

Measure Words in Tai: Their Syntactic Function, Word Order, and the Problem of Deletion

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Among the unified standard speech of the Tai languages in Yunnan, there are two major dialects, Xishuangbanna Tai and Dehong Tai.¹ The syntactic features of measure words in both dialects are quite similar.

Measure words (MW) are one of the special characteristics in the languages of the Sino-Tibetan language family. In general, measure words can be divided into two types. One describes objects, and the other actions. The measure words describing objects can be further divided into two types. One type indicates length, capacity, and weight. The other type demonstrates the physical form of the objects. It is this latter type that represents a special characteristic of the Sino-Tibetan languages. This paper attempts to discuss the syntactic functions of measure words, their order in a noun phrase and in a sentence, and the possible conditions for deletion. The data used in this paper are based on the Xishuangbanna Tai dialect, particularly of the Jinhong area.

Functions

Semantically, measure words can denote objects individually or collectively. Examples of measure words denoting individual objects are: *tɔ¹* for animals; *phu³* for people; *kɔ⁴* or *tun³* for trees. As for collective items, examples are: *ku⁶* 'a pair of', *fɯŋ¹* or *mu⁵* 'a group of' (or, 'a flock or a herd of'). The syntactic functions of measure words in Tai can be categorized into the following types:

Substitution. Measure words can be used as substitutes for nouns if the situation is already understood. For example, *kɔ¹ nɯ⁶* [MW + this] 'this (tree)' can be used, without mentioning the tree, in the case where both the speaker and the listener are pointing at a particular tree. Similarly, *sam¹ bin³* [three + MW] 'three pieces (of paper)' is used when both the speaker and

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the listener are referring to the same papers; *noŕ suk³* [MW + ripe] 'the ripe one' when selecting, for example, mangoes; *to¹ bin¹* [MW + fly] 'the flying one' upon seeing a bird flying; *noŕ paŕ² nŕ¹* [MW + top] 'the one on the top' when the speaker and the listener are both aware that there are two books placed on top of each other; *tăŋ² noŕ²* (whole + MW) 'the whole (one)' is used when the entirety of the object is the focus.

In a sentence such as,

- (1) *mak⁹* *noŕ* *nŕ⁶* *pin¹* *noŕ* *to¹ xa³*
 fruit MW this be MW I
 This fruit is mine.

the second *noŕ*² (before a pronoun) occurs in place of the head noun *mak¹*. This kind of substitution between a measure word and its related noun also occurs in proverbs and riddles, for example:

- (2) *tsăp³* *tsu⁶* *luk⁴* *thuk¹* *tsu⁶* *pun¹*
 hold each MW hit each arrow
 Every shot hits the target.
- (3) *bău⁵* *ko¹* *ha⁵* *ko¹* *fun¹*
 not fear MW fear rain
bău⁵ *ko¹* *deŋ⁹* *tho⁵* *lum²* *ti¹*
 not fear sunlight shine wind hit
 Not to be afraid of wind, rain, nor sunshine

Connection. A measure word links its corresponding noun to a noun modifier, for example:

1. nouns and numeral ²

- (4) *pop⁴* *noŕ⁵* *nurŋ⁶*
 book MW one
 one book

² A measure word always precedes the number 'one'. In the case of the number 'two' or higher, the numeral precedes a measure word. Therefore, the order of 'two books' or 'three books' is [noun + numeral + MW]. Even though a measure word does not occur between a noun and a numeral in this latter case, it is still a connecting element between a noun and a numeral.

2. nouns and demonstratives

- (5) *kă¹dat¹* *bin³* *n⁶*
 paper MW this
 this piece of paper

3. nouns and adjectives

- (6) *hun¹taŋ²* *sin³* *hy⁶hyŋ²*
 road path MW glorious
 a glorious road (a road which is glorious)

4. nouns and verbs

- (7) *phă⁶mŋ²* *mu⁵* *jap¹sar³*
 citizen MW work
 a group of people (who are) working

5. nouns and phrases

a) verb-object construction:

- (8) *lō¹ŋon⁵* *to¹* *leŋ⁴* *ho²*
 child MW raise cow
 a child who tends cows

b) subject-predicate construction:

- (9) *tŕ⁵tsu²* *phu³* *tsă¹hai⁴*
 landlord MW ill will
 an evil landlord (a landlord who is evil)

c) verb-complement construction:

- (10) *xep³* *ku⁶* *sup³* *pu²*
 shoes pair wear worn out
 a pair of worn-out shoes (a pair of shoes which is worn-out)

d) compound sentence construction

- (11) *xva²* *to¹* *pi²* *kɔ⁴* *pi²* *tɛm⁵*
 water buffalo MW fat also fat short
kɔ⁴ *tɛm⁵*
 also short
 a short and fat water buffalo

e) serial verb construction

- (12) *kun*² *to*¹ *keu*⁵ *ja*⁵ *ʔor*⁵ *ho*²
 person MW cut grass feed cow
 a person who cuts grass and feeds cows

f) coordinate construction

- (13) *sv*³*jen*⁴ *phu*³ *ham*³ *tan*⁶ *sau*²*hej*²
 commune member MW urge s/he rest
 a commune member who urges him/her to take a rest

Distinction. The third function of measure words is to distinguish a compound from a phrase and a phrase from a sentence. This type of function is derived from the connection type above. Examples are:

- (14) *tsarj*⁴ *lorj*¹
 elephant big
 a big elephant

- (15) *tsarj*⁴ *to*¹ *lorj*¹
 elephant MW big
 an elephant which is big

- (16) *tsarj*⁴ *kin*¹ *fvj*²
 elephant eat hay
 An elephant eats hay.

- (17) *tsarj*⁴ *to*¹ *kin*¹ *fvj*²
 elephant MW eat hay
 an elephant which eats hay

Determining references. A measure word determines which noun is the intended head noun in a noun phrase. [Since the following discussion includes the Chinese version of the examples below, the Chinese translations are also given. This will also be the practice for later examples in a similar situation.—trans.]

- (18) *kun*² *ʔan*² *nuf*⁶ *sv*³ *xau*¹ *ko*⁴ *non*⁶
ren (*de*) *chuān* *yī* *bái* *ge* *nèi*
 person who wear shirt white MW that
nèi ge chuān bái yīfu de rén.
 that person who wears a white shirt