Classifier Declinations in an Isolating Language: On a Rarity in Weining Ahmao[*]

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In this paper, we scrutinize a rare classifier system in an isolating language. Weining Ahmao, a Miao-Yao language spoken in western Guizhou Province in the PRC, inflects each of its noun classifiers in twelve basic forms and stands in stark contrast to other isolating languages of East Asia (including other Miao languages), in which nominal classifiers are unique indeclinable morphemes. This paper focuses on a synchronic analysis of all aspects of the classifier system; i.e. a representation of its phonological, semantic, and pragmatic properties as well as the syntactic constructions in which the classifiers are involved. A data list of cognate classifiers from four Miao languages encapsulates the uniqueness of the Ahmao inflectional classifiers.

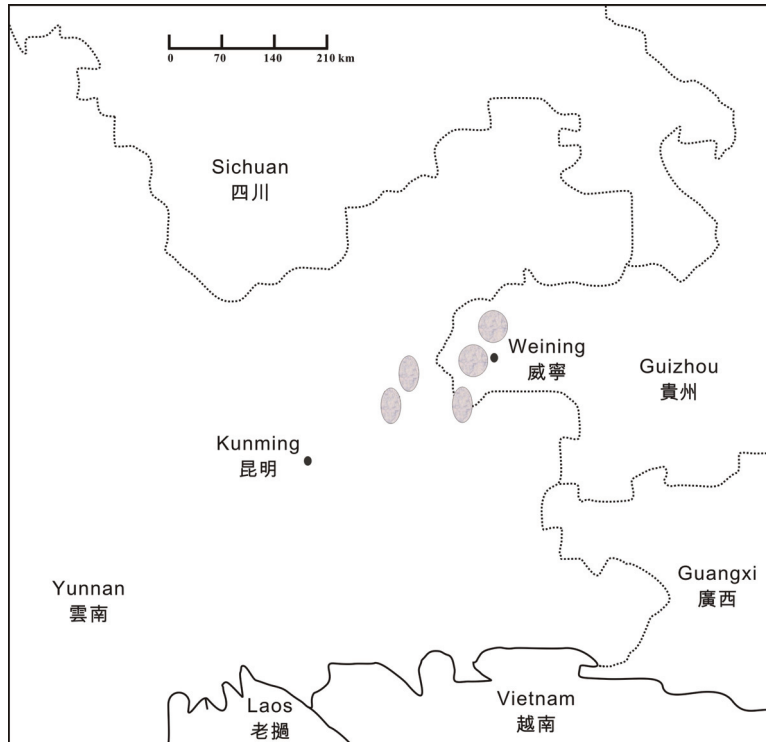Key words: inflectional classifier, size classifier, indexical, Ahmao, Miao, China

1. Introduction

This paper describes the Ahmao classifier system, a linguistic rarity whose historical development was hypothesized upon in a recent paper (Gerner & Bisang 2009). Ahmao is a Miao-Yao language[1] spoken by 300,000 natives in western Guizhou

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[1] In this paper, we employ the Chinese exonym *Miao-Yao* for the language family that is also called *Hmong-Mien*. Most speakers of languages of this family live within the borders of the PRC. As ca. 75% of the Miao-Yao speakers refer to themselves by names other than *Hmong* or *Mien* (e.g. Qanao, Ahmao, Qoxung), and as these speakers readily accept the Chinese exonym, we also adopt this naming convention.

Province in the PRC. The following map illustrates the residence area of the Ahmao people. Although Ahmao is an isolating language in which parts of speech are realized as indeclinable one-form categories, the system of nominal classifiers is different in having developed a twelve-form paradigm for each item.

Map: The residence area of the Ahmao people in Southwest China

Since Greenberg (1974), scholars have recognized a correlation between the obligatory expression of the singular/plural distinction and the presence of numeral classifiers:

> Numeral classifier languages generally do not have compulsory expression of nominal plurality, but at most facultative expression. (Greenberg 1974:25)

If one assumes that nouns in East Asian languages only express the concept itself without any reference to its number, it is the function of the classifier to individuate that concept to make it receptive to quantification by numerals. Classifiers refer to certain cognitive properties of concepts (e.g. dimensionality, animacy, flexibility, etc.) and thus assign them to different classes. The correlation between classification and individuation seems to hold through all the classifier systems of East Asia and mainland Southeast Asia

在孤立型語言中的屈折量詞：
威寧苗語的稀有現象

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　　本文分析了在孤立型語言中少見的量詞系統。威寧苗語是中國貴州西部苗瑤語系中的一種語言，每個量詞可有十二種屈折變化的形式，在亞洲其他的孤立型語言中沒有這種現象，包括其他苗語也不存在這種現象，除威寧苗語外，其他語言的每個量詞只是一個單獨的詞，不能有屈折變化。本文著重從共時語音、語義、語用及句法結構的角度分析了威寧苗語的量詞系統。並在文章附錄列出了三種苗語和威寧苗語對應關係的量詞。

關鍵詞：屈折量詞，大小量詞，索引，威寧苗語