

# The classifier *Gij* in Northern Zhuang

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Zhuang, a Northern Tai language of southern China, has several different kinds of classifiers. One type is the prototypical classifier: words used with individual nouns which fall into a closed set of classes such as animals, plants, flat things and long things. Following Clark (1989:182), I call these words 'classifier nouns'. Other types indicate quantity, and I call these measure words. Measure words are either specific units of measure ('inch, acre, dollar, catty'), names of containers used as measure words ('box of, cup of'), or words for collective sets of things ('string of [beads], pair of, group of').

The word *gij* also fills the classifier slot in a noun phrase, but it does not behave like a typical measure word or classifier noun. Classifiers normally refer to individual tokens or amounts of concrete nouns. One type of noun phrase which requires the use of a classifier is an enumerated noun phrase, since the number of tokens is in focus.

1.a. haj    **bonj**        saw        neix  
      five   cls.: book   writing   this  
      'these five books'

1.b. \*haj    **saw**        neix  
      five   writing   this  
      \*'these five writings'

Another type of sentence which focuses of individual tokens is the distributive sentence, where each instance of one noun in a sentence relates to one instance of the second noun in the sentence.

2. **Boux**            raemj            go.  
     cls.: person   chop-down   cls.: plant  
     'Each person cut down one tree.'

The word *gij*, however, generally cannot co-occur with number words, or be used in distributive sentences. Chinese linguists call *gij* an 'indefinite unit measure word' (Wei 1986:15), reflecting the fact that when *gij* is used the exact number of

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The second way in which *gij* does not behave like other classifiers is that it can be used in place of the normal classifier noun for concrete nouns of any class whatsoever. Normally a classifier can only be used with certain sets of nouns—those which have a certain shape or those which are animals, for example. It is a distinctive characteristic of *gij* that it can combine freely with any noun. In Chinese the term ‘comprehensive measure word’ (Wei 1985:29) is sometimes used for *gij* reflecting this fact. This characteristic of *gij* presents us with the question of what factors determine the choice of whether the normal classifier or *gij* is used in a particular noun phrase. This question will be addressed in the semantics and discourse sections of this paper.

### 1.1 Noun phrase order

### 1.2 Characteristics of classifiers

3. Gou    miz       **song**    **dah**                          sat    lo.  
I       exist      two     cls.: young-woman    finish part.  
'I have two daughters, that's all.'

5. **aen**      **hoengz**  
cls.      red  
'the red one'

<sup>1</sup>Example sentences come variously from my own elicitation, folk stories I have collected, example sentences supplied by the Guangxi Language Commission for a dictionary we are compiling jointly, and published sources. References are given in the text for the later.

A noun may follow the classifier, but it is optional. When the referent has already been mentioned in the discourse, it is more usual for the classifier noun to occur alone without any other noun in the noun phrase.

Semantically, classifier nouns refer to individual, concrete instantiations of things. It is ungrammatical to use them in non-referential noun phrases or in noun phrases where general classes or types are being referred to instead of individual instances or tokens of things.

*Non-referential noun phrase examples:*

6.a. Meh            lauxsae   nwnq       haemq       rox       son       **saw**.  
 cls.: woman teacher that            relatively    know    teach    writing  
 'That teacher can teach pretty well.'

6.b. \*Meh            lauxsae   nwnq       son       **bonj**       **saw**.  
 CL: woman teacher that            teach    CL: book writing

7.a. Haemhhaemh    miz    vunz       bae    dwk       **giuz**.  
 evening-evening   have   people   go    hit       ball  
 'Every night there are people who go to play ball.'

7.b. \*Haemhhaemh    miz    vunz       bae    dwk       **aen**   **giuz**.  
 evening-evening   have   people   go    hit       cls.    ball

*General statements:*

8.a. **Vunz**       gongz   gaenz            cijndaej    miz    gwn,    miz    daenj.  
 people    poor    industrious   only-then   have   eat    have   wear.  
 'Poor people must work hard in order to earn a living.'

8.b. \***Boux**            **vunz**       gongz   gaenz            cijndaej    miz    gwn    miz    daenj  
 cls.: person    people    poor    industrious   only-then   have   eat    have   wear  
 \*'Poor person must work hard in order to earn a living.'

On the other hand, classifier nouns must be used when individual instances of a noun are in focus, as they are in enumerated noun phrases. Individual tokens of a noun are also being referred to when a noun phrase is specific. Noun phrases which include a possessor, a demonstrative pronoun or a relative clause are clearly specific, and so they require a classifier noun. Any noun phrase which is semantically referential and specific must have a classifier noun.

## 2. Semantics of *Gij*

One function of *gij* is as a classifier of abstract nouns, and a second function is to refer to groups of things when they are viewed as a mass collection. Other semantic features are that *gij* is used when the noun is specific, and that it tends to signify inanimate things. For example, body parts such as ‘head’ and ‘stomach’ cannot be referred to with *gij* while they are still part of a living organism, but these nouns can take *gij* as a classifier when they are parts separated off of animals that have been butchered. Further ramifications of the tendency for *gij* to refer to inanimate things is discussed in the section on relative clause nominalizations.

### 2.1 *Gij* used with abstract nouns

Some nouns are abstract and cannot be enumerated or individuated. For example, the abstract nouns for feelings are in this category. Semantically, these abstract nouns do not have any individuated counterparts on analogy with *boux* ‘cls.: person’ and *vunz* ‘human beings’, or *go* ‘cls.: plant’ and *faex* ‘wood’. When an abstract noun occurs in a definite noun phrase, however, the classifier slot in the noun phrase is not left empty; the classifier slot is required to be filled whenever the noun phrase includes a possessor or a deictic. The word used in the classifier position in these noun phrases is the word *gij*, which can be roughly translated as ‘stuff’. One of the most basic functions of *gij*, then, is as the classifier of abstract nouns.

- 9.a. Gou lau aemq mbouj hwnj **gij** cwzyin **yienghneix.**  
 I fear carry not raise cls. responsibility manner-this  
 ‘I’m afraid [I] cannot carry this kind of responsibility.’

- 9.b. \*Gou lau aemq mbouj hwnj **cwzyin** **yienghneix.**  
 I fear carry not raise responsibility manner-this

- 10.a. Yawj **gij** **yienghceij** **de** caen anx.  
 See cls. appearance he really haughty  
 ‘His manner / appearance is really haughty.’

- 10.b. \*Yawj **yienghceij** **de** caen anx.  
 See appearance he really haughty

- 11.a. De gouq gvaq gou, gou mbouj lumz **gij** **aencingz** **de.**  
 he save part. me, I not forget cls. kindness his  
 ‘He saved me; I (will) not forget his kindness.’

- 11.b. \*De gouq gvaq gou, gou mbouj lumz **aencingz** **de.**  
 he save part. me, I not forget kindness his