1$-uy emeni-lul salangha-n-ta.
everyone-NOM he-GEN mother-ACC love-PRS-DEC
'Everyone$_1$ loves his$_1$ mother.'
b. Motwu$_1$-ka nongkwucang-eyse ku$_1$-ka
everyone-NOM basketball.court-at he-NOM
nongkwu-lul cal ha-n-tako malha-yess-ta.
basketball-ACC well do-PRS-COM say-PST-DEC
'Everyone$_1$ said at a basketball court that he$_1$ plays basketball well.'
(Kim and Han 2016: 347-348)

3 These examples can be situated in certain contexts in order to induce the desired readings, similar to those for the examples in (6) from K. Kim (2019), e.g., (i) in footnote 4. For space reasons, I cannot replicate them here, but see K. Kim (2019) for the relevant contexts.

4 This type of reading can be better understood in a particular context. For example, the reading in (6b) is possible in the following context:
(i) Hanswu, Cinswu, and Minswu were playing basketball at a basketball court. Hanswu said that self (caki) plays basketball well. Cinswu also said that self (caki) plays basket ball well.
Minswu also said that self (caki) plays basketball well. (Han and Kim 2016: 356)

The ambiguity of the pronoun *ku* as shown in (5)-(6) has been noted in Korean literature. However, there has been no agreement on the interpretation of the pronoun *ku* as pointed out in Han and K. Kim (2016) and K. Kim (2019).[5] In one view (e.g., Im 1987; Kang 1988; Suh 1990; Noguchi 1997; Choi 2013), the pronoun *ku* can have a variable binding interpretation as in (6). In another view (e.g., Hong 1985; Choe 1988; Kang 2001), the pronoun *ku* cannot play a role as a bound variable. In addressing this debate in the literature, Han and K. Kim (2016) and K. Kim (2019) conducted truth value judgement tasks, and showed that there is inter-speaker variation in the interpretation of the pronoun *ku.* Some speakers of Korean consistently accepted a bound variable reading. Others consistently rejected a bound variable reading allowing a referential reading only. Building on this consequence, they claimed that pronoun *ku* is realized as two different categories in Korean grammar, which is the reflection of the disagreement in Korean literature on the interpretation of *ku*.

Taking the experiment result as evidence, I also propose that the pronoun *ku* is realized as two different categories, which captures the interpretational ambiguity of *ku*. The pronoun *ku* with a referential interpretation has a pro-DP structure (7a) similar to a d-pronoun in German, while the pronoun *ku* with a bound variable interpretation has a pro-ϕP structure (7b) similar to a personal pronoun in German. This paper departs from the experimental studies in Han and K. Kim (2016) and K. Kim (2019) in that *ku* merges in the specifier of DP. Those studies merely assume that *ku* realizes the D or ϕ head as with the previous studies e.g., Chang (2009). I will come back to this issue in section 3.

(7) a. $[_{DP}$ *ku* D $[_{D'}$ $[_{\phi P}$ $[NP_{\varnothing}$ $\phi]$ D ]]] Pro-DP
b. $[_{\phi P}$ *ku* $\phi$ $[_{\phi'}$ $NP_{\varnothing}$ $\phi$ ]] Pro-ϕP

The internal structures of these pronouns in (7) will be further detailed in section 3 and 4 by focusing on the determiner use of pro-DP (7a) and the null NP in both structures of (7), which have not been explored in the previous experimental studies.

5 These studies noted that the same debate also applies to the feminine counterpart of the pronoun, *kuney* 'she', but no discussion has been provided.

## 3. Determiner use of pro-DP

A pro-DP allows a determiner use when the NP is overt (Wiltschko 1998, 2002; Déchaine and Wiltschko 2002). A ϕP, lacking with a DP layer, does not allow this determiner use. This section shows that the pronoun *ku* allows a determiner use which supports for the proposed structure of *ku* as a pro-DP. Importantly, this section addresses what makes a pro-DP behave as a determiner, which has not been seriously addressed in the previous studies.

As with the previous studies on German and Halkomelem (Wiltschko 1998, 2002; Déchaine and Wiltschko 2002), I assume that D in a pro-DP is the locus of definiteness that indicates familiarity, i.e., anaphoric definite, which picks out a familiar entity known to the discourse participants.[6] This assumption on D and anaphoric definiteness will be further refined later in section 3.2 by adopting a decompositional view of familiar definiteness (e.g., Hanink 2021). In the discussion to follow, a 'determiner' use should not be understood in a literal sense, but a determiner can include various elements across languages that behave like a determiner in a familiar sense such as a demonstrative.

A pro-DP structure has the null NP position (see (7a)). The previous studies suggest that the NP position can be overt in which case a pro-DP behaves as a determiner. This has been shown to be true in German (Wiltschko 1998) and Halkomelem (Déchaine and Wiltschko 2002; Wiltschko 2002). To illustrate, consider the data from German in (8). In (8), the d-pronoun *den* appears, and it is followed by the overt NP *Mann* 'man'. In this case, the d-pronoun acts as a determiner by referring to a familiar entity 'the man'.

(8) Maria hat den Mann beleidigt.
Mary has the man insulted
Mary has insulted the man. (Wiltschko 1998: 146)

A pro-DP in Halkomelem also behaves as a determiner when the NP is overt, similar to a d-pronoun. An example of a pro-DP in the language is illustrated in

6 Definiteness has been largely viewed to indicate two kinds of meaning, which I assume in this paper. One is unique definite and the other is anaphoric definite (e.g., Schwarz 2009, 2013; Jenks 2018; Ahn 2019 among many others).

(9a). Halkomelem is a head-marking language and is a predicate initial language. In (9a), as predicted by its pro-DP status, the third person singular pronoun *thú-tl'ò* appears in the argument position. In (9b), the pro-DP *thú-tl'ò* in (9a) is used as a determiner 'that': it appears with an overt NP *q'ami* 'girl' and the two together indicates 'that girl'.

(9) a. [Lám] [thú-tl'ò].
go DET-3SG
'He goes.' (Galloway 1993: 173)

b. Tl'ó-cha-l-su qwemcíwe-t thú-tl'ò q'ami
then-FUT-1SG-so hug-TRANS DET.FEM-3SG girl
'Then I'm going to hug that girl.' (Galloway 1993: 174)

In light of the discussion of pro-DP in these languages, the proposal in which the pronoun *ku* in Korean is the realization of a pro-DP predicts that *ku* can act as a determiner when the NP position is overt. This prediction is borne out by the data in (10). Korean is an article-less language having no English type article 'the'. However, anaphoric definite meaning in the language is indicated by the demonstrative *ku* (e.g., Lee 1989; Chang 2009; Ahn 2019; S. Park 2020; Kang 2021; M. Park 2022; Kim 2024).[7] The data in (10a) provides a context for the example in (10b). In (10b), the demonstrative nominal *ku chinkwu* 'that friend' refers to *chinkwu* 'friend' that I met yesterday, mentioned in (10a). In this case, the demonstrative *ku* in (10b) is obligatory, which suggests that the referent of the demonstrative nominal has to be a familiar one by being mentioned in the previous context such as in (10a). This type of data thus provides further support for the proposed pro-DP structure for *ku*.

(10) a. na-nun ecey chinkwu-ul han myeng manassta
I-TOP yesterday friend-ACC one CL met
'I met a friend yesterday.'

7 A bare noun in Korean can also indicate an anaphoric definite meaning (M. Park 2022; M. Kim 2023), which I do not further discuss for the purpose of this paper. Also note that anaphoric definite *ku* in the context such as (10) is viewed to be discourse oriented (e.g., see M. Kim 2023 for detail), which I do not go into detail either for the same reason.

b. na-nun *(ku) chinkwu-lul onul-to manassta
I-TOP DEM friend-ACC today-also met
'I met that friend today.'

This section has shown that a pro-DP can play a role as a determiner in a familiar sense with the presence of an overt NP. This property appears to be well-documented cross-linguistically, as shown by the previous studies on different languages. However, an important question remains unaddressed in these studies: what makes a pro-DP behave like an anaphoric definite determiner? This question is not trivial, as the proposed pro-DP structure should be able to account for its apparent distribution as an anaphoric definite determiner that appears to be cross-linguistically true. An answer to this question cannot be merely that the D head is realized both by a determiner and a pronoun as implied in the previous studies, because *ku* does not appear to realize the D head (see section 3.2 for discussion). In the next section, I address this question.

### 3.1 A pronoun as an indexed definite

In recent studies, it is claimed that a pronoun shares a similar structure with a definite description in that it has a structurally represented index (e.g., Elbourne 2005; Schwarz 2009; Hanink 2018, 2021; Jenks and Konate 2022; Kim 2025). In this section, I discuss the core of these studies and propose that this structural similarity between a pronoun and a definite description can account for the determiner use of pro-DP, shown in the previous section.

Building on the previous work such as Postal (1966) in which a pronoun can behave as a determiner (e.g, *we linguists*), Elbourne (2005) proposes that a pronoun in English has the same structure as the definite article *the*, as schematically illustrated in (11). For example, in (11b), the pronoun *it* realizes the D head just like the article *the* in (11a), and shares the identical structural components, an i(ndex) and an NP.

(11) a. [the *i* [NP]] definite article
b. [it *i* [NP]] a pronoun Elbourne (2005: 167)

The presence of the index (i) gives rise to an anaphoric interpretation of the definite article and the pronoun, which captures their similarity as referring expressions. Indices in noun phrases have the semantic effect of anchoring a particular referent in the discourse. In Elbourne (2005), the idea is that such indices are not just present semantically, but they are also present structurally. The core structural difference between (11a) and (11b) is that the NP in the structure of pronoun (11b) is null, unlike the structure of definite article (11a). Elbourne (2005) suggested that an NP in the pronoun structure such as in (11b) has undergone nominal ellipsis at PF, unlike the NP in (11a) which is overt. However, no further syntactic account for what licenses the ellipsis has been provided. I will come back to this issue in section 4.

The proposal in Elbourne (2005) illustrated in (11) thus provides an account for the availability of determiner use of a pronoun found in different languages discussed in the previous section. A pronoun shares the core of the structure with a determiner, namely an index, which is the locus of an anaphoric interpretation that is common to both pronouns and determiners. The insight of Elbourne (2005) has been further developed with a particular focus on an index for different languages such as German (Schwarz 2009; Patel-Grosz and Grosz 2017), Mandarin (Jenks 2018), Washo (Hanink 2018, 2021), and Marka-Dafing (isolate) (Jenks and Konate 2022). Although details differ, the studies on these languages take an index seriously, and proposed that an index can be represented as a syntactically independent phrase from the D head, e.g., idxP (indexP) that appears within the DP (Hanink 2018, 2021; Jenks and Konate 2022).

Note that under Elourne (2005)'s approach in (11), the D head is realized both by the pronoun and determiner, which I pointed out as a problem for Korean. In analyzing *ku* in Korean, I adapt Hanink (2018, 2021)'s study on Washo, the language that has no English type article, similar to Korean. Keeping the insight of Elbourne (2005) in which idx is a shared structural component by a determiner and pronoun, but departing from Elbourne (2005), Hanink (2021) claimed that a pronoun is the realization of the idx head, not the D head, building on data from Washo. Core evidence for Hanink's (2021) claim is the fact that in Washo the same morpheme *gi* instantiates a demonstrative such as in (12) and the 3rd person pronoun such as in (13).[8] In (12a), the demonstrative *hádi-gi* 'that' is decomposible consisting of two

8 The morpheme *gi* is long and stressed when it is used as a pronoun (13). Otherwise, it is short and unstressed as in (12).

components, the deictic element *hádi* 'distal' and the morpheme *gi*. The same manner of decomposition applies to the proximal demonstrative in (12b): it consists of the proximal element *wídi* 'this' and the morpheme *gi*.

(12) a. há:di-gi pélew
DIST-IDX.NOM jackrabbit
'that jackrabbit'
b. wídi-gi pélew
PROX-IDX.NOM jackrabbit
'this jackrabbit'

(13) gí: pélew ʔ-íʔiw-i
3.NOM jackrabbit 3/3-eat-IND
'He's eating the jackrabbit.' (Hanink 2021: 513)

Based on the decomposition, in Hanink (2008, 2021), the deictic morpheme such as *hadi* is analyzed as a type of D (King 2001; Roterts 2002; Elbourne 2008). Similar to a definite article such as in English (see (11a)), it appears with an index in order to produce a deictic interpretation. The index is realized by the morpheme *gi*, and as an index-encoding expression, it projects its own phrase, namely idxP within the DP.[9] Under this view, the 3rd person singular pronoun such as in (13) also projects an idxP, by being a referring expression just like a demonstrative and being realized as the indexing morpheme *gi*. The function of the idx is that it introduces a variable that may refer to a previously mentioned entity on its anaphoric use (13) or refer deictically on its spatial demonstrative use (12), both of which are viewed to be familiar (Heim 1982; Roberts 2002). Note that under this view the role of D remains the same as indicating uniqueness, but the difference comes from the meaning of a variable marked by the index.

In what follows, I apply this approach of the pronoun as idx to the analysis of the pronoun *ku*, building on the fact that Korean has no English type article similar to Washo.

9 In Hanink (2021), idxP is proposed to appear between D and N as a part of nominal projection. However, in section 3.2, I propose that in Korean idxP appears in the specifier of DP.

### 3.2 idxP in the structure of pronoun *ku*

As shown earlier, the pronoun *ku* such as in (14a) can appear as the anaphoric definite in the language. The example of the anaphoric definite is repeated as (14b). The data in (14) becomes interesting as it is similar to Washo data (12-13) discussed in the previous section. The same morpheme *ku* is realized as referring expressions, the pronoun (14a) and the anaphoric definite demonstrative (14b), just like the morpheme *gi* in Washo.

(14) a. Younghey-ka ku-lul po-ass-ta
Yonghey-NOM 3sg-ACC see-PAST-DEC
'Younghey saw him.'
b. na-nun ku chinkwu-lul onul-to manassta
I-TOP DEM friend-ACC today-also met
'I met that friend today.'

In this section, I argue that an anaphoric definite use of the pronoun *ku* is possible as the pronoun shares the identical structure with the anaphoric demonstrative *ku*, namely idxP. In fact, idxP has been proposed for the structure of *ku* in a recent study in Kim (2025). I adopt the analysis provided in Kim (2025) in which *ku* instantiates the head of idxP both in the pronoun and anaphoric demonstrative. Below, I discuss the necessary parts of Kim's (2025) analysis for the purpose of this section, and abstract away from other detail not crucial to the current discussion.

Kim (2025) assumed that the pronoun and the anaphoric demonstrative *ku*, as referring expressions, have an index that introduces a variable (cf. Anh 2019). In conjunction with this semantic assumption, morphological evidence in (14) similar to Washo is taken to indicate that *ku* realizes the head of idxP.[10] An idxP is proposed to be an independent phrase from D as with the previous studies (e.g., Elbourne 2005; Schwarz 2009; Hanink 2018, 2021; Jenks and Konate 2022). However, departing from Hanink (2018, 2021) (see footnote 9) but as with the studies that have built

10 The proposed account in Kim (2025) is mainly built on morphological and semantic similarities that *ku* in the anaphoric definite and the pronoun share. Although Korean appears to be different in case marking and agreement pattern from Washo, the proposal made in this paper assuming Kim (2025) does not crucially hinge on these differences.

on cross-linguistic evidence (e.g., Giusti 2002, 2015; Jenks and Konate 2022), an idxP headed by *ku* is argued to appear in the specifier of DP. This is schematically illustrated in (15) with the anaphoric demonstrative *ku*. The morpheme *ku* realizes the head idx and bears the numerically indicated index value such as 1.

(15) $[_{DP}$ idxP $[ku\ 1]$ $[_{D'}$ NP D$]]$ (Adapted from Kim 2025: 269)

Although I assume idxP as proposed in Kim (2025), the current study differs from Kim's study whose main goal was to formalize *ku* in terms of the feature [idx] by adopting the featural approach as in Jenks and Konate (2022), and to extend the featural analysis to other demonstratives (*i* 'this' and *ce* 'that over there') in the language. Unlike Kim (2025), the goal of this paper is to address the structure of the pronoun *ku*. Kim (2025) has not examined the properties of different categories of pronouns such as pro-DP or pro-ϕP recognized in the literature - different interpretations, availability of determiner use of the pronoun *ku*, and the null NP position in the pronoun *ku* - that are the main issues of this paper.

Incorporating idxP into the structure of *ku*, the previously proposed pro-DP in (7a) can be now refined as in (16). A pro-DP is a referring expression, and as such it has idxP instantiated by *ku* in its specifier.[11]

(16) $[_{DP}$ idxP $[ku\ 1]$ $[_{D'}$ $[_{\phi P}$ $[NP_{\varnothing}$ $\phi]$ D $]]]$

The proposed structure in (16) captures the fact that the pronoun *ku* can be realized as the anaphoric definite *ku* with an overt NP. I proposed that this is possible because both instances of *ku* share the same structure, namely idxP in the specifier of DP. As with the previous studies (e.g., Schwarz 2009; Jenks 2018; Hanink 2018, 2021; Jenks and Konate 2022; Kim 2025), I assume a decompositional view of anaphoric definiteness. It consists of two meaning components, uniquiness and anahoricity. These two meanings are structurally encoded in the pronoun in (16) as well as the anaphoric demonstrative (15). The semantics of D in the pronoun and anaphoric demonstrative

11 As for *ku* in pro-ϕP, it also appears in the specifier position as proposed in section 2. As a variable, it should have an index in its structure. However, it is not clear whether an idxP in pro-ϕP is an identical kind to the idxP in pro-DP. As this is beyond the scope of this paper, I leave it for future research.

structures are identical by indicating uniqueness. That is, the D head structurally encodes that there is exactly one salient entity in the context. This salient referent is identified via idxP that has the function of indexing a referent in the context: it is the referent assigned at the given index such as 1. This decompositional view of anaphoric definiteness provides evidence that *ku* merges in the specifier of DP, not realizing D, as also pointed out in Kim (2025). If *ku* instantiated the D head as assumed in the previous studies (e.g., Chang 2009; Kim and Han 2016; K. Kim 2019), *ku* should be able to indicate a unique entity in the absence of idxP in the specifier. However, in Korean, unique definiteness is indicated by a bare noun (e.g., Kang 2021; M. Park 2022; S. Park 2023), contrary to the prediction.

## 4. NP ellipsis in the pronominal structure

The goal of this section is to account for the null NP in the structure of the pronoun *ku*. The previous studies assume that the NP position in the pronoun structure is null (e.g., Han and K. Kim 2016; K. Kim 2019; Kim 2025); however, no account for what licenses the null NP position has been provided. Assuming recent approaches to nominal ellipsis (e.g., Merchant 2001, 2014, 2019; Lipták and Saab 2014; Saab 2019), I propose that the ϕ head licenses the null NP in the structure of the pronoun *ku*.[12]

Regarding an ellipsis in the nominal domain, numerous studies have shown that nominal ellipsis is licensed by a functional head (e.g., Lobeck 1995; Merchant 2001, 2014, 2019; Alexiadou and Gengel 2012; Lipták and Saab 2014; Saab 2019; S. Park 2021): a nominal functional head such as D, Num, CL, or *n* has been identified to license a relevant ellipsis within the nominal phrase. Although a specific feature motivating the ellipsis may differ across language, a standard way of explaining an ellipsis in the current literature is to assume E(llipsis) feature on a functional head (e.g., Merchant 2001, 2014; Saab 2019). This is schematically illustrated in (17), and the functional heads in (17) are not exhaustive. In (17), each of the functional heads within the DP has the feature [E] and it licenses the ellipsis of its complement. For instance, $\text{Num}_{[E]}$ licenses an nP/NP ellipsis.

12 Following the previous studies (K. Kim 2019; S. Park 2021), I assume a PF deletion approach to a null NP for Korean.

(17) $[_{DP}\ D_{[E]}\ [_{NumP}\ Num_{[E]}\ [_{nP/NP}\ n_{[E]}/N_{[E]}\ [\sqrt{P}]]]]$
(Adapted from Saab 2019: 554)

Abstracting away from other conditions, a cross-linguistic variation in nominal ellipsis may emerge depending on which functional head is specified for [E] feature in a given language. For example, Num head with [E] feature licenses nP ellipsis as shown in Greek (Merchant 2014) or Spanish (Lipták and Saab 2014). Although not presented in (17), CL head is proposed to be a licensor of NP-ellipsis in Korean in the context of numeral classifier phrases (S. Park 2021). In line with these studies on NP ellipsis, I propose that the ϕ head, a functional equivalent to Num head (see section 2), licenses the NP ellipsis in the pronominal structure of *ku*, and thus the ϕ head is specified for the [E] feature.

The remaining question is what evidence suggests that the ϕ head is a licensor of NP ellipsis in the structure of pronouns. A number of facts are identified as evidence for the unpronounced structure in ellipsis (cf. Merchant 2019), but the most relevant to the current issue is agreement effect. This effect is well established in the domain of nominal ellipsis (e.g., Merchant 2014, 2019; Saab and Lipták 2014; Saab 2019), and this is also shown to be true with the null NP in pro-DP and pro-ϕP structures (e.g., Wiltschko 1998, 2002). Although implementation differs from [E] feature driven licensing of an ellipsis (17), the previous studies on pro-DP and pro-ϕP proposed that the null NP in those structures is licensed by a functional head associated with agreement such as a ϕ head, the locus of phi-features (Wiltschko 1998, 2002). This proposal is based on a well known fact that an empty element is allowed in the presence of agreement (e.g., Borer 1983; Rizzi 1986). For instance, consider the structure of pro-DP realized with a d-pronoun such as *der* 'he' in German (18) adapted from Wiltschko (1998). In (18), the D head is realized with the bound morpheme *d-*, and the ϕ head is with *er* where the relevant phi-features such as person and number are specified. The NP in (18) can be covert, as its sister is the ϕ head with relevant phi-features so that the elided NP can recover its phi-features (Wiltschko 1998). In light of the proposal in which [E] feature on a functional head licenses an NP ellipsis, the ϕ head in German would have the feature [E] and license the NP ellipsis, as schematized in (18).

(18) [$_{DP}$ D [$_{\phi P}$ $\phi_{[E]}$ NP$_{\varnothing}$]]
*d-* *er* [$\phi$]

Although details differ, the NP ellipsis in the third person pronoun *gi* in Washo is motivated in a similar manner (Hanink 2021). Given the fact that the third person pronoun *gi* is only inflected for number, as shown in (19),[13] Hanink (2021) proposed that the number and person features on the pronoun *gi* can be accounted for if the elided NP provides the relevant phi-feature information (via an Agr node).[14]

(19) a. gé-ši l-í:gi-yi
IDX.ACC-DUAL 1-see-IND
'I saw them [= two ducks].'
b. gé-w l-í:gi-yi
IDX.ACC-PL 1-see-IND
'I saw them [= a plurality of ducks].' (Hanink 2021: 545)

I motivate the NP ellipsis in the structures of pronoun *ku* by building on a similar type of evidence as in these analyses on NP ellipsis in pronominals, but implementing the feature [E]. Although Korean does not show an English type agreement or that of German or Washo, the $\phi$ head in the structure of the pronoun *ku* may have certain phi-features relevant to licensing of NP ellipsis. In particular, I propose that the relevant $\phi$ feature is the number feature such as [±plural]. Evidence comes from the distribution of the plural morpheme *-tul*, which is known to be optional in the language (e.g., Kim and Melchin 2018). Contrary to its optional status, however, recent research has shown that plural *-tul* is obligatory in an anaphoric definite context (S. Park 2020; Kim and Park 2024). The obligatory use is examplified in (20). The example in (20a) provides the context for the example in (20b). The anaphoric definite *ku* and the NP in (20b) refer back to the antecedent *chinkwu sey meyng* 'three friends' in (20a). In this context, the absence of plural *-tul* in (20b) results in the

13 The form *ge* in (19) is an allomorph of *gi*, which is realized an accusative case context. See Hanink (2021) for detail.

14 In Hanink (2021), Agr node is inserted postsyntactically by assuming an analysis of concord in Norris (2014). Washo shows concord for number in that number suffixes appear on a nominal modifier of animate nouns. As this is not relevant to the current discussion, I do not discuss the detail.

ungrammaticality.

(20) a. na-nun ecey chinkwu-ul sey meyng manassta
I-TOP yesterday friend-ACC three CL met
'I met three friends yesterday.'
b. na-nun ku chinkwu*(-tul)-lul onul-to mananta
I-TOP DEM friend-PL-ACC today-also meet
'I am meeting those friends today (again).'

The data in (20) suggest that the number of the antecedent in (20a) has to be visible on the anaphoric definite nominal in (20b). This is made available via the obligatory presence of plural *-tul* on the nominal. In a context where an antecedent is singular, the anaphoric definite NP has to appear as a bare noun, as shown in (21). In (21a), the referent of the anaphoric nominal *ku chinkwu* is singular. In this case, the plural cannot appear and the bare nominal indicates a singular meaning only.

(21) a. na-nun ecey chinkwu-ul han myeng manassta
I-TOP yesterday friend-ACC one CL met
'I met one friend yesterday.'
b. na-nun ku chinkwu-(*-tul)-lul onul-to mananta
I-TOP DEM friend-(*PL)-ACC today-also meet
'I am meeting that friend today (again).'

Kim and Park (2024) noted that the distribution of plural *-tul* in an anaphoric definite context is not the same as the optional plural *-tul* proposed in Kim and Melchin (2018). Plural *-tul* is obligatory in an anaphoric definite context such as in (20). Otherwise, it is optional: a bare noun can indicate either a singular or plural meaning. Building on this contrast, Kim and Park (2024) argue that Korean has grammatical number distinction in anaphoric definite contexts showing a singular-plural number contrast, unlike other contexts where plural marking is optional.[15] In particular, the

15 Under this view, Korean has two two-way number distinction. One is singular-plural contrast, and the other is number neutral-plural contrast. Kim and Park (2024) have shown that this two two-way number distinction found in Korean appears to be a cross-linguistic phenomenon in particular with number neutral languages. See Kim and Park (2024) for detail.

locus of the grammatical number distinction is identified as the Num head with the feature [±plural] within the nominal phrase.

As shown throughout this paper, a pronoun is an indexed definite expression just like an anaphoric definite. Thus, the pronoun *ku* is expected to exhibit the same grammatical number contrast, i.e., singular-plural contrast like the anaphoric definite *ku*. This is borne out by the data (22), which is also pointed out in Song (1975). No number marking on the pronoun *ku* is required in a singular context (22a), while the plural *-tul* is obligatory in the plural context (22b).

(22) a. emma-ka ecey pam-ey ku-lul poassta
mom-NOM yesterday night-in 3-ACC saw
'My mom saw him (*them) last night.'
b. emma-ka ecey pam-ey ku-*(tul)-lul poassta
mom-NOM yesterday night-in 3-PL-ACC saw
'My mom saw them (*him) last night.'

The data such as in (22) suggests that in the structure of pronoun *ku*, a functional head associated with number contrast has to appear. The ϕ head in the proposed structure (16) can play this role, as it is the locus of phi-features. Building on evidence that the plural morpheme must be visible on the pronoun *ku*, I propose that the ϕ head specified for number is a licensor of NP ellipsis in pro-DP and pro-ϕP structures of pronoun *ku*. This is illustrated in (23) with a pro-DP structure of *ku*. As a licensor of NP ellipsis, the head has the feature [E].[16]

(23) $[_{DP}$ idxP [*ku* 1] $[_{D'}$ $[_{\phi P}$ [$NP_{\varnothing}$ $\phi_{[E]}$ [±plural] ] D ]]]

16 The pronoun *ku* refers to a male antecedent only, and its female counterpart is the pronoun *kunye*. At this stage, it is not clear whether the ϕ head should bear a gender feature. For example, in Korean, there is no gender morphology visible on nouns that behaves similar to the plural *-tul*. However, a recent approach to a dependent pronoun *kes* in Korean (S. Park 2021) may suggest a clue to this issue. S. Park (2021) noted that *kes* can refer to an inanimate referent only, and showed that it is a pro-form similar to English *one*. It is proposed to merge in N and be in the complementary distribution with a null NP that undergoes a PF deletion. If so, it seems that the locus of gender in Korean is N, which I leave for future research.

## 5. Conclusion

In this paper, I have proposed that the 3rd person singular pronoun *ku* has two different structural realizations, namely pro-DP and pro-ϕP. I also have examined an issue of how a pro-DP can allow a determiner use in a familiar sense. This paper shows that it is possible, as the pro-DP shares the same structural element, idxP, with the anaphoric definite demonstrative *ku*. A null NP in the pro-DP and pro-ϕP is accounted for as an elided NP licensed by the functional head ϕP.

The consequence of this paper thus supports the non-uniform view of pronominal structures (Wiltschko 1988, 2002; Déchaine and Wiltschko 2002; Patel-Grosz and Grosz 2017). Moreover, it contributes to recent debate on the issue of whether pronouns have the syntax and semantics of definite expressions such as *the* N (Postal 1988; Elbourne 2005, 2008; Sauerland 2007; Patel-Grosz and Grosz 2017) or *that* N in the current context of the paper (e.g., Hanink 2021; Kim 2025). The cross-linguistic data including Korean discussed in this paper suggest that a pronoun can be treated akin to a definite description in sharing the core structural element, idxP.

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