

Historical and Dialectal Variants of Chinese General Classifiers --- On the Criteria of General Classifiers

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It is widely accepted that *gè* is a general classifier in modern Chinese meaning it can categorize most objects while a specific classifier is not available, and it can replace most specific classifiers without causing any ambiguity. However, the *gè* is not always the general classifiers in the history and/or in all dialects. This paper examines the historical and dialectal variations in Chinese with a focus on the criteria for being a general classifier in classifier languages. The author argues that to be qualified as a long-last general classifier, the classifier in question must meet two basic criteria, i.e., originating in objects closely related to human being daily activity and being able to be used for human being.

1. Introduction

Classifier is an outstanding linguistic feature of Chinese, other Sino-Tibetan languages and many other languages spoken in Southeast Asia. In all the classifier languages, a general classifier is often found. As a general classifier, it can be used in case a specific classifier is not available. Among difference general classifiers, some can last a long time in a language, while others cannot. Therefore a question why has been raised. This paper aims at providing an explanation based on the historical and the dialectal variants in Chinese.

2. Historical Variants

In the history of Chinese language, we found several variants of general classifiers. The most significant one is *gè*. There had been three different characters, 个, 個 and 箇 for the same classifier *ge* in different historical period of Chinese language. Many scholars treat the three characters as free-variations for one single classifier (Wang Li 1958; Liu 1965; etc.). The study by Hong (1961), however, points out that they are not the same in origin. Hong claims that the three characters have two origins which divide the three into two groups: (a) 个 and (b) 個 and 箇. Scholars seem to agree on the origins of the two *ges* in group (b): 箇 originates in the word *zhu* 竹 'bamboo' and develops from a specific classifier for bamboo into a general classifier for almost everything. On the other hand, 個 was homophony of *jiè* 界 and 介 (i. e., later 个) and was created around the Han period as stated in many previous studies (cf. Hong 1961).

个 appeared earlier than 個 and 箇. According to Wang (1994), 个 was a classifier as early as in oracle inscriptions, a variant of 丰. According to Guo (1962), it means shell or jade used in counting. Wang lists it as an example of what he calls proto-classifiers, which did not form a classifier system yet. As the earliest classifiers in proto-Chinese, it did not function as a general classifier in the Wei-Jin period when classifiers in Chinese had formed a comprehensive system with more than one hundred specific classifiers; instead, classifier *méi* was the general classifier. In the *Er Shi Wu Shi (History of 25 Dynasties)*, *gè* appears only 68 times, while *mei* is used for more than 394 times.

The *méi* as a general classifier did not last long, however. It had been gradually replaced by *gè* in less than 500 years. According to some studies, in the Song dynasty, the rate of usage of classifier *méi* and *gè* is 1:8. In the *Yuán Chuán Qǔ (Collection of Opera in Yuan Dynasty)*, *méi* only appears 39 times, while *gè* appeared as many as 1039 times. In modern Chinese, *mei* is only a seldom used specific classifier for stamp or coin.

2. Dialectal Variants

In modern Chinese, *ge* is used as general classifier in most dialects and it has been used for more than 1,500 years. However, there are a few variant general classifiers in several other dialects. In these dialects, *ge* is not general classifier, at least not a dominate one. Based on the studies available to us so far, these dialects include Gàn (Tongcheng), Xiāng (Changsha) and Mǐn (Haikou), as detailed below.

In modern southern Mǐn 閩 (Haikou 海口) dialect, the most popular general classifier is not *gè*, but *mo* (*méi* 枚 in Mandarin), which was the general classifier in the Weijin Nanbei period.

The following are examples of objects, which use *méi* as classifiers in Haikou:

人，山，嶺，洞，小河，湖，江，海，塘，水庫，井，糞池，溝，廁所，牛欄，豬圈，餐館，碗，鍋，棍子，電視機，收音機，冰箱，枕頭，香蕉，菠蘿，黃瓜，西瓜，辣椒，番茄，馬，牛，豬，狗，老虎，蛇，魚，蜈蚣，蝨子，蝙蝠，蒼蠅。（Tu: 2005）

In modern Gan 贛 (Tōng Chéng 通城) dialect, the general classifier is neither *ge* nor *méi*, but *zhī* 隻, which is a specific classifier in modern Mandarin and other dialects.

The following are examples of items which use *zhī* as classifiers in Tōng Chéng :

星，山，嶺，洞，小河，湖，江，海，塘，水庫，井，糞池，溝；屋，廁所，牛欄，豬圈，餐館，牆，臺階，碗，鍋，棍子，毛巾，麻袋；汽車，火車，坦克，飛機，電視機，收音機，冰箱，電線杆，馬達；汗衫，胸罩，皮帶，枕頭，撲克，紙牌，棋子，故事，藍球，足球；竹，樹，杜，李，香蕉，菠蘿，黃瓜，西瓜

，辣椒，番茄；嘴巴，門牙，酒窩，下巴，骨頭，大腿，屁股，小腿肚，舌頭，豬唇；馬，牛，豬，狗，老虎，蛇，魚，蜈蚣，蝨子，蝙蝠，螞蟻。（Wan: 2003）

In this dialect, it is specially necessary to use *zhī* in addressing such as for 姑爺，叔叔，姑媽，姨媽，兒子，老妹，招郎崽（上門女婿），小夥子，孫女。

In the Xiang 湘 (Changsha 長沙) dialect, ‘隻’, phonetically, *za*, is the general classifier. Even though *gè* is also used as general classifier, *gè* is not as popular as *zhi*. Among the 439 items collected in the *Xiandai Hanyu 800 Ci* (800 Words in Modern Chinese), 235 items can use *zhī* as general classifier.

Another interesting phenomenon of general classifier in this dialect is that in addition to the *zhī* and *gè*, several sub-dialects in Xiang dialect use *lì* 粒, *tóu* 頭 and *zhi* 只 at the same time when they use *zhi* 隻, meaning that there are more than one general classifiers in the dialect (Luo 2000).

In addition to the three dialects which general classifiers are not *gè*, we see another sub-general-classifiers in some dialects. In Guangzhou dialect, for example, among the 439 objects listed in the *Xiandai Hanyu 800 Ci*, 105 items can use classifier *zhī*, which is only 31 less than that of Tong Cheng dialect reported in Li, 1991. We cannot treat *zhi* in Guangzhou as a general classifier. We may, however, use a sub-general classifier to name the *zhi* in Guangzhou, as well as the *tóu* and *lì* in Xiang dialect. It is true that *zhī* in Guangzhou and *lì* and *tóu* in Xiang dialect cannot be used for all the objects in the said dialect. As we all know, even in modern Mandarin, *gè*, as a well-accepted general classifier, cannot be used for many objects either.

3. Discussion

Among the variety of general classifiers in modern Chinese dialects we mentioned in this paper, we can see some common features.

First, all these general classifiers originate in a specific name of tree, plant or animal. While *gè* 箇, *méi* 枚 and *lì* 粒 are all names for tree or plant, *zhī* 隻 and *tou* 头 relate to animal.

Second, to be qualified as a long-last general classifier, the said classifier should be able to categorize human being, the most important object in the universe. One of the possible reasons why *méi* could not stand long for general classifier in Mandarin after Wei-Jin period is that *méi* cannot be used for human being in that period. On the other hand, *méi* as a general classifier in the modern Min dialect, it can be used for a specific human being such as uncle and brother, it can also be used for human being in general such as women and men. This is an indication that to be qualified as a general classifier, one criterion is whether it can be used for human being.

Third, the variants of general classifiers discussed in this paper are all spoken in southern China. At the same time, we do not see any similar general classifiers in the dialects spoken in the central part China such as Wu dialect in the eastern China and Jin

dialect in the north (Shanxi). This may suggest that the variation of general classifiers in Chinese is an area feature of southern China, where Xiang, Min, Gan and Yue dialects are spoken.

4. Concluding Remark

The cross-dialectal and historical examination of the general classifiers in Chinese may provide some evidence to the study of the relationship among classifiers in Chinese and that in this area such as the Sino-Tibetan languages. By identifying whether some general classifiers among languages are related, if yes, in what way, we may provide evidence to establish the genetic and typological relation among languages in question, which has long been debated.

Along with this suggestion, it is interesting to note here at the end of this study that many general classifiers in other classifier languages in Sino-Tibetan languages have shared the feature of general classifiers in Chinese we discussed above, i.e., many general classifiers in these language also originate in the objects which closely related to human being (Wang: 1985 for Miao language; Wei: 1979 for Zhuang language, etc.). More study is needed to provide a comprehensive conclusion.

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