# Specific classifiers versus unspecific bare nouns☆

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## Abstract

Based on rare language data from a Chinese minority language, we argue for a particular theory of specific and unspecific reference. We understand specific versus unspecific reference as the properties of picking out *one* versus *not-one* (set of) referents in the discourse context. The analysis is reminiscent of Schwartzschild (2002)'s singleton theory and an alternative to the Choice Function approach. We further argue that unspecific reference conversationally implicates other reference types such as 'universal', 'generic' or 'distributive' reference. The Hmu language (Miao-Yao: China) is cross-linguistically rare in encoding the contrast of specific versus unspecific reference by a minimal pair, by bare classifiers and bare nouns.
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## 1. Introduction

This paper showcases the Hmu language, a language in which specific reference is a necessary condition for the use of the bare classifier (BCL), while unspecific reference is a necessary condition for the use of a bare common noun (BN).

In East Asian languages, classifiers do not have independent grammatical functions but *contribute* to mark the functions of counting (with numerals), quantification (with quantifiers) or deixis (with demonstratives).[1] The languages generally have one plural and mass classifier, while all the other classifiers count the singular number of the noun they modify. When bare classifiers are available, they usually encode indefinite reference, definite reference, or both depending on the syntactic position in which they are used.[2] In a similar way, bare nouns have definite, indefinite or generic reference according to the slot in which they occur. Examples (1)–(2) illustrate the range of functions that bare classifiers and bare nouns can express. Bare classifiers are exemplified in (1), bare nouns in (2). Ambiguous interpretations can be clarified by contextual information.

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 [1] See Bisang (1999)'s typology of classifier constructions.
 [2] See, for example, Simpson et al. (2011)'s findings on bare classifiers in several East Asian languages and Li (2013)'s investigation in three Chinese dialects, Mandarin, Cantonese and Wu.

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