

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	<i>rom</i>	<i>saam</i>	<i>khan</i>
	umbrella	three	classifier (long, handled object)
	'three umbrellas' ¹		

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,

¹ Example from Hundius and Kölver (1987: 167).

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 numerals 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.²

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:

Classifier Type	Semantic/Pragmatic Function
Noun Class	Determination (Reference)
Numeral Classifier	Enumeration
Possessive Classifiers	Possession
PredicateClassifier	Spatial Predication

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

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) (Jaisser 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 [\pm exact], [\pm 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 Pingkarawat 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

accomplished by making a description of what is to be referred to complete enough to allow the addressee to find the referent" (Hoffmann 1993: 187).

It should not be forgotten that the specific/nonspecific distinction is among the oldest 'semantic primes', since that distinction "had as its cerebral foundation the different storage of percepts and concepts" (Bickerton 1981: 248) then it must be strong. The semantic infrastructure, as Bickerton says, tells us where the lines may be drawn between lexicalizable areas of meaning, but not where they must be drawn.

2. Specificity and Classifiers

We have pointed out that the precise function of classifiers has not yet been fully explicated. In this section we will give some evidence to relate the different occurrences of classifiers to definiteness and specificity.

Many authors recognize that classifiers function as 'individualiers' of a head noun which is indeterminate for number, since Greenberg (1974) pointed out that: "Numeral classifier languages generally do not have compulsory expression of nominal plurality, but at most facultative expression."

As has been already said, several authors mention definiteness in the literature on classifiers to explain their function. The majority of them agree on accounting for the occurrence of classifier plus a bare noun in terms of definiteness (eg. Jaisser 1987 on Hmong, Hundius and Kölver 1987 on Thai).

A NP with specific reference requires a classifier in languages like Thai, Cantonese, Vietnamese, and Hakka, where bare nouns can only be interpreted as generics. In languages which do not allow the construction [classifier N], like Mandarin, a bare noun can be read as either specific or generic.

ex:

Mandarin	Cantonese
<i>Wo kan shu</i>	<i>ngóh tái syù</i>
I read the books	I read books
I read the book	

Our analysis that classifiers mark specificity is supported by the fact that in all these languages when the classifier is omitted then the noun should be generic (Hundius & Kölver 1987, Jaisser 1987, Matthews and Yip 1994).

Numeral plus classifier constructions also show the role of specificity. Enumeration presupposes the isolation of natural units of the same kind.

Enumeration involves two cognitive processes: individualization of units and identification of them as being of the same kind (Denny 1986, Croft 1994:163). The process of individualization is based on the semantic concept of specificity.

Individualization is also shared with demonstratives, since they imply individualization of the person or object being pointed out (Denny 1986, Croft 1994:163). The second of Greenberg's (1974: 35) important generalizations about classifiers is still valuable and it concerns classifiers occurring with demonstratives. He pointed out that a synchronic universal seems to be that wherever a classifier construction is used in a non-quantifier construction the demonstrative construction is one of these, often the only one even in areas geographically distinct and historically independent such as Chinese, Thai, Vietnamese, Bengali, Nauru (Micronesia) Kiriwina (Melanesia). As examples of these languages we can see Cambodian where classifiers are not compulsory — in the informal style — with numeral expressions, but their presence is obligatory with demonstratives (Greenberg 1974)

Greenberg (1974) remarks that demonstratives seem to have, as well as numbers, a special relation with individuating and non-collective expressions, but the details of this relation are still to be investigated.

We suggest that underlying this is specificity. What demonstratives share with numbers is predicating a 'unique' quality/property; in this case a precise location in space. If something we point out is a 'this' it cannot be a 'that'. Deictics not only individuate but also refer to a unique specific referent. In support of this we can see that in languages like Thai in which we find classifiers plus demonstratives, the construction demonstrative plus Noun is also possible but the resulting meaning is a generic:

rom nii
umbrella this
'this/these umbrella(s)

rom khan nii
umbrella classifiers this
'this umbrella'

Examples from Hundius & Kölver (1987: 172)

As these examples show only the construction with the classifier has a specific and "unambiguous singular" meaning is 'this umbrella' not 'this or these umbrella/s'.

Possessive classifier constructions also show the role of specificity. Berg (1995: 173) has pointed out that possession and definiteness are separate concepts:

“intuitively, a referent such as ‘my friend’ is definite, but does the mere presence of a possessive imply definiteness? Constructions such as ‘a friend of mine’ show that possession and definiteness are separate categories.”

Berg asks (ibid): “To what extent are they related?”. In our view specificity is the link between possession and definiteness. A possessed nominal is necessarily specific. One of the ways we define specificity is in terms of picking out a unique individual, but not identifying it. Possession involves a relationship between unique individuals: the possessor and the possessed object. This does not identify the individuals with one another. Thus, ‘their book’ does not identify ‘them’ and ‘book’ as the same entity.

The use of classifiers in possessive constructions in Cantonese provides strong support for our view (Pacioni forthcoming)⁴. In Cantonese there are four means of indicating possession:

1. bare possessor plus possessed, used for inalienable possession, as in:

ngóh gogo
I elder brother
‘my elder brother’

2. possessor plus *ge* plus possessed, used for alienable possession, as in:

ngóh ge pàhng-yáuh
I GE friend(s)
‘my friend(s)’

3. possessor plus classifier plus possessed, used for singular alienable possession, as in:

ngóh go pàhng-yáuh
I classifier friend(s)
‘my friend’

⁴ Although possessive classifiers have been reported for Oceanic and Amerindian languages their presence in Chinese dialects other than Mandarin is not well known (for example, Bisang 1993 reports that Hmong and another Miao language “appear to be the only classifier languages in which numeratives [ie. classifiers - PP] display the particular capacity of relationalization [ie. occur in possessive constructions - PP]”).

4. possessor plus *di* plus possessed, used for plural alienable possession, as in:

ngóh di pàhng-yáuh

I DI friend(s)

'my friends'

The difference between (2) and (3) is that the presence of the classifier signals specificity and singular number.⁵ In addition, to confirm that the form with a classifier signals the specificity, it is also possible to use 'ge' with inalienable possession as well, as in Mandarin with 'de'.

Cantonese

ngóh (ge)mà má

I GE mother

'my mother'

Mandarin

wo (de) mama

I DE mother

'my mother'

Classifiers are also used with some attributive adjectives in a number of Asian languages, eg. Cantonese, Hmong, Thai and Newari. In all these languages just 'big', and 'small' occur in such constructions (Thai also allows colour terms). Dixon 1977 points out that such expressions of 'dimension' are cross-linguistically the most basic members of the adjective class. Dimension is one aspect of individualization and thus related to specificity. Also, predicating something about the size of the object in question gives it a unique quality (excluding its description by the antonymous term). This again assigns specificity, and so it is just these adjectives which we would expect to find associated with classifiers.

Cantonese

daaihi go yàhn

large classifier person

'a big person'

In Thai we also find classifiers with 'big' and color terms, as in this sentence (Hundius & Kölver 1987:177):

⁵ In Cantonese there is another possible possessive construction mainly used for formal Cantonese 'dik' which is the Cantonese reading for the Mandarin 'de.'

rom khan sii-khiaw khan jai
 umbrella classifier green classifier big
 'the big green umbrella'

Finally, note that in all these languages classifiers are never used in proverbs (Goral 1978: 14) We take this to be further evidence for specificity since it is precisely proverbial statements which are generic and hence non-specific.

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