

Which Comes First, Noun Classifiers or Numeral Classifiers?

—The Typological Status and Evolutionary Direction of Classifiers in Bai Language

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Since Aikhenvald's work in 2000, typological studies on noun categorization have often classified classifiers based on the constituents they directly attach to. However, previous research on Bai language classifiers has primarily categorized them into the numeral classifier system based on their co-occurrence with numerals. However, in the discourse of Bai (Dali dialect), there is a significant presence of both N-NUM-CL structures and N-CL structures (where numerals cannot be supplied), displaying a certain degree of hybridity. Zhang Chen(2012: 11) mentions that there is a tendency for numeral classifiers in Bai and Hmong–Mien languages to further develop into noun classifiers, suggesting a possible unidirectional grammaticalization pathway between these two classifier systems. Li Zhien (2011) also argues that in languages that have both numeral and noun classifiers, the function of noun classifiers originates from the measuring function. However, by examining Kam-Tai language data, Guo Rui & Li Zhien(2021) propose a bidirectional evolutionary relationship between the two systems and suggests that the more common situation is the evolution of noun classifiers into numeral classifiers through processes such as copying and homonymous deletion.

This paper takes Bai language classifiers as a starting point to discuss two qualitative issues and one theoretical issue:

1. The first qualitative issue examines whether the classifier system in Bai language exhibits a mixture of numeral classifiers and noun classifiers.

2. If such a mixture exists, the second qualitative issue explores the relationship between numeral classifiers and noun classifiers. It investigates whether there is a connection or evolutionary relationship between the two systems and, if so, what the evolutionary direction might be.

3. The theoretical issue at hand concerns the directionality of grammatical category evolution. Specifically, it investigates whether the evolution of grammatical categories (rule evolution) and the evolution of specific members within those categories can exhibit opposite directions or tendencies.

To address the aforementioned questions, this paper begins by providing a brief overview of the distribution and functions of Bai language classifiers, as well as the differences between Bai language classifiers and Mandarin Chinese classifiers (typical numeral classifier system). We then present three pieces of evidence: the differences in classifier distribution and functions in Bai dialects, the quantification of referents of N-CL structures, and the composition of repeaters in Bai classifier system. Based on these pieces of evidence, we argue that the numeral classifier system as a whole emerged earlier than the noun classifier system in Bai language, although some numeral classifiers were derived from corresponding noun classifiers at a later stage.

This paper suggests that the grammatical status and functions of N-NUM-CL structures in Bai language are relatively stable. However, within N-CL structures, the

classifier undergo potential grammaticalization (individualization > definiteness marking before verbs), morphologization (forming new words and marking the noun class), and lexicalization (becoming fixed as morphemes within words and losing their classificatory nature). Although the individualization function and pragmatic definiteness function in N-CL structures are prominent, the further grammaticalization faces two obstacles: 1) conflict with homophonous numeral classifiers in post-verbal positions, making it difficult for the definiteness function to extend from pre-verbal to post-verbal positions; 2) the semi-open nature of classifiers and the lack of a general classifier.

Finally, building on Li Zhien's (2011) critical comments on Aikhenvald's (2000) discussion of multiple classifier system languages, this paper incorporates existing typological surveys (Li Zhien 2011; Bu Lianzeng 2011) to compare several languages within China that possess both noun classifier and numeral classifier systems. This comparison focuses on the distributional positions, co-occurrence potentials, referential functions, and inclusion relationships of these systems' members. The goal is to examine the similarities and differences between these languages and discuss how to differentiate between the expansion of a single function and the overlapping of multiple systems.

Keywords: Bai classifier, Bai dialect, noun classifier, numeral classifier, repeaters, cross-language comparison

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