Classifiers, Specificity and Typology in Asian Languages

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Introduction

It is well known that many Asian languages have nominal classifiers, as in the following examples from Thai:

ex  rom  saam  khan
umbrella three classifier (long, handled object)
‘three umbrellas’

In this paper we are not dealing with the semantic categorization of classifiers (Allen 1977), or with verbal classifiers (Berlin 1968).

The vast majority of published articles about classifiers are either descriptions of individual languages, or they focus more on the semantic categorization of their nouns. In this work we will analyse some articles about classifiers which consider a more general typological point of view in their discussion. This will give us an idea of the current state of knowledge about classifiers. Some of these authors mention definiteness and/or specificity but they give no explanation of the role of these two phenomena. Classifiers are said to be definiteness markers (Adams and Conklin 1975: 2). Some authors (eg. Hundius and Kölver 1987: 182) claim that nouns in these languages denote concepts rather than objects and hence they will be incompatible with direct quantification, and so the classifier is required to enable the nouns to be counted.

Nominal classifier systems have been explained in terms of various semantic/pragmatic functions (Croft 1994), as an operation of nominal ‘concretization’ (Bisang 1993), or in terms of the classifiers having different functions depending on their contextual distribution (eg. Bisang 1993, Hundius and Kölver 1987)

The aim of this article is to account for the presence of nominal classifiers by using the concept of specificity. We explain the apparently varied functions of the classifiers according to the sharing of this concept in the different types of construction. We will also show how the different definitions of definiteness,

specificity and related phenomena are overlapping one to another, making it difficult to find a clear boundary among them. Moreover, these definitions have not been properly established so far, neither in general linguistic theory nor in the literature on classifiers which uses them.

Nevertheless we believe that describing classifiers in terms of specificity is a more exhaustive way to account for the function of classifiers in different and apparently unrelated contexts.

1. Classifiers in Asian Languages

1.1. Classifier constructions

Numeral classifiers are, probably, the most commonly recognized type of classifiers, and are usually defined as classifying morphemes prototypically attached to numerales and expressions of quantity (Croft 1994). The basic morphosyntactic types of noun classification and noun classifiers, identified in terms of their prototypical functions are: noun classification systems, numeral classifiers, noun classifiers (Aikhenvald 1994: 409). Croft, Aikhenvald, and Bisang consider different functions of the classifiers depending on their contexts and they all include grammaticalization in their discussions.  

One of the most recent papers on classifier systems and their cross-linguistic generalizations argues that by examining the classifier's function it is possible to draw some classifier semantic universals: "...any generalizations about the semantic distinctions made by classifiers are likely to be correlated with the grammatical function of the classifier, which in turn will be linked to a semantic or pragmatic function in the utterance" (Croft 1994: 147). The following categorization is proposed by Croft:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Classifier Type</th>
<th>Semantic/Pragmatic Function</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Noun Class</td>
<td>Determination (Reference)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Numeral Classifier</td>
<td>Enumeration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Possessive Classifiers</td>
<td>Possession</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Predicate Classifier</td>
<td>Spatial Predication</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For Croft only the classifier type 'Noun Class' has the semantic/pragmatic function 'Determination (Reference)'. Then the numeral classifier should have the

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2 For a more comprehensive explanation of grammaticalization in classifiers in recent works see also Thomason and Kaufman 1988, Craig 1992 and Sands 1995.
semantic/pragmatic function of 'enumeration' and the Possessive classifier should have the semantic/pragmatic function of 'possession'.

Typologically possessive classifiers are considered quite rare and to exist mainly in Oceanic (Micronesian) and American languages, and they are found exclusively with alienable possessors. Numeral classifiers and possessive classifiers are found in Micronesian languages in which the primary distinction is between edible and other possessed items (Croft 1994: 155). Only in recent publications are classifiers mentioned to exist in possessive constructions in Asian languages (Miao-Yao) (Jaiisser 1987, Bisang 1993, Aikhenvald 1994). None of the typological works published so far on classifiers mentions their existence in possessive constructions in Cantonese.3

Classifiers also appear with adjectives in Asian languages such as in Thai, Hakka, Hmong and Cantonese (Greenberg 1974, Hashimoto 1977, Hundius and Kölver 1987, Bisang 1993)

More recently there has been another attempt to give: "a general framework for the functional range of classifiers in a given language, which will also allow us to establish a typology of classifier languages" (Bisang 1993: 1). In this work four operations of nominal concretization are considered fundamental in order to display a typology of classifier languages. These are: individualization, classification, relationalization (possession) and referentialization. Degrees of grammaticalization should account for the development of classifiers using parameters such as [± exact], [± entity] from T'sou 1973, and cohesion.

Bisang mentions the fact (cf also Hundius & Kölver 1987) that certain nouns in many South East Asian languages express mere concepts of an object which must be further specified, when necessary, by various operations. Since nouns per se do not refer immediately to objects, they are neutral with regard to several aspects, namely: transumerality, individualization and classification.

Bisang and Hundius and Kölver both mention and refer to the first important generalization on classifier languages reported in Greenberg (1974). A synchronic universal shows that numeral classifier languages generally do not have compulsory expression of nominal plurality. Then if a NP is "transnumeral" (Bisang 1993) it cannot occur in immediate combination with a numeral, it has to be individualized by the numeral classifier "as the most appropriate tool with which to make it countable" (Bisang 1993: 3).

3 On possessive constructions in Cantonese see Pacioni (forthcoming).
Classification is a mental operation that causes an object or a multitude of objects to fall under a concept X. Classification and individualization which have often been considered the only operations described in connection with classifiers are the primary functions and (Bisang 1993: 3, bold in original):

"This entirely applies to languages like Thai and Vietnamese, where the absence of a numeral or an overt mark of reference allows the classifier to be interpreted, through its main function of individualization, in terms of specific reference or definiteness.

Thus, in a classifier-noun sequence in Vietnamese, or in a noun-classifier-adjective sequence in Thai, a classifier will be understood as a marker of definiteness (Kölver 1982:177)."

For Bisang the four operations can also be taken as a basis for a typology of classifier languages, then in languages like Mia-Yao in which classifiers may also occur in possessive constructions they have the function of relationalization.

1.0.2. Specificity and related phenomena

If we look at the definitions of specificity and its related phenomena we end up concluding that they look like a puzzle; each definition refers to another related phenomenon definition.

Specificity is usually defined as referring to a unique individual without identifying it as in: ‘She has a [particular] dog’ or as in: ‘A [certain] visitor arrived’. For Enç (1991: 24): "...a theory of natural language semantics contains principles that determine whether or not NP denotations are linked to previously established referents, and how this link can be accomplished. Definiteness involves a strong link, that of identity of reference, whereas specificity involves a weak link, that of being a subset of or standing in some recoverable relation to a familiar object."

Others have claimed that specific reference means: “assigning an algebraic-numerical index to a term. For instance, the (indefinite) specific noun phrase a boy (as in A boy spoke to me yesterday) clearly refers to a particular ith boy selected out of the (perhaps arbitrarily ordered) set of all boys (of some cardinality N)” (Lehman & Namtip Pingkarakwat 1989:1).

Both of these definitions mention definiteness which is supposed to identify a unique referent and to be known by the listener. The difference between definiteness and specificity is that the former identifies a unique referent and the latter refers to a unique individual without identifying it. They share the reference to the unique referent, but specificity does not need to identify it. "Reference is