

Definite uses of classifiers and the DP projection in Wu Chinese

Xu-Ping LI Email: xupingli.sem@gmail.com

EHESS, Paris & Bar-Ilan University, Israel

This paper discusses how the notion of definiteness is realized in Wu Chinese (the *Fuyang* dialect), a classifier languages without (in)definite articles. It has been described by many that classifiers in Wu have a definite use in the “Cl+N” construction. We are interested in the following two questions concerning definite classifiers: (i) What is the syntactic status of the classifier in the definite “Cl+N” construction? Is it a Cl⁰ or a D⁰? (ii) What is the semantic feature of the definite classifier? Is it characterized with uniqueness or familiarity?

Like in other classifier languages, such as Mandarin, numerals in Wu cannot modify nouns without the presence of classifiers, as in (1.a). However, classifiers do not have to go hand in hand with numerals in all cases. Classifiers can modify nouns independently in the “CL+N” construction, which can have definite or indefinite readings (see Cheng & Sybesma 1999 for the Cantonese “Cl+N” construction, Simpson 2005 for Vietnamese “Cl+N”). We observe that in the *Fuyang* dialect, postverbal “CL+N” has an indefinite reading (1.b) and preverbal “CL+N” has a definite reading (1.c) (cf. Li & Bisang 2010).

1. a. ngo ma le [niang ben shü].
1sg buy PERF two CL_{-volume} book ‘I bought two books.’
- b. ngo ma le [ben shü] [Indefinite]
1sg buy PERF CL_{-volume} book ‘I bought a book.’
- c. [ben shü] si ngo ge . [Definite]
CL_{-volume} book COP 1sg SFP ‘The book is mine.’

In this talk, we only concentrate on the syntactic structure of definite “Cl+N” construction. Cheng & Sybesma (1999) argue that definite “Cl+N” (in Cantonese) has the maximal projection of CIPs. In contrast, Simpson (2005) claims that definite “Cl+N” is a DP instead, where the classifier undergoes Cl-to-D raising. In what follows, we will argue for Simpson’s Cl-to-D analysis with the evidence from the *Fuyang* dialect. We claim that on the definite reading, the classifier no longer sits at its base-generated classifier position, and it is raised from CL⁰ to D⁰ to express definiteness (characterized as “weak familiarity” à la Roberts 2003, cf. Li 2010).

Syntactic evidence (i): classifiers can modify proper names. Unmodified proper names and “CL+Proper name” are both rigid designators and they refer to the same individual, as in (2). Following Longobardi’s (1994) N-to-D proposal for proper names in Italian, we suggest that syntactically, definite classifiers in Wu are comparable to Italian definite articles, both of which head DP. Accordingly, bare proper names undergo N-to-D movement; when proper names are modified by CL, they are NPs and taken as complement by the DP headed by Cls.

2. (ge) Xiaowang ngintsao mi lai.

CL Xiaowang today NEG come 'The Xiaowang did come today.'

Syntactic evidence (ii): the definite use of classifiers undergoes tone sandhi in the Fuyang dialect. As in (3), the classifier *diao* changes its base tone of 34 into a lower tone 22. The tone sandhi is seen as a realization of the D feature by some (e.g. Cheng & Sybesma 2005 for the Wenzhou dialect). Therefore, the modifier is adjoined not at CIP, but DP, which dominates CIPs (also see Sybesma & Sio 2008).

3. ngo ma ge? diao³⁴⁻²² kutsi

I buy Mod CL_{pair} trousers 'the pair of trousers I bought'

We now turn to the second question, i.e. the semantics of definite classifiers. We claim that the definite classifiers in Wu are not the same as the English definite article, i.e. not an iota operator. The definiteness expressed definite classifiers is characterized with “weak familiarity” but not “uniqueness” (Roberts 2003). We suggest that definite “Cl+N” refers to entities that are perceptually perceivable entities or entities that are familiar or identifiable by the interlocutors in the contexts.

Three relevant facts: (i) the interpretation of “Cl+N” is constrained by the information structure to a great extent. The definite reading of “Cl+N” is prototypically found in preverbal positions, such as subject, which are proven to be (secondary) topic positions in Chinese languages (see Li & Bisang 2010). (ii) The definite use of classifiers is very restricted in the anaphoric use. It is only possible in the contrastive contexts. (iii) Definite “Cl+N” requires “situational ostension”. Semantically unique entities such as *sky* can be represented by bare nouns or by “Cl+N” in Wu. But bare nouns are used in generic sentences (4.a), and CL+N are used to describe in a particular situation (4.b).

4.a. ting si lan ge?.

b. *(pan) ting iao lo-yu die.

sky Cop blue SFP 'The sky is blue' CL_{piece} sky will rain SFP 'The sky will rain.'

We further argue that the “weak familiarity” can be represented as a part of the semantics of definite classifiers by von Stechow's domain restriction and C variable. Assuming that classifiers have the basic function of individuation, as in “Num+Cl+N”, we propose, following von Stechow (1994), that there is a contextual variable C associated with the classifier in definite “Cl+N”, which restricts the individuation operation in such a way that it picks out the familiar individual relevant to a particular context C (contextually familiar).

5.a. Indefinite “Cl+N”: $\lambda k \lambda x. \text{INST}(x, k) \wedge \text{Unit}(x)$ [Individuating]

b. Definite “Cl+N”: [Definite]

$\lambda R \lambda P. \exists x [P(x) \wedge R(x) \wedge \text{CONTEXTUALLY FAMILIAR}(x)] (\lambda k \lambda x. \text{INST}(x, k) \wedge \text{Unit}(x))$

$= \lambda P. \exists x [P(x) \wedge \lambda k \lambda x. \text{INST}(x, k) \wedge \text{ATOM}(x) \wedge \text{CONTEXTUALLY FAMILIAR}(x)]$

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