
Studies of numeral classifiers (CL) in Chinese and other languages have been abundant in recent decades, ever since Greenberg's paper on language universals and the development of models of folk taxonomies, human categorisation and, in particular the prototype theory of classification. Yang-Drocourt's book fills a gap in the existing literature, as it describes for the first time the diachronic development of the Chinese CL from the earliest transmitted sources of the language (i.e., 13th c. BC) until the 17th c. AD when by and large they have assumed their contemporary function.

Chinese numeral classifiers represent only one among several types of noun classification systems which have been extensively described by Aikhenvald (2000). In Contemporary Chinese, they are morphemes obligatory between the numeral (Num) and the noun (N) in count constructions (Num CL N). This phrase can be preceded by a demonstrative, and other modifiers such as adjectives can be inserted between CL and N. Together with frequent anaphoric usage of Num CL and Dem CL, these represent the major constructions with CLs.

The relevance of a systematic diachronic study of Chinese CLs is twofold: Firstly, they form the CL-system with the longest recorded history. The study of 3,000 years of inscriptions and documents gives the unique opportunity to study the development of a CL-system from zero to a full-fledged obligatory system. Secondly, Chinese — or better — Sinitic languages - have been in contact with numerous languages in East and Southeast Asia, most of
which have CL systems of various types. As CL have been shown to be an areal phenomenon, a clear picture of the evolution of the Chinese will shed light on the distribution and features of other systems and help to make assumptions about their historical development and the impact of language affiliation and of contact phenomena in their formation.

Two of the main questions repeatedly raised by linguists for many decades are treated exhaustively by Yang-Drocourt: (1) How and when did Chinese CLs become obligatory in quantitative expressions? (2) How to explain that the earlier predominant construction "N Num CL/MW" gives way to the pre-nominal "Num CL N" that predominates in Contemporary Chinese?

The book is divided into an introduction followed by seven chapters, with a short summary at the end of the last chapter. The introduction briefly outlines the scientific context, aim and methodology of the study and clarifies the usage of the term "classifier" in the context of abundant alternative terms.

The first chapter "Preliminaries" mainly deals with the syntactic functions of CL and MW in Contemporary Mandarin, as well as the definition of CL as opposed to measure words (MW). A long discussion is consecrated to the issue of the quantifying vs. qualifying role of CL. This chapter lays the basis for the following 6 chapters diachronically treating the syntax of CL-phrases as opposed to other numeral constructions in different periods (see below).

Yang-Drocourt emphasizes the distinction between CL and MW – a distinction not unanimously accepted in the field. Discarding some of the syntactic and semantic criteria suggested previously by Tai (1994), Chao (1968), Wang (1994) and Peyraube & Wiebusch (1993), she accepts only the possible replacement of CL by the default CL ge 上, as opposed to the resulting distortion of meaning in the same procedure (a criterion not applicable in early periods without default CLs).

The author rightly points out that the universal occurrence of MW in all languages as opposed to the limited set of languages possessing a CL system as well as the historical situation of