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: \(\text{to}^1\) for animals; \(\text{phu}^2\) for people; \(\text{kn}^4\) or \(\text{tun}^5\) for trees. As for collective items, examples are: \(\text{ku}^6\) 'a pair of', \(\text{fun}^1\) or \(\text{mu}^5\)'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, \(\text{kn}^1\ \text{ni}^6\ [\text{MW} + \text{this}]\) '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, \(\text{sam}^1\ \text{bin}^3\ [\text{three} + \text{MW}]\) 'three pieces (of paper)' is used when both the speaker and

\(^1\) Portions of this paper were delivered at the Association for Asian Studies Annual Meeting in Chicago, March 1986. Ngampit Jagacinski translated this paper from the original Chinese.
the listener are referring to the same papers; nor¹ suk³ [MW + ripe] 'the ripe one' when selecting, for example, mangoes; to¹ bin¹ [MW + fly] 'the flying one' upon seeing a bird flying; nor¹ par² nr¹ [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; tār² nor⁶ (whole + MW) 'the whole (one)' is used when the entirety of the object is the focus.

In a sentence such as,

(1) mak⁹ nor⁶ nɪ⁵ pin¹ nor⁵ to¹ xa³
fruit MW this be MW I

This fruit is mine.

the second nor⁶ (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 pum¹
hold each MW hit each arrow

Every shot hits the target.

(3) bārus⁵ ko¹ ha⁵ ko¹ fun¹
not fear MW fear rain
bārus⁵ ko¹ def⁶ tho⁵ lum² ti⁴
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 nor⁶ nrur⁶
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) \(kā^1 \text{dat}^1 \quad \text{bin}^3 \quad nī^5\)
paper \(\text{MW}\) this
this piece of paper

3. nouns and adjectives

(6) \(\text{hun}^1\text{tar}^2 \quad \text{sin}^3 \quad hī^5\text{hrī}^3\)
road \(\text{MW}\) glorious
a glorious road (a road which is glorious)

4. nouns and verbs

(7) \(\text{phā}^5\text{mrī}^3 \quad \text{mu}^5 \quad \text{jap}^1\text{sar}^3\)
citizen \(\text{MW}\) work
a group of people (who are) working

5. nouns and phrases

a) verb-object construction:

(8) \(lō^1\text{ton}^5 \quad \text{to}^1 \quad \text{leŋ}^4 \quad \text{ho}^2\)
child \(\text{MW}\) raise cow
a child who tends cows

b) subject-predicate construction:

(9) \(\text{tī}^5\text{tsu}^2 \quad \text{phu}^3 \quad \text{tsā}^1\text{hā}^4\)
landlord \(\text{MW}\) ill will
an evil landlord (a landlord who is evil)

c) verb-complement construction:

(10) \(\text{xep}^3 \quad \text{ku}^4 \quad \text{sup}^3 \quad \text{put}^3\)
shoes \(\text{pair}\) wear worn out
a pair of worn-out shoes (a pair of shoes which is worn-out)

d) compound sentence construction

(11) \(\text{xva}^3 \quad \text{to}^1 \quad pī^2 \quad \text{krī}^4 \quad pī^2 \quad \text{tem}^5\)
water buffalo \(\text{MW}\) fat also fat short
\(\text{krī}^4 \quad \text{tem}^5\)
also short
a short and fat water buffalo
e) serial verb construction

(12) kun²  to¹  keu⁵  ja⁵  ñor⁴  ho³
    person  MW  cut  grass  feed  cow
    a person who cuts grass and feeds cows

f) coordinate construction

(13) sv³ jen⁴  phu³  ham³  tan⁶  sau² her²
    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) tsar⁴  log¹
    elephant  big
    a big elephant

(15) tsar⁴  to¹  log¹
    elephant  MW  big
    an elephant which is big

(16) tsar⁴  kin¹  fn²
    elephant  eat  hay
    An elephant eats hay.

(17) tsar⁴  to¹  kin¹  fn²
    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) kun²  ñan²  nuu³  sv³  xau¹  ko⁴  ndu⁶
    rën  (de)  chuân  yi³  bái  ge  nèi
    person  who  wear  shirt  white  MW  that
    nèi ge chuân bái yīfu de rën.
    that person who wears a white shirt

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