

Some afterthoughts on classifiers in the Tai languages

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During the last few decades classifiers have become one of the current issues in contemporary linguistics. The latest evidence of it is the special workshop on classifiers in Sino-Tibetan languages set up at 31-st ICSTLL held in October 1998 in Lund (Sweden). The explanation of this fact, in the opinion of one of the classifier researchers, lies in that "The study of classifiers and noun classification systems is intrinsically connected with many crucial issues in modern linguistics," that classifiers "are normally a central constituent of the grammar" and "provide a unique insight into the mechanisms of semantic categorization of the world by human beings" (Aikhenvald, 1994, 408).

The interest in classifiers has found its expression in a great number of articles scattered over different and sometimes little known publications as proceedings of various symposiums or workshops and thus are hardly accessible. When so, there always exists a danger of repeating what has been already said. Anyhow, I venture to share aloud some of my afterthoughts on several controversial or still untouched issues in connection with classifiers in the Tai languages.

Nowadays the definition 'classifier' has a very loose meaning and many interpretations. Sometimes the term 'classifier' is applied almost to all the words used together with numerals. Here, when the word 'classifier' is used, it means the lexical units used with numerals for counting homogeneous discrete items. In all other cases the word accompanying numerals belongs to other groups than classifiers. Though in some cases it is rather difficult to distinguish between classifier and non-classifier. It can be seen from the comparison of two quantitative constructions in Standard Thai: *gluai saam luuk* 'three bananas' (lit. banana three pieces) and *gluai saam wee* 'three bunches of banana' (lit. banana three bunch). In the first construction the word *luuk* 'piece' is a classifier derived from a noun *luuk* 'fruit', 'something small and round', because the question is about the number of discrete objects named 'banana', while in the second construction, the word *wee* 'bunch' is a unit of measurement, because it designates just a certain part of the multitude named 'bananas'.

The very name 'classifier' speaks for itself. This group of words represents classes of nouns denoting the objects of the extralinguistic universe. They reflect the cognitive activity of our brains in the acquisition of reality. Just as the biologists establish species and genera of animals and plants in accordance with their peculiarities or specific features. Tai peoples, as well as Chinese, Vietnamese and many other peoples, spontaneously assemble the items around them into classes proceeding from their certain features and properties. Each class of objects has its

label, i.e. the classifier. Taken together they form a superclass or class of classes. The peculiar feature of Tai, as well as of Chinese and Vietnamese, cognition is that it classifies almost exclusively the perceptible material objects. There are just a few instances in which they include abstract notions into this or that category with the exemption of gods, angels, demons, spirits and other celestials that attain a status similar to man.

The superclass of classifiers in no way is a plain set or conglomerate of classifiers. It is a system in which its units are in semantic opposition to each other. Compared with some other languages the Tai system of classifiers is rather simple. Schematically it looks like the following: 'animated (rational vs. irrational) vs. inanimate, i.e. it has three main subsystems. The first dichotomy is: animate versus inanimate. However the animate group is not uniform, it is divided on the principle: rational, i.e. Homo Sapiens, versus irrational, i.e. animals and other living beings. Each subsystem has its own set of classifiers.

The first subsystem (animate, rational) in every Tai language has a classifier with a meaning 'man', 'person' and sometimes other words of different origin, usage of which is regulated by the social status, age, sex and other features of the person in question. For instance, in the Xiafang dialect of Northern Chuang there are fifteen classifiers with reference to person (Liang Min, 1983, 15).

The second subsystem (animate, irrational) usually has for its representative a word with the meaning 'body'.

The third subsystem (inanimate) is multiple. Its main representative is a classifier obviously developed from a noun with the meaning '(some)thing', 'article', 'piece'. These classifiers strive to become universal; rather often they substitute for other classifiers of this subgroup. They are bleached semantically and look like auxiliaries. The rest of classifiers of this subsystem represent minor groups based on different semantic principles.

As it has been said above, the majority of nouns liable to categorization denotes material objects including artifacts. Therefore it is quite natural that speakers of Tai assemble nouns into classes first of all on the principles of similarity of form, shape, function and so on. A vivid example is a class of plants cross-linguistically represented by an item with original meaning 'trunk', 'stalk', 'stem' being the most striking part of every plant. In other cases the relationship between the semantics of the classifier and members of the class are not so explicit as in the present instance. The clarification of this issue may require some efforts to carry out extensive historical investigations and to remove several layers of metaphoric, figurative meaning. For instance, if one wishes to know why for books Thais use the classifier *lem* that refers to pointed sharp edged items as knives, blades, etc., it is necessary to know that formerly manuscripts were written on palm leaves that looked like blades. So, the word *lem* became a classifier for books. But in Laos some kinds of manuscripts were written on big sheets of paper folded up several times that were called *hua*. Later it turned into classifier for books. In Thai-Phake the classifier for books is *phyyn*, etymologically a 'piece of cloth'. In the remote past sacred formulas of Phakes were written on cloths. When these cloths with inscriptions developed into volumes, the word *pyyn* remained as a classifier for books (Dongde 1991). So the history of book-printing reveals the reasons why Thais include books into a class of sharp edged items, Lao, into a class of folded up many times items, and Phake,

into a class of flat items. On the whole, the problems of relationship between noun and classifier, and metaphoric extension of the meaning of words are more philological than linguistic. How this process happens see Lakoff (1986).

It is well known that classifiers evolved from nouns and their etymology in many cases is transparent. It makes it sometimes difficult to differentiate classifiers and nouns. For example, in Standard Thai and Lao there is a word *khabuan* which occurs as a noun 'column' and as a classifier for trains, cf. *rot saam khabuan* 'three columns of cars' (lit. car three column) and *rotfai saam khabuan* 'three trains' (lit. train three column). At first sight the difference between them is not quite evident. But the fact is that in the first construction the word *rot* 'car' represents a class of objects called 'car' or 'cars' and the numeral *saam* 'three' with the noun *khabuan* 'column', 'chain' quantify this undiscrète multitude, i.e. they designate *a certain part* of this multitude. While in the second construction the word *rotfai* 'train' represents a discrete unit of a calculable multitude, and following it the quantitative syntagma *saam khabuan* quantifies this discrete multitude, i.e. indicates a certain number of objects in question. That's why in the first construction the word *khabuan* is a noun and in the second construction it is a classifier.

Classifiers in Tai form an open or, at least, half open class of words. As stated above, classifiers envelop only a part of nouns, some of them remain unclassified. So, when it is necessary to quantify such an item the numeral would adjoin a noun directly without any mediator (Num. N) or would be introduced with the help of the same noun (N Num. N). In this instance the item in the position of classifier may be treated as an occasional classifier or *ad hoc* classifier. It makes this class practically innumerable.

Besides that, the number of classifiers in each language is uncertain. Grammars usually mention only frequently used classifiers while others remain unknown. The so-called universal classifiers step by step supplant specific classifiers or oust them to periphery. At the same time new classifiers appear instead.

Boundaries between various groups of classifiers are not clear-cut, "spheres of influence" of classifiers are unstable and changeable. In many cases the selection of this or that classifier is due to certain situation and/or individual perception. G.Lakoff (1986) once remarked that our conceptual system depended on our physical and cultural experience and was directly connected with it. A good illustration of it is an experiment carried out by Thai linguist Kyakun (1983). She compiled a list of 120 nouns and asked 300 senior grade school-children to put down a proper classifier. It appeared that no item was estimated unanimously. The number of different classifiers for one noun ranged from 2 to 25. However, it does not mean that there are no rules for using classifiers. This range of responses was in questionnaires of 25% of respondents, the responses of the remaining 75% ranged only from 2 to 3.

Before finishing this subject it may not be out of place to mention that so-called unclassified nouns and classified nouns share the same grammatical features and properties.

All of the above seems to testify that classifiers in Tai are lexical and not grammatical units. The classifier is a lexico-syntactic phenomenon.

Classifier systems in Tai, Chinese, Vietnamese, and some other languages of mainland East and Southeast Asia are very much alike or even identical. Such a situation naturally arouses the question about “copyright” on the invention of this category. R. Jones (1970) and A. Peyraube (1991) are of the opinion that in all probability the authors of classifiers are Tais, and Chinese are borrowers. But Chinese linguists claim that classifiers were an indigenous innovation (Wang Lianqing (1993), Liang Min (1983), Zhang Gongjin (1988), Huang Zaipin (1964) and others). You Rujie (1982) acknowledged the substratum of Tai classifiers in Chinese, but only in its southern dialects.

As to Tai classifiers themselves, for the present it is difficult to say something intelligible about their origin. What is known so far is that in the earliest manuscript in Tai (XIII-XIV A.D.) classifiers appear as a rather well formed category.

If we follow the predominant point of view that the Tai languages originally belong to the Austronesian family, then it would look more probable that Tais were recipients and Chinese donors. It comes from the fact that in modern AN languages there is nothing that speaks for the existence in former times of a well developed category of classifiers so that they were able to share classifiers with Chinese. On the other hand, if we still agree with the former views about Chinese-Tai relationship, the question who is the donor and who is the recipient no longer arises. So, the issue is still under investigation.

What we know for sure is that for centuries Tais and Chinese were in close contact with each other and interaction of their languages was rather intensive, especially in the beginning of the first millenium A.D. If so, the process of formation of classifiers in Chinese can be applied to the Tai languages.

As the inscriptions on bones and on turtle shells and ancient manuscripts dated from early times up to the Middle Ages testify, quantitative constructions with numerals in Chinese had changed their syntactic configuration several times before they assumed a modern pattern, i.e. «Num N», «N Num», «N Num N», «N Num Clf», «Num Clf N» (Liang Min (1983), Huang Zaipin (1964), Peyraube (1991)). All these forms also occur in the Modern Tai languages. The above-cited scheme demonstrates the process of transformation of one pattern into another. However, it doesn't explain the reasons and incentives for such transformations. For clarification of the issue, a step by step analysis would be expedient.

The first stage (from «Num N» to «N Num») is of no importance for the question in consideration and may be dropped. The next stage involves the transition from «N Num» to «N Num N».

The long term coexistence of synonymous constructions «N Num» and «N Num N» in a similar environment gives enough grounds to suppose that the repetition of noun in all probability was a stylistic device for stressing and focusing attention on the numeral. Such an inference seems not to have alternatives. At all events, such an assumption looks most plausible.

Another reason for the repetition of noun and formation of tripartite quantitative construction can be the necessity to have a tool for expressing agreement

between words in a phrase, or for marking syntactic ties between the numeral and the head-noun, because in some cases, without a concordial instrument, relations between words in the phrase may turn out ambiguous. A graphic example of it can be such an endocentric construction in Lao as: *phoonaa liang khwaai sip khon/to* (lit. peasant(s) to breed buffalo(s) ten Clf for people or animals). Only classifiers, thanks to their associative meaning, can help in identifying the relations between the numeral *sip* 'ten' and the noun *phoonaa* 'peasant' or *khwaai* 'buffalo'. If classifier *khon* is used then the phrase has the meaning 'Ten peasants breeding buffalo(s)', and if classifier *to* is used then the meaning of the phrase will be: Peasant(s) breeding ten buffaloes.

Such motivation of the origin of classifiers is less probable, because at that time, as it goes from ancient Chinese texts, attributive chains were rather short and syntactic constructions as cited above were extremely rare. However, it might be one of the incentives for the formation of such constructions.

Lastly, the quantitative construction «N Num N» can be treated as an extension of the construction «NN», i.e. repetition of nouns. The latter is an ancient construction for denoting plurality of objects and still occurs in both languages as a stylistic device for the above mentioned purpose. These constructions are in opposition: definite number versus indefinite number or calculable number versus incalculable number. Though there are no good reasons for such an assumption, it is not incredible, and has the right to be taken into consideration.

The peculiarity of transition from «N Num N» to «N Num Clf» is the replacement of postpositional noun by classifier. The problem is to clarify the motivation for such substitution. The main reason seemed to be the desire to eliminate tautology, repetition of the same words. By analogy with incontiguous dissimilation in phonology this process can be called or defined 'lexical or semantic dissimilation'. In short, the replacement of one name by a classifier again had been caused for the reasons of style. But the above does not mean that the subject is exhausted. (Here we have raised the question of why nouns are replaced by classifiers and not by any other means.)

The history of classifiers shows that the first classifiers supposedly were specific names, i.e. units of measurement. For instance, in Chinese the classifier for horses *pi*, which is one of the earliest classifiers in Chinese, formerly had the meaning 'team of two horses'. In old Thai and modern Lao, as it has been said before, the classifier *hua* had the meaning 'bundle of paper folded up several times'. It would be appropriate to point out that units of measurement in fact have abstract meaning (bundle, team, handful and so on do not exist in reality), which is an indispensable property for actual classifiers.

Another kind of words liable to replace tautological nouns in the aforesaid construction were synonyms or words with similar meaning. A good illustration is the distribution of syntactic functions between the word with the meaning 'man' in various Tai languages: one is used as a noun and another as classifier, e.g. in Shan *khon* and *ko*, in Chuang *vun* and *pow*, in Li *aaw* and *tsuun*. The same can be said about a pair of synonyms in Tai *ton* and *kok* 'trunk, stalk, stem', that various Tai languages interchangeably use as a noun 'tree' and classifier for trees. Simultaneously, some other words, the meaning of which only partly conformed

with the meaning of head-noun, were included into quantitative constructions. Thus, the mechanism of categorization in Tai started on its historic journey.

Prototypically Tai, as well as Chinese, classifiers obviously belonged to a class of the so-called 'numeral classifiers', i.e. words attached to numerals, and were used as a complementary tool for introducing numeral modifiers. But later the evaluation of Tai and Chinese classifiers diverged. While Chinese classifiers in general remained monofunctional, Tai classifiers diversified their functions. These two trends of development W.Bisang defined as "unit oriented" for Chinese and "category oriented" for Tai (Bisang, forthcoming). The process of functional diversification in various Tai languages was uneven. As a result the number of classifiers and the number of their functions in the languages is different.

At present, apart from presentative or introducing function, classifiers in Tai fulfill the following functions:

1. referential or anaphoric, when classifier substitutes for aforementioned name;
2. individualization and/or actualization, when classifier precedes noun, merges with this noun into single unit that denotes a definite, actual object;
3. relative or concordial, when classifier marks semantic-syntactic relations between the attribute and the head-noun;
4. substantivation, when classifier precedes verb or verbal phrase and turns them into substantival word-group.

Some authors also distinguish possessive-relative, word-building, delimitative and other functions. But the latter seem to be occasional functions of those mentioned above.

Classifier is a feature in common for all Tai languages. But each of them has its own set of classifiers and categories concerned with these classifiers. On one hand, this means that classifiers as such are an old event in the Tai languages, and, on the other hand, this signifies that this category is rather young. Being once a stylistic device it turned into a multipurpose linguistic means.

At present quantitative construction in Tai exists in two forms: «N Num Clf» and «Num Clf N». The first form is attested in the Tai languages spread over the areas lying to the Southwest from the Red River, and the second form in the Tai languages spread over areas lying to the Northeast from the Red River. The Northeastern division includes Kam-Sui, Kadai and Northern Tai groups of Tai languages, and the Southwestern division includes languages of the Southwestern Tai group. As to the Central Tai, its area should be treated as a zone of vibration, i.e. the zone where both constructions occur. In all probability formerly numeral with classifier (numeral complex) occupied postposition, but later in Central Tai got under the influence of Chinese and Vietnamese and now is undergoing the change of word-order after the standards of Chinese and Vietnamese.

So, the question is: what was the original word-order in Tai quantitative constructions and why are there two word-orders for quantitative constructions? The answer seems to lie in the history of Sino-Tai interaction.

One should remember that the so-called Tai family is not a united whole. It consists at least of two divisions: proper Tai including Southwestern, Central and Northern Tai (after Li Fanguei's classification) and Para-Tai languages, including Kam-Sui and Kadai. The disintegration of Proto-Tai started in the second millennium B.C. (P. Benedict and S.E. Yakhontov). According to the calculations of S. Yakhontov (1977) based on glottochronological method, Kam-Sui languages broke away from the mainstream of Tai languages approximately three thousand years ago. A little bit later Be and Li (Slai) followed suit (Gokhman, 1980). As to Old Tai, a parent language for Modern Southwestern, Central and Northern Tai, it is only about two thousand years old (W. Gedney, unpublished, Chamberlain 1975).

The data about the origin and development of quantitative constructions in Chinese and about the divergence of Tai languages allows us to put forward a hypothesis concerning the position of the numerative complex in two divisions of Tai languages.

Historico-comparative investigations of Tai and Chinese testify that Tai-Chinese contacts were very intensive in the first half of the first millennium A.D. (see S. Starostin, S. Yakhontov 1977, Downer 1963 e.a.). This comes from the fact that supposedly cognate Sino-Tai words, including numerals, can be traced back to the aforementioned period. As it has been said earlier, the first centuries A.D. were the period of consolidation of N Num Clf construction in Chinese. So, it gives us enough grounds to hypothesize that precisely at that period the Southwestern Tai had adopted the system of Chinese classifiers together with Chinese numerals.

On the other hand, Tais of the Kam-Sui and Kadai groups, who broke away from their ancestors before the New era, got in contact with Chinese much later, i.e. after the shifting of numeral complexes in Chinese into foreground. It is worth noticing here that the pre-position of numeral complexes in these Tai languages in no way is a recent innovation. It is a rather old phenomenon. This comes from the fact that there are no signs of interchangeable word-order or vestiges of post-position of numeral complexes as happens with other modifiers in modern Kam-Sui and Kadai languages.

If we suppose that originally quantitative construction in Tai looked like «Num Clf N», then the question arises: why the numeral with classifier in Southwestern Tai changed its position and the construction assumed the form «N Num Clf»? The only linguistic reason for it might be: the tendency to align all modifiers after the noun. However, linguistic data of Southwestern languages (earliest manuscripts of Tai go back to the 13th century) does not yield any evidence of prenominal position of numeral complexes. As to extralinguistic factors, in the Indo-Chinese peninsula there were no indigenous languages with mighty classifier systems that could influence Tai languages in this respect.

Simultaneously, if we suppose that originally quantitative constructions in Tai looked like «N Num Clf», then it would be difficult to find a linguistic explanation for the changed word-order in quantitative constructions in Kam-Sui and Kadai languages (from «N Num Clf» into «Num Clf N»). So, the only alternative is to suppose that the prenominal position of the numeral complex in Tai languages is a consequence of Chinese influence.

In conclusion, I hope that these notes will contribute to Tai studies.

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