Personal pronouns in Thai

Certain aspects of Thai grammar are quite simple compared to other languages, but you can’t really say that about its complex personal pronoun structure.

Although you can get by with learning just a of the more common ones, a native Thai may switch personal pronouns many times a day depending on the situation, who they’re talking to and their age difference. The variety of pronouns range from the very formal to the very casual/insulting. There’s also distinct differences between male and female usage.

On top of that, several of the pronouns have more than one meaning and you’ll have to resort to context to work out the true meaning quite frequently.

Making things slightly easier is the fact that subject pronouns and object pronouns are the same (there’s no difference between ‘I’ and ‘me’ in Thai for instance) and that personal pronouns are frequently omitted from sentences altogether if they can be implied from the context.

Once you get used to the Thai way of speaking, you’ll find that simple pronouns tell you a great deal about the relationship between the speakers and their relative status.
Polite Personal Pronouns

The standard polite personal pronouns are:

ผม pôm
I / me (only used by men)

ฉัน chăn
I / me (mainly used by women)

คุณ kun
You

เขาม man
He / him / she / her

มัน mân
It

เราม rao
We / us

(พวก) เขาม (pûak) kão
They / them

If you’re just beginning to learn, then it’s safe to use just these words and you’ll never offend anybody. pôm and kun are somewhat formal words though, and as such may sound a bit out of place in casual and informal situations.

kão, man, rao and pûak kão are commonly used both in polite and informal speech. For “they / them”, the pûak is really only necessary if without it the context would be unclear, otherwise “they / them” can be translated just as kão the same as “he / she”.

For women, chăn can be used in both polite and informal situations. Men also sometimes say chăn , mostly when chatting with close friends or to their girlfriend or wife, but it’s a fair bit less common. A man saying chăn excessively often or in inappropriate situations risks sounding somewhat effeminate too, so it’s best used with caution.

In casual speech, chăn is commonly pronounced with a high tone as if spelt ชั้น chăn and kão as if spelt แ์ kão.
**Informal Personal Pronouns**

- **เรา** (rao)  
  I / me

- **นาย** (naai)  
  You (used by men and women, but only to refer to men)

- **เธอ** (ter)  
  You ; She

- **เธอ** (lon)  
  She ; You (to refer to women)

*ter* is an informal pronoun meaning ‘you’. It’s most commonly used when speaking male female, and is much less often encountered in same-sex conversations. It’s also mainly only used when talking to someone of a similar age to you.

*ชาน* and *ter* are the pronouns of choice for the majority of Thai pop songs, regardless of whether it’s a man or woman singing. As an alternative to *ter* when talking to men, either men or women can also use the similarly informal *naai* to mean ‘you’.

*ter* also has a less common meaning of ‘she/her’. It’s a more formal word when used in this context, and occurs mostly in written Thai. *rao*, the standard word for ‘we/us’, is confusingly enough also informally used as a pronoun for ‘I/me’ too.

It’s mainly men who use it this way (as women have the alternative *ชาน*), and it’s frequently partnered with *ter* or *naai* for ‘you’. When *rao* is intended to mean ‘we/us’, the sentence will often also contain the word ณุ (gan, meaning “together”) to make the meaning clear.

*lon* means “she”, or less commonly “you”, and is predominately used in written Thai. If used in spoken Thai, it can have something of a sarcastic or mildly derogatory connotation and so is best used with caution.

- **ไอ** (ai)  
  I / me

- **ยู** (yoo)  
  You
'I/me' and 'you' are relatively recent additions that have been taken straight from their English equivalents, no doubt much to the chagrin of language purists. Another pairing, 'เค้า kao' 'I/me' and 'ตัวเอง dtua ayng' 'you' is used similarly in casual situations. Both are most common amongst students and teenagers, and rarely used by those much older.

The use of 'เค้า kao' and 'ตัวเอง dtua ayng' can be very confusing if you’re not expecting it, given that 'เค้า kao' often sounds identical to 'เขา kăo' (the word for "he/she" as above) and the standard meaning of 'ตัวเอง dtua ayng' as 'one’s self'.

Informal / Offensive Pronouns

- กู goo, 'I/me'  
- มัน man, 'he/him/she/her'  
- มึง meung, 'you'  
- แก gae, 'you'; He/She  
- เอ็ง eng, 'you'

'กู goo', 'I/me', 'มึง meung', 'you' and 'มัน man', 'he/him/she/her' (though literally 'it' as above) are often used by friends of many years when talking amongst and about each other. Used this way they serve as a kind of bonding term that shows close friendship, but be warned that using these terms outside of with close friends is considered very impolite and potentially abusive.
As such they can cause considerable offence if used inappropriately, and unless you’re very sure of your ground you’re best off avoiding using them altogether. *gae* and *eng*, both meaning ‘you’, are similar to *meung* although marginally less impolite.

*gae* also has limited use as a third person pronoun too. When used this way, it’s not at all impolite but is used to refer in a respectful way to elders. Thai people referring to their parents in the third person will often use *gae* for instance.

**Formal**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Thai</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>กระผม</td>
<td><em>I / me</em> (only used by men)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ดิฉัน</td>
<td><em>I / me</em> (only used by women)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ท่าน</td>
<td><em>You</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Of these, you’re most likely to encounter *tâan* as it’s commonly used by business when referring to customers in a general way. *grà-pôm* or *di-chân* can be partnered with *tâan* and used in very formal situations or where you want to be extra-polite.

You’re very unlikely to ever hear the even more formal *kâa-pâ-jâo* in normal speech, but may encounter it sometimes in official and formal documents (such as the Immigration form you fill in when entering Thailand).

**Plurals**

In the “Polite Personal Pronouns” section above, you can see *kâo* as the word for “he / him / she / her” and *pûak kâo* for “they / them”. The word พวก *pûak* (“group”) can actually be added in front of any of the other pronouns to make them plural as needed, so for instance you could say พวก *pûak pôm* for “us” or พวกท่าน *pûak tâan* for “you” (in a plural sense).
Nicknames and Titles

In casual speech, it’s very common for women to avoid using a first-person pronoun altogether and instead refer to themselves in the 3rd person by using their nickname. For instance, someone called เหมียว (mîeow, usually written as “Meow”) would say the equivalent of “Meow is tired” rather than “I am tired”. Similarly, they can also be referred to using their nickname instead of a second-person or third-person pronoun (e.g. “Is Meow tired?” rather than “Are you tired?”).

Though this may take a bit of getting used to at first, it’s a useful way of addressing someone if you’re not sure which of the various pronouns is most appropriate.

While it’s not unknown for men to also refer to themselves this way on occasion, it’s much less common and, as with using ชำ (chăn), may sound quite effeminate unless you’re sure of your ground.

When addressing someone who has or works in a respected position, it’s usually respectful and appropriate to use their title rather than any of the above pronouns. So students will refer to their teacher as อาจารย์ (aa-jaan, the word for “teacher”) and patients or staff to their doctor as คุณหมอ (kun mŏr, the word for “doctor”).

Others

Apart from the use of family terms as pronouns, there are other personal pronouns not covered here but which are unlikely to be frequently encountered. For instance, there’s special pronouns to be used when talking to monks, a lot more in the Thai royal language and the main regional dialects of Thai also have their own pronouns. Ethnic Chinese Thais also have some separate pronouns derived from various Chinese dialects.