

On the Conceptions of Chinese Numeral Classifiers in the Chinese and Western Traditions of Linguistics

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While Mandarin Chinese has a rich numeral classifier system, classifiers have only recently begun to attract attention from Chinese linguists. Classifiers are morphemes that denote “some salient perceived or imputed characteristics of the entity to which an associated noun refers (or may refer)” (Allan 1977: 285). In Mandarin Chinese, they occur as independent words typically found between numerals and nouns in the context of counting. The number of classifiers in Mandarin Chinese has been estimated at between a few dozen (Erbaugh 1986), 126 (Gao & Malt 2009) and 427 (Huang & Ahrens 2003). The discrepancy in the numbers results largely from the different conceptions of classifiers among Western and Chinese linguists. The aims of the study are to review the different conceptions and to examine the causes of the differences between the two linguistic traditions.

Numeral classifiers have been approached differently by Chinese and Western linguists. Within the Chinese tradition, they were first described as a subtype of nouns by Ma (1898), and subsequently as quantifiers, an independent word class that is obligatory in the context of quantification (Lü 1956; Wang 1985). Since the 1990s, classifiers have been interpreted predominantly in terms of semantic functions and cognitive motivation (Tai & Wang 1990), acquisition (Hu 1993), and the syntax of the classifier phrase (Zhang 2013). In contrast, in the Western tradition numeral classifiers were first referred to as *particulas* (i.e. particles) by Varo (1703) (Coblin & Levi 2000), who also described semantic features of classifiers in Mandarin Chinese. In the 19th and 20th century, classifiers played a marginal role in the mainstream linguistic studies. Most recently, classifiers have been investigated in terms of semantics (Denny 1976), their status as a noun categorization device (Aikhenvald 2000) and morphosyntactic properties in the domain of grammaticalization (Seifart 2010). Therefore, Chinese and Western linguists have approached classifiers differently, the former as quantifiers in the context of numeration, while the latter as classifiers of noun referents in the context of semantics and grammaticalization.

These different conceptions can be attributed to a number of methodological, descriptive and theoretical causes. First, with regard to terminology, there is a mismatch of the terms for classifiers in the two linguistic traditions: the term ‘classifiers’ in the Western tradition is equivalent to ‘liàngcí’ (quantifiers) in the Chinese tradition, where the former usage emphasizes semantic features while the latter focuses on quantification. Second, with respect to functions, Chinese linguists have centered more on syntactic functions, i.e., the obligatory use of classifiers in counting objects, rather than semantic functions. Third, in the domain of grammaticalization, Chinese linguists view classifiers as fully grammaticalized morphemes in numeral structures and thus semantically redundant, while Western linguists regard classifiers as partly grammaticalized morphemes with visible semantic characteristics. Such differences in conceptions and their causes illustrate the different perspectives and traditions among Western and Chinese linguists, and thus they are descriptively and theoretically important for the study of numeral classifiers and related forms of nominal classification. (*Word count: 488*)

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