Cognitive Models of the Thai Classifier System

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This study is about noun categorization. Specifically, it investigates the process of noun categorization in the Thai language, a language which possesses an overt noun categorization system known as “classifier system.” In the classifier system, a linguistic unit known as “numeral classifier” is used to precede or follow a noun when that particular noun is being counted. Commonly found in the Southeast Asian languages, a “numeral classifier” occurs is the slot after noun and number in a numeral phrase in languages such as Thai, etc., (e.g., /māa5 səŋə5 tua1/: dog two classifier = two dogs) or between numbers and nouns in languages such as Vietnamese (e.g., hai ngu’o’ ong: two classifier grandfather = two grandfathers). At first glance this might appear trivial in the sense that every language does use some kind of unit when quantifying certain nouns, i.e., a unit such as “glass” to quantify water. Unique in Southeast Asian languages, however, is the fact that every noun, when being quantified, takes an additional term - the classifier. In English, when mass (paper, soap, etc.) nouns are counted, units such as “a piece,” “a bar,” etc. are needed. As for count nouns, numbers are attached in front of the nouns. In the Thai language, both count and mass nouns take “unit counters” when counted. As a result one needs a construction such as “two classifier books” to connote the idea equivalent to “two books” in English.

Previous Studies

Reviewing the literature on the studies of classifier systems, one finds three major topics: distinction between classifiers and the other kind of unit which fits in the same slot, known as “quantifiers”, historical comparative studies of
classifier system in related languages, and semantics of classifiers.

**Classifiers vs. Quantifiers**

To distinguish classifiers from quantifiers, many linguists come up with different dichotomies. Burling (1965:259) proposes a semantic criterion of “individual” vs. “amount” to account for the distinction. According to Burling (1965:259), “individual” is characteristic of “classifiers,” i.e., in the phrase “dog five body” (classifier for dog), individual dogs are being quantified. In a phrase “dog one dozen,” however, the individual aspect is overlooked and dogs are seen collectively. Also collective in the sense of “dozen” are words for weight, measure terms, piles, bundles, etc. (Burling 1965:270).

T'sou (1976:1217) proposes the features of “exact” vs. “entity” to distinguish classifiers from other words. While “exact” is used to account for the amount of objects being counted, “entity” denotes the characteristics of the objects. In order for a word to qualify as a “true classifier,” both features (“exact” and “entity”) have to be present. That is, while the word is used in counting, it has to simultaneously describe the characteristics of the noun it co-occurs with. Becker (1975:111) indicates that, semantically, quantifiers and classifiers inform us of different things about the nouns. According to Becker (1975:111), classifiers represent covert knowledge and their meanings are difficult to describe explicitly, while quantifiers are easy to discuss and their meanings are overt. Conklin (1981:68) proposes that quantifiers have a heavier functional load than classifiers. According to Conklin (1981:76), if quantifiers are omitted communication will be disrupted, while the omission of classifiers (in many cases) does not yield the same effect. Adams (1989:9) adds syntagmatic criteria to distinguish classifiers from quantifiers. As Adams (1989:9) indicates, for example, the size of a number can affect the appearance of the classifier in a numeral phrase. Classifiers in Thai, for instance,
do not have to appear when the number (they follow) is large (e.g., 1,000, etc.).

Historical Comparative Studies

In her historical comparative studies of classifier system in Austroasiatic languages, Adams (1989) finds that there are recurring similarities in the types of classes that appear in different numeral classifier languages. The common underlying dimensions found are "animacy," "inanimacy," dimensions such as "shape and sizes" (derived from perceptual bases), and other kinds of dimensions specific to languages and cultures (e.g., the use of /chuak3/ [rope] for elephant which refers to the way elephants were led around) (Adams 1989:18).

Similar to the Adams' (1989) study of the classification systems of the Austroasiatic languages, Conklin's (1981) is a comparative study of the classification systems of the Tai languages. Among these languages, Conklin (1981:130) finds "animacy" to be a universal fundamental semantic parameter. In dealing with inanimate objects, Conklin (1981:136) uses plant-part classifications to describe inanimate classifiers. These classifications, according to Conklin (1981:136), are derived from the fact that many morphemes used in referring to plant parts are also used as classifiers. The assumption is that classifiers categorize objects on the basis of the physical attributes of the plant parts to which the morphemes refer. The classifications underlying the systems are: (1) stick-based classification; (2) seed-based classification; (3) fruit-based classification; (4) leaf-based classification; and (5) flower/star-based classification. In addition to the plant-part classes mentioned, there are: (6) tuber- and lump-based classification; (7) cloth- and board-based classification; and (8) other well-defined semantic domains. These classes appear to be the ones that display both central members (fruit, leaf, etc.) and some kind of linkage between these central members and other members. The study by Conklin, however, is a historical comparative study on the description of classifiers in related languages; the process of classification is not pursued in depth.
Semantics of Classifiers

In the studies on semantics of the classifiers, a common theoretical foundation employed is the classical theory which holds that categories are defined by common properties. Hundius and Kölver (1983:189), basing their study in the classical view conclude that “[classifiers] are doubtless meaningful, however, in the sense that, in principle the parameters utilized are traceable to the inherent semantic structure of the associated nouns.” When looking at the actual system, “traceability of the parameters of the nouns associated with the classifier” becomes problematic. In many cases, one finds that many nouns in one class (by means of classifier) have different physical characteristics. To resolve this, Hundius and Kölver (1983:208) notes that in addition to classifiers of which meanings are arrived at from characteristics of nouns, there are classifiers which are associated with nouns that have irregular (not uniform) shapes, that lack definite contour, and that are too large or too complex to be apprehended and identified as typical contours. As such, there exist classifiers of which the meanings are not readily traceable.

The classifiers of whose meaning can be traced are not without a problem. In many cases (e.g., the classifier /bav1/ with the nouns “fruit” and “leaf”, etc.) nouns being classified by the same classifier do not have the same physical characteristics. To make sense of the phenomenon, Hundius and Kölver (1983:205) attribute that associative techniques of gradual expansion and shifting of features are in operation. While the expansion scheme presented might work, the fundamental idea that nouns give meaning to classifiers deserves a closer look. Since the nouns have different physical characteristics, the nouns themselves cannot render meaning to classifiers. Expansion of any sort must be caused by the people who select a particular aspect of the two nouns and link them together, and it could very well be that the aspects are of other kinds, not only physical ones. The concept that noun classification is centered around the physical characteristics of the nouns leads to