

## **Numeral classifiers as markers of (in)definiteness— Conditions of grammaticalization and the existence of pre-established categories**

Oral

The cross-linguistic homogeneity of grammatical categories is taken for granted by some linguists, while many typologists deny the existence of pre-established grammatical categories (Greenberg 1963, Haspelmath 2007). This paper will support the critical stance against cross-linguistic categorial homogeneity by showing that the function of categorial markers is determined by the specific conditions under which grammaticalization processes take place. To show this, it will discuss numeral classifiers as a source of (in)definiteness markers in some East and mainland Southeast Asian languages and it will look at the extent to which they can be compared to definiteness markers based on other sources (demonstratives, possessives, case in DOM).

Numeral classifiers are generally associated with the function of counting and with the lack of obligatory plural marking (Greenberg 1974). In this context, they individuate or atomize a concept. What is less well-known is that they also can express (in)definiteness if they occur in the [Classifier+Noun] construction. This is the case in various Sinitic languages (Cantonese, Wu Chinese, and marginally also in Mandarin Chinese) as well as in various Hmong-Mien languages, among them Hmong and Weining Ahmao.

The paper will analyse the specifics of the (in)definiteness functions of classifiers in each of these languages and it will show that there are two factors that determine their (in)definiteness function:

- (i) Numeral classifiers refer to certain properties of the object they mark (e.g.  $\pm$ human,  $\pm$ one-dimensional,  $\pm$ book-like) and thus restrict the search domain of the hearer. The hearer will look for something that is one-dimensional if a classifier for one-dimensional objects is used.

Due to this identificational function, the classifier in [Classifier+N] marks familiarity rather than uniqueness.

- (ii) Each of the languages discussed is characterized by the omission of grammatical markers if they can be inferred from context.

As a consequence, the classifier is not obligatory even if it is a highly grammaticalized (in)definiteness marker. Once a referent is firmly established, it will simply be expressed by a bare noun.

These two properties are manifested as follows in individual classifier systems:

- (a) Sinitic: The interpretation of the classifier depends on word order as it is associated with information structure: In preverbal positions (topic), the classifier in [Classifier+Noun] is definite, while it tends to be indefinite in the postverbal position (focus). The definiteness expressed by the classifier is not based on uniqueness but rather on familiarity (on identifiability/familiarity and topic, cf. Lambrecht 1994). If the classifier occurs with a unique concept, it refers to its familiarity in the discourse situation.
- (b) Hmong: The classifier only marks definiteness in terms of familiarity irrespective of word order but its use is still driven by discourse and pragmatic inference.
- (c) Weining Ahmao has developed an inflectional paradigm for classifiers that combines singular/plural, definite/indefinite and size (augmentative, medial, diminutive). In spite of this, the classifier is not fully obligatory. It is obligatory only with foregrounded concepts, while backgrounded referents do not take a classifier.