Instruments as verb classifiers in Kam (Dong)*

MATTHIAS GERNER

Abstract

This article is a contribution to an emerging crosslinguistic typology of verb classifier systems. It presents an in-depth study of one particular type predominant in East Asian and Southeast Asian languages and epitomized through Kam (Dong), a Kam-Tai language spoken in Southwest China. In Kam and related languages there are basically two types of verb classifiers: sortal and mensural. Both kinds are involved with event-phase counting and temporal measuring and hence mirror the function of their twins in the nominal realm. Sortal verb classifiers can be characterized as deriving lexically from nouns that occupy an instrumental participation role. Kam exhibits ca. 40–50 of them.

Although the term of noun and verb classifier has been around for many years, it is noteworthy that almost no scholar has ever come forward with an authoritative definition of what exactly constitutes a linguistic classificatory phenomenon. McGregor (2002) is an exception and his definition is based on distributional-probabilistic properties. I adopt, augment and partially rewrite his criteria and demonstrate that the system of sortal verb classifiers in Kam constitutes indeed a phenomenon by which verbs are categorized.

The basic semantic requirement for classifiable verbs (or events) in Kam is to incorporate one minimal part. A minimal part of an event is defined as a TOUCH-type event by which two objects meet in various ways. The prototypical verb referring to a TOUCH-event is 'hit'. Further subdivisions can be made for classifiable verbs. Verbs are categorized in terms of the instruments by which objects are caused to collide: by a physical instrument-object or by a trigger medium.