A LINGUISTIC ANALYSIS OF CLASSIFIERS IN THE TAI LUE
LANGUAGE OF CHIANG KHAM DISTRICT, PHAYAO PROVINCE
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0. Introduction

One feature for which Asian languages are well
known is their complicated systems of classifiers. The
Tai Lue language is no exception to this. Every common
noun in the language has a classifier, and often
several classifiers, connected with it in the lexicon.

This paper explores the semantic functions of the
classifier within the Tai Lue Nominal Group showing how
different semantic functions are realized in connection
with the common noun and the classifier noun, and gives
lexical information about the classifier system of Tai
Lue.

The assumptions behind this study are basically
stratificational, following Fleming (1986). Levels of
grammar, semantics and a referential realm are inter-
related by realization relationships. Minimal elements
on each stratum are respectively the morpheme, the
sememe, and a referential unit. Within each stratum
there are tactic relationships which relate the minimal
elements in such ways as taxonomic relationships, co-
occurence restrictions, and the formation of clauses

and propositions. A case frame arrangement operates in the semantics.

1. Classifiers

The notion of a classifier is not totally unfamiliar to English speakers. When we say "300 head of cattle" the word "head" is being used in a way very similar to that of a classifier in Tai Lue. Each referent, and indeed each and every thing that is potentially nominalizable, has two nouns that can be used in referring to it. One is the noun specific to that thing ("common noun" to distinguish them from the classifiers which are also nouns). The other is the noun for the linguistic class to which that thing belongs. This is commonly called the classifier or classifier noun and is normally used in situations such as counting. In English "300 head of cattle" we demote the common noun "cattle" to a position within a prepositional phrase, but in Tai Lue the structure is more like "cattle 300 head" where both the common noun and the classifier noun are independent and each has the potential of being expanded into a Noun Phrase. Each of these Noun Phrases has specific but different elements that can be associated with it, and together these two Noun Phrases form a Nominal Group.

A classifier then might be defined as any noun that can act as the head of the second Noun Phrase within the Nominal Group.

Some common nouns have a unique classifier associated with them. Usually, however, groups of nouns share a classifier in common and thus form "classes" with their classifier. Most of these classes are based roughly on recognizable semantic features such as shape or size, although it is often not easy to say exactly what these features should be[1]. Some classes contain odd assortments of things, sometimes due to accidents in historical development.

My informants recognize the classifiers as kam4 nap1[2] "count word", but counting is not the only situation in which classifiers must be used. Specification (this head of cattle), and often also

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[1]Attempts to specify what these semantic features are for Thai (a closely related language with a similar system of classification) have not been very impressive. Hiranburana (1979) provides beautifully drawn charts of semantic features delineating classes but they turn out to be very hard to understand and, when you get to the bottom of them, full of holes and far-fetched arguments.
[2]The orthography is standard except for possibly these symbols: /j/ as in yes; /y/ = high back unrounded vowel; />/ = low back vowel; /ng/ = velar nasal; /c/ = voiceless alveopalatal stop; /x/ = voiceless palatal fricative; /?/ = glottal stop.
Tai Lue tones are marked with numbers 1-6. They correspond to Fang Kuei Li (1977), in which 20 proto-tones are distinguished, in this way:
1 = A1, A2, A3, DS4; 2 = B1, B2, B3, DS1, DS2, DS3, DL1, DL2, DS3;
3 = C1, C2, C3; 4 = A4; 5 = B4, DL4; 6 = C4.
There are some exceptions. Some words from the A3 tone box have a tone 4 instead of tone 1. Examples are dang1 "loud", ?an4 "relative clause marker", baang4kun4 "some people", ?eng4 "self". Presyllables with a short /a/ are not marked for tone.