VERBAL VS. NOMINAL CLASSIFIER CONSTRUCTIONS IN CANTONESE AND THAI

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In memoriam Joseph H. Greenberg (1915-2001)

1. Background

The topic of this paper[1], like so many topics in typology, was first broached by the late Joseph Greenberg:

> The logical possibility exists, then, that a language might have a system of verbal classifiers each of which would be used with a particular class of verbs and an accompanying numeral. However, this possibility never seems to be realized in the systematic way in which it so often is for nouns.
> (Greenberg 1972: 32)

Greenberg gave example (1) from Mandarin, in which the verb *kan* 'see' appears to select the word *yan* 'eye' as a classifier.

(1) kan-le liang yan
look-PFV two eye
'took a look'
(Mandarin: Greenberg 1972: 30)

Such constructions have indeed been described as verbal classifiers (VCL) in Sinitic languages (e.g. by Killingley 1983 for Cantonese, Paris 1989 for Mandarin).

Beyond Chinese descriptive grammar, however, the VCL phenomenon seems to find no place in current typologies of classifier systems. Although both Aikhenvald (2000) and Grinevald (2000) mention 'verbal classifiers', what they are referring to is in fact nominal classification which is marked on the verb, or by the verb (as in the case of classificatory verbs).

In this paper we examine and compare the counterparts of (1) in Cantonese and Thai, asking to what extent they are distinct from nominal classifier (NCL) constructions, and what semantic functions they perform.

2. Nominal vs. verbal classifier phrases in Cantonese

We assume that in Cantonese, as in Mandarin (cf. Li and Thompson 1981), numeral and classifier combine to form a classifier phrase (CLP). Without committing ourselves to a formal structure for the Noun Phrase, we assume that the CLP is a constituent within NP.

In the case of nominal classifier phrases, the CLP precedes the noun with which it has a selectional relation. The classifier *zoeng1*, for example, is selected by nouns denoting a flat surface:[2]

(2) [[$_{CLP}$ jat1 zoeng1] zi2 $_{NP}$]
one CL paper 'a sheet of paper'

(3) [[$_{CLP}$ loeng5 zoeng1] toi2 $_{NP}$]
two CL table 'two tables'

With verbal classifier phrases, the CLP **follows** the verb with which it has a similar selectional relation. For example, the classifier *seng1* 'voice' is selected by verbs such as *giu3* 'call' and *kat1* 'cough':

(4) [$_{VP}$ giu3 [$_{CLP}$ jat1 seng1]]
call one voice 'call out once'

(5) [$_{VP}$ kat1 [$_{CLP}$ jat1 seng1]]
cough one voice 'give a cough once'

Note that it is not possible to insert a head noun in such cases:

(6) *[$_{VP}$ kat1 [$_{CLP}$ jat1 seng1 je5]
cough one voice stuff

The VCL construction as in (4-5) cannot, therefore, be directly assimilated to the NCL construction as in (2-3). However, the same item can often be used as NCL or VCL, as in the case of *geoi3* 'phrase':

(7) gong2 [NP [CLP gei2 geoi3] Ciu4zau1 waa2] (NCL)
speak a-few phrase Chiuchow-ese
'speak a few words of Chiu Chow'

(8) [VP gong2 [CLP gei2 geoi3]] (VCL)
speak a-few phrase 'say a few words'

There are many such cases of overlap between NCL and VCL constructions. As shown in table 1, some CLs allow only the nominal usage, others only the verbal usage, and many both.

Table 1. Nominal vs. verbal functions of selected classifiers

Classifier	Verbal usage	Nominal usage
Faai3 'slice'	-	Jat1 faai3 beng2 one slice cake
Deoi3 'pair'	-	Jat1 deoi3 haai4 one pair shoes
Coeng4 'length'	Beng6 jat1 coeng4 Sick one period	Jat1 coeng4 beng6 one period illness
Caan1 'meal'	Geng1 jat1 caan1 Fear one mealful	Jat1 caan1 faan6 one meal rice
Zan6 'moment'	Dang2 jat1 zan6 Wait one moment	Jat1 zan6 jyu5 one moment rain
Goek3 'foot'	Tek3 jat1 goek3 Kick one foot	Jat1 goek3 laai4 one foot clay
Seng1 'voice'	Giu3 jat1 seng1 Call one voice	?
Haa5 'blow'	Daa2 gei2 haa5 hit few blows	?
Tiu3 'jump'	Haak3 jat1 tiu3 Scare one jump	?

Given the extensive overlap, a natural hypothesis would be that the VCL is derived from the more frequent and productive NCL construction. Matthews and Yip (1999) proposed a mechanism for such a derivation of VCL constructions from NCL:

(i) Verb taking an NP object containing CLP (NCL construction):

[$_{VP}$ gong2 [$_{NP}$ [$_{CLP}$ gei2 geoi3] waa6]]
say a-few CL speech 'say a few words'

(ii) Deletion of head N (NCL construction with null N):

[$_{VP}$ gong2 [$_{NP}$ [$_{CLP}$ gei2 geoi3] [$_{N}$ ∅]]

(iii) Verb followed by CLP alone (VCL construction):

[$_{VP}$ gong2 [$_{CLP}$ gei2 geoi3]]

A crucial question is whether such a derivation is merely a diachronic step posited in order to account for the existence of VCLs, or rather a synchronic route of derivation. On this issue, Matthews and Yip (1999) argued that the process is synchronically productive on the following grounds:

(a) The deletion of head N leaving CLP is usually possible, provided that deletion does not distort the original interpretation. The interpretation of referents of deleted nouns may be recovered either through context, or from the subcategorisation frame of the preceding head verb. For example, considering (8) without the context of (7), the deleted N cannot refer to any specific kind of entity (e.g. the Chiu Chow language) but only to an unspecified referent, i.e., words in this case.

(b) Alternations of usage exist like that in (7-8), with (8) having the advantage of communicative economy.

(c) Many structures are subject to two possible analyses: as NP with a null N as in stage (ii) above, or as CLP as in stage (iii).[3]