Numeral Classifiers in Sgaw Karen

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The purpose of this paper is to present data on numeral classifiers in the Mae Chaem dialect (Chiengmai) of Sgaw Karen. It was found that there are three types of classifiers in Sgaw Karen: unit classifiers, noun-derived classifiers, and verb-derived classifiers. Noun-derived classifiers can be further divided into simple unit classifiers, group classifiers, action classifiers, and measurement classifiers. These classifiers are discussed together with exhaustive examples. The classifier constructions which belong to the "Southeast Asian" type (see Jones 1970) are given. A short discussion concludes the article.¹

The fact that Southeast Asia abounds with numeral classifiers is well known. Robert B. Jones in his "Classifier Constructions in Southeast Asia", an essay honoring Mary R. Haas in 1970, suggested that the Tai group of languages is a possible source of influence in the spread of the use of classifiers in Southeast Asia and China. Numeral classifiers in languages of different families in Southeast Asia have been described at length since Haas 1942 (see Burling 1965; Hla Pe 1967; Benton 1968; Omar 1972; Nguyê phú Phong 1975; Adams, Becker, and Conklin 1975; Wajanarat 1980, and others). However Karen happened to be overlooked, alluded to by a few examples in Jones 1970. It is the purpose of this paper to present data on classifiers in the Mae Chaem dialect of Sgaw Karen. The writer of this article is also the compiler of a dictionary of this dialect of Sgaw Karen, viz. the Thai-Sgaw

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Karen Dictionary, 2 volumes, 1,277 pages, 1986. Data in this paper are taken exclusively from this dictionary.

Numeral classifiers (see Jones 1970, T’sou 1976, Allen 1977) are those morphemes which identify units, usually by reference to the shape of the object or objects concerned, when a number is present. All countable nouns are obligatorily associated with a classifier if a number is used in counting them. For example,

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{ce⁰} & \quad \text{thi⁰} & \quad \text{poʔ¹} & \quad \text{teʔ¹} & \quad \text{phleʔ} \\
& \quad \text{I} & \quad \text{see} & \quad \text{tent} & \quad \text{one} & \quad \text{CL} \\
& \quad \text{‘I see one tent.’} \\
\end{align*}
\]

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{ce⁰} & \quad \text{luʔ¹} & \quad \text{ne⁰} & \quad \text{she²ka²} & \quad \text{seʔ³} & \quad \text{beʔ¹} \\
& \quad \text{I} & \quad \text{choose} & \quad \text{obtain} & \quad \text{shirt} & \quad \text{three} & \quad \text{CL} \\
& \quad \text{‘I chose three shirts.’} \\
\end{align*}
\]

Uncountable nouns include such lexical items as thi² ‘water’, so² ‘oil’, and me² ‘cooked rice’. When used with numbers these nouns must take the measures classifiers.

I. **Types of classifiers**

There are three types of numeral classifiers in Sgaw Karen: unit classifiers, noun-derived classifiers, and verb-derived classifiers.

I.1 **Unit classifiers**

Unit classifiers constitute a set of morphemes whose only function is to classify nouns. They cannot be used as a common noun. If they appear as a common noun (ex. ‘thu²’ as a noun means ‘mountain’ and is used also as a classifier for cloth, cigarettes and bananas), then it is the case of homonym. Unit classifiers in Sgaw Karen are simple unit classifiers. Twenty unit classifiers have been found:

1. **po²** ‘section of bamboo’, used as a classifier with:
   wa¹ ‘bamboo’, me²te²bla² ‘preparation of
glutinous rice cooked in a bamboo joint’, me¹tu² ‘fireworks’.


4. phu³ ‘bunch of flowers, cluster of flowers’, used with: phọ²ta¹shỹ⁴ ‘roses’.

5. tọ² ‘place’, used with: ma²ta¹ ‘work’, phi³ ‘place’.

6. thu² ‘roll, curl, furl’, used with: mo³thu² ‘cigarette’, se¹kwì³ la¹ ‘banana leaf’, ta¹ki³jna³ ‘cloth’.

7. cu¹ ‘set’, used with: she²ka² ‘shirt’, phọ²khi² ‘trousers’.

8. ko³ ‘heap, pile, stack’, used with: lo¹bo² ‘straw’, se²mị¹ ‘firewood’.

9. kha² ‘item, thing, affair, matter’, used with: no¹bọ³ ‘ladle’, ta¹pọ³ ‘strainer’, ta¹ ‘matter’, ta¹ma² ‘work’, ta¹yε¹ ‘affair’, li³ ‘book, knowledge, subject’, no²me¹ ‘tea (boiled)’, na¹phọ²ʔi³ ‘pickled fish’, ta¹jọ³ ‘food’, thi² ‘water’, lo¹da² ‘mattress’, pe³thọ³ khli² ‘grains of bean (for planting)’, pya¹pu² ‘forest’, ta¹kα¹lì¹ ‘voice’, kha³ ‘table’, ta¹tu² ‘prayer’, ta¹sha² ‘disease’.

10. kọ³ ‘piece, fragment, pipe, tube’, used with: khri² ‘wild yam (a head of)’, se¹ ‘wood (a long section of cut timber)’, se¹mị¹ ‘firewood’, si³na³ ‘pistol, firearm’.
11. khu³³

‘piece’, used with: se¹ ‘wood (a cylindrical section of cut timber used as a chair)’.

12. dì²


13. mɔ²

‘mouthful’, used with: me² ‘cooked rice’, se¹be² ‘a concoction to be chewed having betel nuts as the main ingredients’.

14. sha²

‘item’, used with: ta¹dɔ³³će³³ ‘examination questions’, ko¹na² ‘arithmetic problems’.

15. sho²

‘pair, item (especially with engine, machine, motor, things having movement, music instruments)’, used with: cya¹ ‘cymbals’, kho¹phi³ ‘shoes’, na¹di³³ ‘earrings’, tha¹ ‘loom’, çe³³sho³ ta¹ ‘sewing machine’, ko¹ha¹ ‘water wheel’, ko¹ha¹ri³³ ‘bicycle’, kwe³³le¹lo² ‘telephone’, mɔ¹to³ka³³ le¹ ‘bus’, na¹ri¹ ‘clock, wrist-watch’, le¹ ‘ox-cart’, le¹ dì³³ta¹ ‘tank’, le¹ me¹tu² ‘train’, le¹zo¹ ‘bicycle’, shi³³ ‘cradle, hammock’, swë¹cu¹ ‘balance, a pair of scales’, te²na¹ ‘lute’, thɔ¹lo³³ ‘fiddle’, so¹xe² ‘harmonica’.
16. **ye¹** ‘line’, used with: pa²coʔ³pho² ‘pupils, students’, sɨʔ³pho² ‘soldiers’.


18. **zi¹** ‘thing, affair, business’, used with: po²leʔ³ple² ‘story’, ta¹yo²mu² ‘movies’.

19. **zuʔ¹** ‘classifier for a sleep, a nap’, used with: mi² ‘a sleeping time’.

20. **lo¹** ‘lump, block, clunk’, used with: bi² ‘a sheaf of rice’, ta¹ʔaʔ¹ ‘cloud’, ta²ja¹ ‘flesh, meat’, di²ciʔ¹ ‘brick’, diʔ¹ ‘fried eggs’ (NB. boiled eggs have phleʔ¹ as a classifier; see supra), ka¹thiʔ²xeʔ¹ ‘loaf of palm sugar’, sa²pjaʔ¹ ‘soap’, le¹shi¹wa² ‘potash alum’.

1.2 **Noun-derived classifiers**

Noun-derived classifiers in Sgaw Karen are common nouns which are used in the position of classifiers. Noun-derived classifiers include simple unit classifiers, group classifiers, time classifiers and measurement classifiers. All in all there are sixty-two (62) noun-derived classifiers.

**Simple unit classifiers**

1. **pa²** as a noun means ‘side’, used as a classifier for one side of things which usually come in pairs. Used with: peʔ¹so¹ ‘lung’, thoʔ³ ‘pig (one half of)’, kho¹ ‘foot’, kho¹phiʔ³ ‘shoe’, kho¹phlo¹ ‘sock’, ciʔ³ ‘hand’, khɛʔ³ta¹bo² ‘pencil (one tip of)’, sho ‘chicken (one half of)’, yo²pa² ‘wall’.
2. **pu** as a noun means ‘hole’, used as a classifier with: bɨ ‘rice (a bucket of)’, pe’pɔ ‘mosquito net’.


4. **tə** as a noun means ‘sack’, used as a classifier for things coming in a sack such as bɨ ‘unhusked rice’, ti’sa ‘salt’.

5. **thi** as a noun means ‘word’, used as a classifier with: ta’kwə ‘language, word’.

6. **thu** as a noun means ‘tree’, used as a classifier with all kind of trees, such as thɔ ‘Toddy palm’,


14. khĩ₁ as a noun means ‘spool, reel’, used as a classifier with: plĩ² ‘rope’, lĩ¹ ‘cotton thread’.

15. khle¹ as a noun means ‘a stem-part of flowers such as that of coconut, a cluster of fruit such as that of Toddy palm’, used as a classifier with: thɔ²sa¹ ‘Toddy palm’, ke¹ho¹ ‘a kind of tropical fruit’, bĩ² (ears of) paddy’, se³sa¹ ‘betel nut’, xo²sa¹ ‘coconut’.

16. khle² as a noun means ‘the outside of’, used as a classifier with: ho¹kho¹ ‘land’.

tooth’, mè1 kə³¹la² ‘looking-glass’, mi¹ni² ‘calendar’, mo² ‘gong’, no¹te² ‘spoon’, no¹khwe² ‘broom’, le³¹kho² ‘bowl’, le²¹kho² pha³³le¹ ‘basin, tray’, lo²¹mo¹ pya¹ ‘Blattaria, cockroach’, si¹swa² ‘comb’, si³mo¹le² bya²³ ‘aphides’, se¹lwa?¹ ‘(wooden) board, plank’, se³bi³¹ ‘plate, dish’, se³¹bi³¹ la¹ ‘Paper betel leaf’, su¹ ‘head louse’, she²ka² ‘shirt’, sho² ‘(a whole) chicken’, swe² ‘dip-net for fishing’, shwe¹ ‘crab’.

18. bo²


19. de²

as a noun means ‘claw (of a crab), a bunch of flowers’, used as a classifier with: xɔ²sa¹ shyo³³ ‘blossom (spadix) of the coconut tree’, and shwe¹ de² ‘crab’s claw’.
20. de⁵⁰ as a noun means ‘box, case, wrapper’, used as a classifier with: bo⁴⁰tho⁷³ ‘firecrackers’, mo⁷¹thu² ‘(a case of) cigarettes’, wi²⁷thu²⁷yu⁷³ ‘radio’.

21. mi² as a noun means ‘name’, used as a classifier meaning ‘kind, sort, category, specimen’ with: ta²⁷sa¹ ‘fruits’, bo⁴¹so⁷² lo¹tho¹ ‘(several transfigure of) tiger’.

22. mi¹ as a noun means ‘liana, vine, climbers’, used as a classifier with: se¹xi¹ ‘vine’, lu¹khe² ‘pumpkin vine’, lu¹sa¹ ‘white (wax) gourd’.

23. si¹ as a noun means ‘comb’, used as a classifier meaning ‘a hand of’ with: se³kwí³ ‘bananas’.

24. se¹be⁷ as a noun means ‘arrangement’, used as a classifier meaning ‘a unit of things which one has arranged’ with: se¹kwí³ la¹ ‘banana leaves’, no²ma¹thi³ ‘fermented tea-leaves (around 30 leaves)’, se¹blí³ la¹ ‘Piper betel leaves (around 8–9 leaves)’.

25. shu⁷ as a noun means ‘room’, used as a classifier with: de³ shu³ ‘a room in a house’.

26. swa² as a noun means ‘a ladder-step’, used as a classifier with: xa² ‘ladder’.

Group classifiers

1. pu³ as a noun means ‘heap, pile’, used as a classifier with: pa² ‘(a group of) men’, ta³na¹ ‘meat’, bi² ‘paddy’, se¹mi² ‘firewood’, si³ ‘alcoholic drink’, me² ‘sand’.

2. ke¹phi² as a noun means ‘group’, used as a classifier with: pa² ‘(a group of) men’.
3. klaʔ³ as a noun means ‘group’, used as a classifier with: pa² ‘(a group of) men’, te¹mlaʔ¹ pho² ‘bandits’.

4. ?uʔ³ as a noun means ‘group’, used as a classifier with: pa² ‘(a group of) men’, pe¹na¹ mi² ‘(a herd of) wild buffalos’, ta¹ ‘things’, tho¹ ‘(a flock of) birds’, ja²sa² ‘(a group of) policemen’, sha¹ ‘(a constellation of) stars’, swi¹ siʔ³ po¹ ‘(a crowd of) foxes’, mo¹liʔ³ ‘(a throng of) monkeys’, le²khə² ‘(a set of) dishes’.

5. duʔ¹ as a noun means ‘a brood of, a litter of’, used as a classifier with: thoʔ³ ‘(a litter of little) pigs’, sho² ‘(a brood of) chickens’.

**Action classifiers**

1. blə² as a noun means ‘one time’, used as a classifier with several action verbs such as phle² ‘beat’, diʔ³ ‘fight’, le² ‘go’.

2. co¹ as a noun means ‘a little while’, used as a classifier with verbs such as khoʔ³ ‘wait’, toʔ³ co² ‘help’.

3. co² as a noun means ‘a generation’, used as a classifier with verbs such as toʔ¹ ‘live’.

4. na¹ri¹ as a noun means ‘one hour’, used as a classifier after numerals.

5. ni¹ as a noun means ‘year’, used as a classifier after numerals.

6. ni² as a noun means ‘day’, used as a classifier after numerals.
7. nwiʔ³ as a noun means ‘week’, used as a classifier after numerals.

8. sə¹ as a noun means ‘night’, used as a classifier after numerals.

Measurement classifiers

For standardized measures of weights and space, both lineal and square, the Sgaw Karen people have their own system, at least among older people. These may become obsolescent, as English and Metric measures are on the way to replace them.

1. baʔ¹ (T.) as a noun means ‘Baht’ both for monetary and weight, used as a classifier after numerals.

2. bəʔ¹ (ləʔ³ ciʔ³) as a noun means ‘one scoop up with one hand’, used as a classifier after numerals.

3. ho¹ (ləʔ³ ciʔ³) as a noun means ‘one scoop up with both hands’, used as a classifier after numerals.

4. cyo² (ləʔ³ ciʔ³) as a noun means ‘one scoop up with one clenched fist’, used as a classifier after numerals.

5. tha² as a noun means ‘a span, a Karen unit of linear measure equal to the fully extended hand (between the thumb and the middle finger)’, used as a classifier after numerals.

6. si¹tə¹ as a noun means ‘a span, a Karen unit of linear measure equal to the fully extended hand (between the thumb and the index finger)’, used as a classifier after numerals.
7. tha¹ as a noun means ‘a pail’, used as a classifier after numerals.

8. the² as a noun means ‘a dozen’, used as a classifier after numerals.

9. ce³ as a noun means ‘a little bit of’, used as a classifier after numerals.

10. ke¹ pho³ as a noun means ‘a measure equal to the length between the joints of the middle finger’, used as a classifier after numerals.

11. ke¹ as a noun means ‘a handful of’, used as a classifier after numerals.

12. ke¹ pha³ do³ as a noun means ‘a handful of (using both hands)’, used as a classifier after numerals.

13. khri² as a noun means ‘a Karen measurement for height equal to one fist (with the thumb flat)’, used as a classifier after numerals, usually used to measure the height of pigs, piles of wood, etc.

14. phi³ as a noun means ‘a Karen measurement for height equal to one fist (with a slight elevation of the thumb)’, used as a classifier after numerals, usually used to measure the height of pigs, piles of wood, etc.

15. ce³ as a noun means ‘a Karen measurement for height equal to one fist (with a fully elevated thumb)’, used as a classifier after numerals, usually used to measure the height of pigs, piles of wood, etc.
16. khɔʔcɪʔ as a noun means ‘a Karen measurement for length equal to one hand’, used as a classifier after numerals.

17. khli as a noun means ‘a Karen linear measure equal to two extended arms’, used as a classifier after numerals.

18. pla as a noun means ‘a Karen linear measure equal to the span between the elbow and the tip of the extended middle finger’, used as a classifier after numerals.

19. tɛ as a noun means ‘a Karen linear measure equal to the span between the elbow and the clenched fist’, used as a classifier after numerals.

20. shi as a noun means ‘a unit of ten’, used as a classifier after numerals.

21. keʔpʰi as a noun means ‘a group of about ten people’, used as a classifier after numerals, usually used with yaʔsa ‘policemen’, siʔʰo ‘soldiers’.

22. keʔja as a noun means ‘a group of about one hundred people’, used as a classifier after numerals, usually used with yaʔsa ‘policemen’, siʔʰo ‘soldiers’.

23. keʔtho as a noun means ‘a group of about one thousand people,’ used as a classifier after numerals, usually used with yaʔsa ‘policemen’, siʔʰo ‘soldiers’.
1.3 Verb-derived classifiers

Verb-derived classifiers are classifiers which are also verbs. They are less numerous than noun-derived classifiers. The following items have been found:

1. shye\(^2\) as a verb means ‘to carry (hold) in both arms’, used as a classifier after numerals with: bo\(^1\) ‘bamboo-shoots’, se\(^1\)mi\(^1\) ‘firewood’.

2. bo\(^1\) as a verb means ‘to wrap’, used as a classifier after numerals with: ko\(^1\) ‘(a wrapped package of) sweetmeats’, mo\(^1\)thu\(^2\) ‘(a carton) of cigarettes’, sha\(^2\)kho\(^3\) ‘(a wrapped package of) paper’.

3. Klo\(^1\) as a verb means ‘to coil, to roll, to curl up’, used as a classifier after numerals with: pli\(^2\) ‘rope’.

4. ki\(^3\) as a verb means ‘to cut into sections’, used as a classifier after numerals with: ta\(^2\)na\(^2\) ‘meat’, ko\(^1\) ‘sweetmeats, cake’.

5. khli\(^3\) as a verb means ‘to fold’, used as a classifier after numerals with: ta\(^1\)ki\(^3\)na\(^1\) ‘cloth’, ja\(^1\) ‘blanket’.

II. Classifier constructions

Sgaw Karen constructions are of the “Southeast Asian” type, that is to say they follow the order noun + numeral + classifier.\(^2\) This

\(^2\)Jones 1970 divides the languages of Southeast Asia and South China into two large groups distinguished by the structure of noun phrases involving classifiers. The difference is based on the position in the phrase of the head noun. One group employs the pattern numeral + noun (e.g., Chinese, Vietnamese); Jones terms this the “Chinese” type. The other group employs the pattern noun
noun-phrase pattern can be extended by the addition of demonstratives and adjectivals, so that the full noun-phrase order is: Noun + Adjectival + Numeral + Classifier + Demonstrative (or, N + Adj + Num + CL + Dem).

Examples:

\[
\begin{array}{llllll}
\text{N} & \text{Adj} & \text{Num} & \text{CL} & \text{Dem} \\
\text{na}^1 \text{ri}^1 & \gamma_e^2 & \text{kh}i^2 & \text{sho}^2 & \text{ne}^1 \\
\text{watch} & \text{good} & \text{two} & \text{CL} & \text{that} \\
\text{those} & \text{two} & \text{good} & \text{watches} & \\
\end{array}
\]

\[
\begin{array}{llllll}
\text{she}^2 \text{ka}^2 & \gamma_\circ^2 & \text{sa}^?^3 & \text{be}^?^1 & \text{i}^2 \\
\text{shirt} & \text{red} & \text{three} & \text{CL} & \text{this} \\
\text{these} & \text{three} & \text{red} & \text{shirts} & \\
\end{array}
\]

However if we devide this big noun-phrase into two smaller ones—i.e., (1) a numeral noun phrase and (2) a demonstrative noun phrase—we will have these constructions:

\text{numeral noun phrase}

\[
\begin{array}{llllll}
\text{N} & \text{Adj} & \text{Num} & \text{CL} \\
\text{sha}^1 & \text{pha}^?^3 \text{do}^?^3 & \text{ta}^?^1 & \text{phla}^?^1 \\
\text{star} & \text{big} & \text{one} & \text{CL} \\
\text{one} & \text{big} & \text{star} & \\
\end{array}
\]

\[
\begin{array}{llllll}
\text{d}_\circ^2 & \text{cu}^?^1 & \text{kh}i^2 & \text{be}^?^1 \\
\text{knife} & \text{pointed} & \text{two} & \text{CL} \\
\text{two} & \text{pointed} & \text{knives} & \\
\end{array}
\]

In this type of noun phrase the CL is obligatory. To delete the CL from the numeral noun-phrase will produce an ungrammatical phrase in Sgaw Karen.

+ numeral + classifier (e.g., Thai, Burmese); this he calls the "Southeast Asian" type.
demonstrative noun phrase

N  (CL)     Dem    Adj
šé₁ (phleʔ₁) ʔi²     phyiʔ²
sack   (CL)  this    light
‘this light (≠ heavy) sack’

koʔ₁ (beʔ₁) ʔi²     be² ye²
cake   (CL)  this    tasty
‘this tasty cake’

We can see that with the demonstrative noun phrase, the CL is not obligatory. We have numerous examples of demonstrative noun phrase without CL.

III. Discussion

1. Classifiers are well established in Sgaw Karen. In this study, we find that the use of CL is consistent for every speaker. However, cases where one noun can take either of two CLs have also been found. For example, ‘loom’ can have as a CL either sho² ‘CL for moving machine’ or phu² ‘CL signifying the shape of a comb or a bunch of bananas’, which the loom (with its many strings) resembles. Another example kwε²le¹lo² ‘telephone’ can have as a CL either sho² ‘CL for moving machine’ or de² ‘CL signifying the shape of a box’; sa¹mo²kleʔ³ ‘tamarind fruit’ can have as CL either phleʔ₁ ‘CL for round object’ (as such the CL for most fruits) or ‘CL for long objects’. Anyone who has seen a tamarind pod will know that it is difficult to designate its shape as either round or long.

2. Classifiers in Sgaw Karen signify first and foremost the shape of the objects they classify.

3. Classifiers in Sgaw Karen categorize objects according to their taxonomy in nature (i.e., according to whether the thing referred to is a machine, a four-footed animal, a fowl, a
reptile, an insect, etc.). And this Karen categorization corresponds well with scientific categorization. Exceptions, however, are found. For example khliʔ³ ‘turtle’, which is four-footed, does not have as CL dī² ‘CL for four-footed animal’, but instead has beʔ¹ ‘classifier used for many small animals and fowls and insects’. And, ironically enough, both so²kha² ‘Buddhist monk’ and co²so² ‘Buddhist novice’, which in Thai and Burmese require highly elevated CL, have as their CL dī² ‘CL for four-footed animals and ogreish beings’.

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