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Inflectional speaker-role classifiers in Weining Ahmao

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Abstract

This paper is the first of two (see references) aiming to bring to the attention of pragmaticians an idiosyncratic classifier system that encodes speaker-roles along the lines of gender and age. Isolating (analytic) languages are known for their scarcity of word forms and for their under-specification of grammatical categories. Analytic languages in East and Southeast Asian involve classifiers – a word category without counterpart in most languages of the inflectional type – to attenuate some of the vagueness in the nominal realm. Similar to other parts of speech, the classifier generally constitutes a one-form word category with occasional sandhi-derivations. Weining Ahmao, a Miao language spoken in SW China, significantly deviates from this pattern with regard to classifiers. While it generally follows the pattern of one-word categories, it has developed a highly uncommon system of classifiers. Each of its ca. 50 classifiers can be inflected in a 12-form paradigm encoding three semantic features: number [singular, plural], definiteness [definite, indefinite] and size/importance [augmentative, medial, diminutive]. Furthermore, the Ahmao system exhibits a rare form of social deixis whereby each classifier form mirrors information on the gender and age of the speaker. The augmentative form of a classifier is pragmatically unmarked when employed by men; the medial form is unmarked when a woman is the speaker and the diminutive version of a classifier is typically associated with child speakers.
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Keywords: Inflectional classifiers; Speaker-role classifiers; Ahmao; Miao; China

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