

A Feature-based Account of Classifiers in Southeast Asia

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This paper attempts to characterize and explain a variety of functions which classifiers perform in so-called ‘classifier languages’ in which [+count] nouns require the co-occurrence of classifiers in the context of enumeration. It has been generally claimed that the core functions of classifiers are two-fold: (i) converting concept-denoting nouns enumerable (‘individuation’ function); (ii) classifying nouns according to the inherent properties of nouns (‘classification’ function). It has been also claimed that the presence/absence of classifiers can be subject to parameterization. The macro-parametric comparison of classifier vs. non-classifier languages showed that there exist interesting correlations between the presence/absence of classifiers and the absence/presence of articles; the optional/obligatory plural marking. We rather consider classifiers from a micro-parametric perspective and explore the linguistic phenomena of classifiers which cannot be captured from macro-parametric researches. Considering the distributional and typological properties of classifiers from five classifier languages in Southeast Asia: Burmese, Hmong, Khmer, Nung, and Vietnamese, we will show that classifiers are truly multi-functional in that they are involved with making nouns referential, marking the definiteness/specificity, and relating possessor and its head noun. We propose a simple and natural account of the multi-functionality of classifiers in terms of the specification of DP-internal formal features such as [\pm count], [\pm singular], and [\pm definite]. We argue that the formal features can have their values specified in three different ways (i) intrinsically, (ii) morphological concatenation in the lexicon, and (iii) syntactic merging; the latter two modes of specification being of our interest here. It will be shown that the micro-parametric variations with respect to the function of classifiers can be accounted for by the interactions of those feature specification modes.

References

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