

## Inflectional classifiers in Weining Ahmao: Mirror of the history of a people<sup>\*1</sup>

Matthias Gerner & Walter Bisang

In most East and Southeast Asian isolating languages, the classifier is realized as a unique undeclinable morpheme. Weining Ahmao, a Miao-Yao language spoken in Western Guizhou (P. R. of China), happens to decline its 48 classifiers in 12 basic forms, each displaying a complex cluster of meanings which can be broken down into three to four parameters: Size/Importance [Augmentative, Medial, Diminutive], Definiteness [Definite, Indefinite] and Number [Singular, Plural]. Moreover, gender registers are attached to the parameter of Size/Importance. In addition to their function as noun categorization devices, the Ahmao classifiers exhibit a rare instance of social deixis whereby they disclose the gender and age of the speaker. A classifier in the Augmentative form is typically employed by men (in addition to conveying an idea of greatness); the Medial form is typically used by women (and communicating a notion of medium size); the Diminutive version of a classifier correlates with speakers of lower social status, typically children (as well as attaching a sense of reduced size).

This idiosyncratic system can be reconstructed diachronically. The size distinctions in the classifiers came into existence through morphological reanalysis of two size affixes. The feature of definiteness was established through the influence of the Ahmao numeral for 'one'. The Ahmao gender roles appear to be linked to a long and proven history of harsh oppression by local landlords in Southwest China in the 18th–20th centuries. The Ahmao classifier system is adequately accounted for by Chen's notion of self-politeness within Brown and Levinson's theory of strategic politeness.

**Keywords:** Inflectional classifier, social deixis, Ahmao, Miao, China

---

<sup>1</sup> Matthias Gerner gratefully acknowledges the support of City University of Hong Kong in the form of two Strategic Research Grants (Project No. 7001921 & 7002188). We wish to express special gratitude to Wang Deguang, native Ahmao speaker serving as principal informant. Warm regards also go to Noel Johnston, Amanda Huensch and two *FLH*-reviewers for comments on an earlier version of the manuscript.