A comparative look at
Yao numerical classifiers

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Summary

This paper extends Donald R. Goral's (1978) descriptive analysis of numerical classifiers (CLs) found in several Southeast Asian languages to CLs found in Yao. What is presented is a necessary first step in our understanding of the syntax and semantics of Yao CLs. As is perhaps expected, Yao CLs are in many ways similar to the CLs found in neighboring languages. However, there are certain syntactic and semantic features that are peculiar to Yao. While the syntax of Yao CLs is relatively straightforward, they represent a rich and still not completely explored arena for semantic analysis. The appendices list eighty-one Yao CLs along with main selectional criteria and a beginning attempt at semantic classification. These lists should allow further comparisons between Yao CLs and those of neighboring languages.

Description of the data

These data were gathered from a native speaker of Yao who grew up in Northern Laos, in the village of Sam Sao, Houa Khong province.1 This dialect is located in the same region as the Yao who were the sources for Lombard and Purnell's Yao - English Dictionary. These people, the Highland Yao, are distributed not only through Northern Laos, but have also migrated into Northern Thailand, and live in their greatest numbers in Southeast China. This dialect has seven tones – five live tones, and two dead.2 The following symbols will be used for these tones:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Live Tones</th>
<th>Dead Tones</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High-level: 55</td>
<td>High-level: 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mid-level: 33</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low-level: 11</td>
<td>Low-level: 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Falling: 51</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rising: 15</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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I SYNTAX

I-A General remarks on Yao syntax

Before we turn to Yao classifiers, some general remarks on Yao syntax are in order. These remarks will be limited to the basic constituent order, and areal syntactic features.

Word order in Yao is unique among the Southeast Asian languages. Like Thai, Yao uses prepositions and noun-adjective constructions, and like Chinese, it puts the head noun after the genitive attribute (see Figure 1 following; cf. Goral, Appendix 1; Purnell 1972, pp. 13-25).

Figure 1: Sentence word order in Yao, Chinese, and Thai

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Yao (and Meo)</th>
<th>SVO</th>
<th>Prepositions</th>
<th>Genitive-N</th>
<th>N-Adjective</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>SVO</td>
<td>Postpositions</td>
<td>Genitive-N</td>
<td>Adjective-N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thai</td>
<td>SVO</td>
<td>Prepositions</td>
<td>N-Genitive</td>
<td>N-Adjective</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The following examples illustrate Yao word ordering:

SVO: \[y^{33}i\odot p^{15}iin y^{33}i\odot \bar{n}^{33}\varepsilon \bar{n}^{51}aan\]
I\{S\} hide\{V\} [I+poss.] money\{O\}
\textit{I hid my money.}

Genitival: \[n^{51}in \bar{n}^{33}\varepsilon \ v^{51}ee \ w^{33}aan\]
\{he+poss.\} shoe lace
\textit{his shoelace}

Adjectival: \[c^{55}uu \bar{k}^{55}i\odot\]
dog black
black dog

Prepositional: \[k^{11}a-d^{55}i\odot \ m^{55}i\odot\]
in/under grass
\textit{in the grass}

Major Southeast Asian areal syntactic features listed in Matisoff (1978:25) are well represented in this dialect of Yao:
1.) Reduplication as an adverbializing process:

\[ \text{c15aaw s1i?} \quad \text{red egg} \]
\[ \text{c15aaw s1i? s5i?} \quad \text{very red egg} \]

2.) Sentence final particles for expressing "propositional attitudes". i.e. emotions of the speaker. These particles are frequent in Yao, and are quite difficult to fully describe. Particles such as ı'a?, ı'33ce, and ı'33co occur at the end of declarative sentences. Their precise function has not yet been fully assessed.

3.) Aspect, not tense, as the primary inflectional category for verbs:

\[ \text{55m k51uu-k150o ts55aw c55ien nh15aan} \]
the old woman to cook{+prog.} rice
The old woman is/was/will be cooking rice.

4.) Free topicalizability of noun-phrases, with a tendency towards topic prominence. While there is not sufficient space in this piece to fully demonstrate topicalizability in Yao, the following example shows a representative topicalized sentence:

\[ \text{w33uæ 33iÆ t51aw m51ien yliet t51aw [m51ien] ı'5uat 33iÆ t51aw py55aa} \]
those two CL people one CL {deleted} break two CL sticks
As for those two people, each one broke two sticks.

5.) The nominalization of whole sentences, without their being embedded into any larger unit. The Yao particle ı'33ce, which appears in genitive and relative clause constructions, may also appear at the end of a sentence, where it has a nominalizing function.

In summary, Yao shows the major areal syntactic features common to Southeast Asian languages, yet its basic word order is unlike that of any other language in the area, except for its sister language, Meo.

I-B. A syntactic definition of Yao numerical classifiers

Goral's syntactic definition of Vietnamese numerical classifiers is useful in describing Yao classifiers. In Yao, a classifier is any lexical item which can appear in the frame \[ \text{Num} + ______ + \text{N}, \] where \text{Num}=numeral and \text{N}=noun (cf. Goral: p.6). Yao CLs constitute a subclass of nouns which appear in the above frame to specify a certain attribute of the following noun. Through this explicitly stated attribute the following noun can be counted. Furthermore, without the presence of the CL, the noun cannot be counted. Thus, some CLs not only can appear in the above frame, but must appear
(except for a very few exceptions to be explained below). For this reason, the above definition is useful in predicting the obligatory occurrence of CLs (and it is useful in eliciting CLs). However, this does not fully describe the range of noun-phrase frames where CLs will occur, nor the process of selecting CLs. Of course this definition is a wholly syntactic one, and CLs are primarily semantic in their function. In short, this definition is certainly very useful in eliciting which lexical items can and cannot be used as classifiers. So it approaches descriptive adequacy. It does not, however, define the entire distribution nor the selectional motivation for CLs, i.e. it does not provide explanatory adequacy. Goral's definition does make one thing certain concerning the distribution of CLs: *their obligatory presence in nominative noun-phrases.*

There are two further stages in the analysis of CLs in any language beyond a syntactic definition such as the above. The first stage is a functional semantic description of CLs. Studies show that CL systems can be very complex in the interaction between their syntax and semantics, and that the semantics of CL systems can be highly culture-specific. The second stage is more problematic: it is doubtful that a fully adequate description of numerical classifiers can be made without recourse to a satisfying explanation for their existence. Why are they found in such obligatory profusion in certain languages and not at all or vestigially in others? Such an explanation rests uncomfortably on extra-linguistic (psychological, philosophical, etc.) evidence. Until someone uncovers the reason(s) for the existence of complex CL systems and their semiotic function, CLs will continue to evade any explanatory adequate analysis. This caveat is not given to excuse the shortcomings of the following analysis of Yao CLs, but merely to frame the information provided in the context of the task that lies ahead. For the purposes of this paper, Goral's definition of CLs, and some further notes on the syntactic and semantic features of various Yao CLs, will allow for comparisons between Yao and other Southeast Asian languages.

**I-C**

**The basic structure of the Yao nominative phrase**

The following schema (Figure 2) shows the basic structure of the Yao nominative and/or demonstrative noun-phrase.

**Figure 2:**

**Basic structure of Yao nominative phrase**

| + preposition | + Demonstrative | + Number | + CL |  |
| ------------- | --------------- | -------- | ---- | +ADJECTIVE |
| - Number     | +CL             |          |     |  |
| - preposition| + Demonstrative | + Number | + CL |  |
| + Number     | +CL             |          |     |  |
| + preposition| - Demonstrative | + Number | + CL |  |
| - Number     | -CL             |          |     |  |
| + Number     | +CL             |          |     |  |
| + Number     | +CL             |          |     |  |
| - Number     | -CL             |          |     |  |