On the Origin and Development of Classifiers in Jingpo

Xu Xijian
Chinese Academy of Social Sciences

Translated by Randy J. LaPolla
University of California, Berkeley

0. Compared to that of other Tibeto-Burman languages, the classifier system of Jingpo is not very developed, especially in terms of count-noun classifiers. When most nouns are counted, no classifier (CL) is necessary; the noun can be directly modified by a numeral. For example, ‘four chickens’ is expressed as \( x_{31} \ םז_{31} \ י_{33} \) ‘chicken’ + ‘four’; ‘two shirts’ is expressed as \( p_{33} \ קר_{33} \ יל_{35} \ קוח_{51} \) ‘shirt’ + ‘two’. I described the basic synchronic characteristics of Jingpo noun classifiers in Xu 1987. The aim of this paper is to discuss the origin and development of Jingpo CLs through an analysis of the internal situation visàvis CLs and a comparison with CLs in related languages.

1. The CLs of Jingpo developed gradually, in general along the following two paths:

1.1. Creating CLs from native lexical material.

1.1.1. Most of the CLs in Jingpo developed from native material, mainly through one of the following three methods: (1) using a noun to act as a CL; (2) combining two lexical items to create a compound CL; (3) using container nouns as ad hoc CLs. When a noun is used as a CL, the meaning of the CL is related to the attributes and shape of the referent named by the noun. CLs created in this way (there are about twenty common ones) are mainly count-noun CLs, such as \( קוח_{31} \), which as a noun means ‘body’, but as a CL can be used with common animal names, melons, and fruits, and certain other objects:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{pig} & \quad \text{CL} & \quad \text{one} \\
\text{‘one pig’} & \\
\text{n}_{33} \ קר_{33} \ הם_{31} \ י_{33} & \\
\text{cucumber} & \quad \text{CL} & \quad \text{one} \\
\text{‘one cucumber’} & \\
\end{align*}
\]

As a noun, \( קוח_{33} \) means ‘circle, ring’; as a CL, it can be used to modify circular objects:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{flower} & \quad \text{CL} & \quad \text{one} \\
\text{‘one wreath of flowers’} & \\
\end{align*}
\]

* The Chinese version of this paper is to appear in the Journal of the Central Institute of Nationalities, 1990.2.
As a noun, tʃen³³ has the meaning 'fragment'; as a CL it is similar to English 'slice', 'strip', 'half', or 'part':

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{kə³³ wə³³ tʃen³³ mji³³} & \quad \text{ji³³ tʃen³³ mji³³} \\
\text{bamboo CL one} & \quad \text{dry land CL one} \\
\text{‘one strip of bamboo’} & \quad \text{‘one section of dry field’}
\end{align*}
\]

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{nə³³ tʃen³³ mji³³} \\
\text{cow CL one} \\
\text{‘one side of beef (i.e. half of a cow)’}
\end{align*}
\]

1.1.2. Native lexical items are also used in combination to create specialized CLs. Of these, some consist of two lexical items, usually a noun plus a noun, verb, CL, adjective, or static verb. Others are comprised of a root plus a prefix. These bimorphemic CLs include count-noun CLs, quantity/weight measures, and group CLs. There are about thirty of them. Ex.:

**Noun + Noun > Classifier**

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{ʃen³¹ ‘meat’ + po³³ ‘head’ > CL for hunted animals} \\
\text{num³¹ ‘woman’ + po³³ ‘head’ > CL for wives}
\end{align*}
\]

**Noun + Verb > Classifier**

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{sì³¹ ‘cotton’ + kə³³ ‘to separate’ > ‘boll (of cotton)’} \\
\text{thiŋ³¹ ‘house’ + nep³³ ‘to pad’ > ‘plank (of floorboard)’}
\end{align*}
\]

**Noun + Classifier > Classifier**

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{kəi³¹ ‘bead’ + tŋ³³ ‘tube’ > CL for cylindrical beads} \\
\text{wə³³ ‘bamboo’ + phəŋ³³ CL for trees > ‘grove (of bamboo)’}
\end{align*}
\]

**Noun + Static Verb > Classifier**

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{le³³ ‘hand’ + kə³³ ‘shape of hand grabbing smth.’ > ‘handful’} \\
\text{sì³¹ ‘cotton’ + lan³¹ ‘pile-shaped’ > ‘pile (of cotton)’}
\end{align*}
\]

**Prefix + Verb > Classifier**

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{mə³¹ (prefix) + kə³³ ‘carry on back’ > ‘backload (of firewood)’} \\
\text{jin³¹ (prefix) + kəəm³¹ ‘build’ > ‘floorboard (2nd floor and up)’}
\end{align*}
\]

**Prefix + Static Verb > Classifier**

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{sum³¹ (prefix) + pʃau³¹ ‘string-shaped’ > ‘string (of meat, fish, fruit, etc.)’}
\end{align*}
\]

1.1.3. Ad hoc use of container nouns as CLs:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{pəə³³ wə³³ mji³³} \\
\text{rice gruel bowl one} \\
\text{‘a bowl of rice gruel’}
\end{align*}
\]

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{ʃat³¹ n³¹ kəp³¹ mji³³} \\
\text{rice mouth one} \\
\text{‘a mouthful of rice’}
\end{align*}
\]

1.2. Borrowed CLs. There are about forty CLs of this type, mostly indicating weight or quantity. These CLs gradually worked their way into the language because of the needs of daily life and contact with surrounding Chinese, Dai, and Burmese people. Examples from Chinese include ㄆㄨ ( '~/6 acre', ㄕㄝ ( '~/sheng) 'litre', ㄊㄨ ( '~/duo) 'bushel', ㄊㄨ ( '~/duo) 'mule-load', ㄉㄢ ( '~/tsa) 'set', and ㄕㄐин ( '~/jin) '1/2 kilo'. From Dai, examples include ㄈㄐIAI (1 1/2 kilos), ㄆォ ( '~/ten basketsful', ㄎㄢ ( '~/ten ounces (1/3 of a ㄈㄐIAI), ㄕㄨ ( '~/a strip (of paddy field)', and ㄐォ ( '~/level (piles of grain)'. From Burmese, borrowings include ㄊㄢ ( '~/kilometer', ㄨㄆ ( '~/roll (of cloth)', ㄉㄢ ( '~/basketful', ㄆㄦ ( '~/basketful', ㄕㄨ ( '~/kind', ㄉㄨ ( '~/class', ㄒㄠ ( '~/stick, roll', ㄆォ ( '~/pound', ㄕㄡ ( '~/minutes' (ult. < English)).

1.3. Ancient CLs. Aside from the above, there are about twenty specialized native CLs, of which more than ten are weight/measurement or group CLs. There are two verb classifiers and nine count-noun classifiers. We can find no etymological relationship between these classifiers and items in other word classes, so it is possible that these developed very early in the history of Jingpo. Comparing these with CLs in related languages, we find no more than a few cognate sets. This suggests that these CLs developed in Jingpo after Jingpo had already become an independent language. (See appendix).

2. Jingpo CLs went through a process of development from nonexistence to existence, and from few to many. From the present situation vis-a-vis CLs in Jingpo, it is possible to find clues that reflect their development.

2.1. There are three situations with respect to the use or non-use of CLs:

2.1.1. A classifier must be used. When counting weights, measures, units of money, or groups, or when counting verbal actions, a CL must be used. Ex.: ㄆㄨ ㄅㄧㄢ ㄕㄢ ㄊㄢ ( '~/cloth foot one 'a foot of cloth' ㄆㄨ ㄕㄧㄢ ㄑㄫ ㄕㄢ ( '~/fruit 1/2 kilo one '1/2 kilo of fruit' ㄆㄨ ㄆㄨ ㄕㄢ ㄡㄡ ㄕㄢ ( '~/rice basketful one 'a basketful of rice' ㄆㄨ ㄕㄧㄢ ㄎㄢ ( '~/money yuan one 'one yuan (unit of money)' ㄆㄨ ㄕㄧㄢ ㄆㄦ ㄕㄢ ( '~/person group one 'a group of people' ㄌㄨ ( '~/two CL go 'go two times'

Aside from this, when counting animals that have been eaten or are going to be eaten, it is customary to use a CL:

\[ \text{wa}^{31} \text{khum}^{31} \text{mjì}^{33} \text{ja}^{35} \text{ka}^{55} \text{mā}^{33-33} \text{sa}^{33} \text{pig CL one eat aspect sent. particle 'They ate a (whole) pig.'} \]

From the semantics of the CLs it is not difficult to see that most classifiers of this type were late developments historically. The former reflect the increased complexity of weights and measures; the latter reflect the need to clarify the measurement of individual referents.

Although a verbal CL must be used when counting actions, the system of verbal CLs is quite simple: there is only one specialized verbal CL, laŋ⁳¹. There is also an allomorph of this CL, kā⁳¹ laŋ⁶¹, which includes the meaning 'one', as in 'one time'. This form can only combine with mjì³³ 'one', and not with any other numerals. Borrowed verbal CLs are also very restricted in scope; generally only nouns which express a unit of time are borrowed as verbal CLs.

2.1.2. Situations where CLs are not used are basically of two types: (1) under normal circumstances, most count-nouns do not require the use of a CL (some nouns have CLs that could be used, some don't have CLs at all). The NP can be directly modified by the numeral:

\[ \text{phun}^{55} \text{mā}^{31} \text{sum}^{33} \text{tree three 'three trees'} \]
\[ \text{sā}^{31} \text{pā}^{65} \text{laŋ}^{55} \text{khon}^{51} \text{table two 'two tables'} \]
\[ \text{sa}^{33} \text{pja}^{33} \text{mā}^{31} \text{li}^{31} \text{soap four 'four (cakes of) soap'} \]
\[ \text{paŋ}^{31} \text{laŋ}^{55} \text{khon}^{51} \text{gong two 'two gongs'} \]

(2) even though a noun may have a corresponding CL, the CL is not used when the number modifying the noun is a compound (i.e. higher than ten). Compare the following examples:

\[ \text{mā}^{33} \text{ko}^{33} \text{si}^{31} \text{khum}^{31} \text{mā}^{31} \text{li}^{31} \text{pear CL four 'four pears'} \]
\[ \text{mā}^{33} \text{ko}^{33} \text{si}^{31} \text{ji}^{33} \text{laŋ}^{65} \text{khon}^{51} \text{pear twelve 'twelve pears'} \]
\[ \text{nā}^{55} \text{ta}^{51} \text{thin}^{31} \text{ko}^{33} \text{mjì}^{33} \text{family CL one 'one family'} \]
\[ \text{nā}^{55} \text{ta}^{51} \text{mā}^{31} \text{na}^{33} \text{ji}^{33} \text{family fifty 'fifty families'} \]

This is not to say that it is impossible to use a CL here. It would not be ungrammatical to use one, but customarily one would not be used.

2.1.3. There are also some count-nouns with which the use of a CL is optional. Although these nouns all have CLs, the CL will customarily be used only when needed for clarifying the unit of measurement. For example, ‘one chopstick’ is usually kholi\textsuperscript{33} tse\textsuperscript{31} la\textsuperscript{55} nai\textsuperscript{51} nji\textsuperscript{33} (‘chopstick’ + ‘one’\textsuperscript{66} + ‘one’), without a CL, but to emphasize the unit of measurement, to show that it is not ‘a pair’, ‘a bunch’, etc., it is possible to add the CL khat\textsuperscript{55}, so ‘one chopstick’ would become kholi\textsuperscript{33} tse\textsuperscript{31} khat\textsuperscript{55} nji\textsuperscript{33}. Other examples:

\begin{align*}
\text{sum}\textsuperscript{31} \text{vum}\textsuperscript{53} si\textsuperscript{31} \text{na}\textsuperscript{31} \text{na}\textsuperscript{33} & = \text{sum}\textsuperscript{31} \text{vum}\textsuperscript{53} si\textsuperscript{31} \text{khum}\textsuperscript{31} \text{na}\textsuperscript{31} \text{na}\textsuperscript{33} & \text{peach} & \text{five} & \text{peach} & \text{CL} & \text{five} \\
\text{u}\textsuperscript{51} \text{ti}\textsuperscript{31} \text{kzy}\textsuperscript{55} & = \text{u}\textsuperscript{51} \text{ti}\textsuperscript{31} \text{khum}\textsuperscript{31} \text{kzy}\textsuperscript{55} & \text{egg} & \text{six} & \text{egg} & \text{CL} & \text{six}
\end{align*}

Of the three situations discussed above, the first two are the most frequent, and the third is relatively rare. The fact that CLs are optional in Jingpo suggests that Jingpo CLs are in a transitional stage of development where their use has not yet stabilized. This phenomenon is a function of the need for increased complexity and accuracy, and is in accordance with the development of CLs from few to many.

2.2. The grammaticalization of CLs is uneven. In Jingpo, those CLs that are native and have completely grammaticalized are few. Most still retain a certain amount of their original (nominal) lexical meaning. According to the degree of grammaticalization, they can be divided into four types:

2.2.1. Those that have completely grammaticalized; we cannot determine what lexical items they developed from. There are about twenty of this type, not counting borrowed CLs. Aside from their function as CLs, they have no other use, and can only be ascribed to the class of CLs. Examples are man\textsuperscript{33} ‘pair’, kum\textsuperscript{31} t\textsuperscript{31} ‘handspan (index finger to outstretched middle finger)’, and tik\textsuperscript{55} ‘rectangular piece of land (for growing vegetables)’.

2.2.2. Those that are fairly grammaticalized, but we can still determine which nouns they developed from. When these are used as CLs, their lexical meaning is completely lost. There are only five or six of this type; two examples would be (a) lap\textsuperscript{33}, which means ‘leaf’ as a noun, but ‘sheet, slice’ as a CL. It is used in counting pieces of paper, tree leaves, and other flat thin objects:

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{66} In Jingpo there are two ways to express the meaning ‘one’: la\textsuperscript{55} nai\textsuperscript{51} and nji\textsuperscript{33}. Both are used when a noun is being modified, but only nji\textsuperscript{33} can be used to modify a CL.
\end{itemize}

(b) tum^33 means 'fruit) pit, seed' as a noun, but is used as a CL for small round objects:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{sum}^33 & \text{vum}^33 \text{ si}^31 \text{ tum}^33 \text{ tum}^33 \text{ mji}^33 \\
\text{peach-pit} & \text{CL one} \\
\text{'one peach pit'} & \\
\text{si}^31 \text{ tum}^33 \text{ mji}^33 & \text{ku}^33 \text{ tum}^33 \text{ mji}^33 \\
\text{rice} & \text{CL one} \\
\text{'one grain of rice'} & \\
\text{phun}^55 & \text{lum}^31 \text{ lum}^31 \text{ mji}^33 \\
\text{leaf} & \text{CL one} \\
\text{'one (tree) leaf'} & \\
\end{align*}
\]

2.2.3. Those that are not very grammaticalized; to varying degrees they retain their original lexical meaning. There are six or seven of these. Ex.:

(a) si^31 khap^55 'bale [50 kg.] (of cotton)' is a compound CL comprised of the root si^31 'cotton' and the noun khap^55 'bale'. It retains the lexical meaning of its morphemes, and can only be used for bales of cotton, as in

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{pâ}^31 & \text{ si}^33 \text{ si}^31 \text{ khap}^55 \text{ mji}^33 \\
\text{cotton} & \text{bale one} \\
\text{'a bale of cotton'} & \\
\end{align*}
\]

(b) sin^31 kjan^55 has the lexical meaning of 'ear (of grain)'. When used as a CL, it has the meaning of 'spike (of grain), stem, branch', etc., and is used in counting ears of wheat or other grains, flowers, etc. Ex.:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{kha}^31 & \text{ lan}^31 \text{ sam}^33 \text{ sin}^31 \text{ kjan}^55 \text{ mji}^33 \\
\text{wheat} & \text{CL one} \\
\text{'an ear of wheat'} & \\
\end{align*}
\]

2.2.4. Those least grammaticalized. There are about ten of this type. They retain their lexical meaning to such an extent that they preclude the cooccurrence of a noun either before or after the CL. One can only say

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{kok}^31 & \text{ mji}^33 \\
\text{CL (room) one} & \text{one room'} \\
\text{or} & \\
\text{kap}^31 & \text{ mji}^33 \\
\text{CL (dynasty) one} & \text{one dynasty'} \\
\end{align*}
\]

but not

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{*kok}^31 & \text{ kok}^31 \text{ mji}^33 \\
\text{room (CL room) one} & \text{one room'} \\
\text{or} & \\
\text{*kap}^31 & \text{ kap}^31 \text{ mji}^33 \\
\text{dynasty (CL dynasty) one} & \text{one dynasty'} \\
\end{align*}
\]

Yet these CLs are not the same as those count-nouns that can be directly modified by a numeral. There are two main differences: this type can only take the form mji^33 to express the meaning 'one', whereas nouns can take both mji^33 and lâ^55 nai^51.
when used as CLs, their meanings are not exactly those of the original nouns. Compare the following:

sə²³ poi⁵⁵ as a CL:

jan⁵⁵ the³³ sə²³ poi⁵⁵ mji³³ to⁵⁵ tʃoʔ³¹ maʔ⁴¹ ai³³.
3pl table(banquet) one entertain give aux.part.
They invited a tableful (of people) to a banquet.'

sə³¹ poi⁵⁵ as a noun:

ŋai³³ sə³¹ poi⁵⁵ lə⁵⁵ ŋai⁵¹ mji³³ lu⁴¹ n⁴¹-ŋai³³.
1sg table one one have aux.part.
I have a table.'

This suggests that these CLs are the precursors of true noun CLs. Because their lexical meaning has not bleached away, and they are still concrete semantically, they haven’t actually become true CLs; they have just begun the process of grammaticalization from noun to CL.

Among all those CLs that developed from nouns in the four types mentioned above, the level of grammaticalization (bleaching) is closely related to the flexibility of the use of the CLs. Generally, the more advanced the stage of grammaticalization, the more flexible the use will be. For example, nɨʔ³¹ theʔ⁵¹ ‘drop’ is made up of the noun nɨʔ⁳¹ ‘rain’ and the verb theʔ⁵¹ ‘drip’. Because the meaning of ‘rain’ has been completely lost in this compound, nɨʔ³¹ theʔ⁵¹ can be used not only for counting drops of rain, but also drops of oil, water, etc. On the other hand, kəi³¹ ɾep⁵¹ ‘slice (of ginger)’ can only be used in counting slices of ginger, as the noun kəi³¹ ‘ginger’ retains its lexical meaning.

The unevenness in the grammaticalization of Jingpo CLs shows that Jingpo CLs developed little by little because of the needs of production and daily life, and are going through a gradual process of bleaching and grammaticalization. This process is an important step in the development of Jingpo CLs.

2.3. There are many ways that CLs can combine with numerals and nouns. The scope of use of each type of combination is different.

2.3.1. Noun + Numeral. Used in counting count-nouns:

n⁴¹ pa⁵⁵ lə⁵⁵ kʰon⁵¹
quilt two
‘two quilts’

po³¹ luŋ⁵⁵ maʔ³¹ suma³³
ball three
‘three balls’

2.3.2. Noun + CL + Numeral. Used in counting units of weight, volume, money, group nouns and some count-nouns:

2.3.3. CL + Numeral. Used only for the type of CL discussed in section 2.2.4, those where there has been little bleaching of lexical meaning, so no noun can appear with them:

\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{xam}\, 33 \quad \text{mji}\, 33 \\
&\text{CL (affair) one} \\
&\text{‘one thing/affair’}
\end{align*}
\]

\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{kok}\, 31 \quad \text{mji}\, 33 \\
&\text{CL (fireplace) one} \\
&\text{‘one fireplace’}
\end{align*}
\]

2.3.4. Numeral + CL or CL + Numeral. Used with very few words:

\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{txi} \, 55 \quad \text{khoq}\, 31 \quad \text{thi}\, 31 \quad \text{k\textsuperscript{3}am}\, 33 \\
&\text{two} \quad \text{CL (floorboard)} \quad \text{two} \quad \text{floorboards’}
\end{align*}
\]

\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{thi}\, 31 \quad \text{k\textsuperscript{3}am}\, 33 \quad \text{txi} \, 55 \quad \text{khoq}\, 31 \\
&\text{CL (floorboard) two} \quad \text{two} \quad \text{floorboards’}
\end{align*}
\]

\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{txi} \, 55 \quad \text{khoq}\, 31 \quad \text{ni} \, 55 \quad \text{k\textsuperscript{3}am}\, 51 \\
&\text{two} \quad \text{CL (stairs) two} \quad \text{two} \quad \text{stairs’}
\end{align*}
\]

\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{ni} \, 55 \quad \text{k\textsuperscript{3}am}\, 51 \quad \text{txi} \, 55 \quad \text{khoq}\, 51 \\
&\text{CL (stairs) two} \quad \text{two} \quad \text{stairs’}
\end{align*}
\]

The four constructions above have the highest frequency of use. Of these, the first and second are used most often. The common characteristic of these two is that the numeral and the CL both appear after the head noun. The third type is of the same nature as the first, in that semantically the CL functions the same way as a noun. The fourth type, where the numeral can either precede or follow the CL, only holds for a few CLs.

According to the analysis presented above, the main order of numeral, CL, and noun is for the numeral and CL to follow the head noun. This is the same order we find in pre-Qin Old Chinese. It wasn’t until the North-South Dynasties period that CLs in Chinese moved to the position in front of the noun (Liu 1959). If we say that the post-nominal position for CLs is a relatively old feature of Sino-Tibetan, then we can determine that the genesis and development of CLs in Jingpo is still in a relatively early stage.

The diachronic development of a language is very often reflected in its synchronic characteristics. From an analysis of the complex features of the modern language we can find clues to the history and evolution of those features. The CLs of modern Jingpo provide evidence of this.

REFERENCES

