
This dissertation investigates the semantics of classifiers in Chinese. We claim that there is a fundamental semantic distinction in the Chinese classifier system, namely, the distinction between the counting function and the measure function. Relying on argument that Chinese bare nouns denote kinds, we argue that in their counting function, classifiers apply to the kind denoted by the noun and return a set of atomic entities, which can be counted as one in context (Rothstein 2010:343-397). In their measure function, classifiers first combine with numerals to form a complex modifier which denotes the set of entities of the head noun type, whose measure value is the quantity denoted by the numeral (Krifka 1995, Chierchia 1998, Landman 2004).

The dissertation consists of six chapters.

Chapter 1 is introductory. Section 2 contains a brief overview of the morpho-syntactic properties of nominal phrases in Chinese. It is addressed to those readers who are not familiar with classifier languages. Section 3 provides an introduction to key semantic concepts employed throughout our analysis, such as the mass/count distinction, the interpretation of bare nouns, and the counting and measure functions of classifiers in Chinese. Section 4 gives an overview of the remainder of the dissertation.
Chapter 2 reviews the mass/count distinction of Chinese nominal phrases. Cheng and Sybesma (1998) argue that the mass/count nominal distinction is a grammatically relevant phenomenon in Chinese. They propose that there is a mass/count distinction in Chinese nominal phrases, and that this distinction is reflected at the level of classifiers rather than at that of nouns. They suggest that there are two types of classifiers in Chinese, “count classifiers” and “mass classifiers”, which modify ‘count’ nouns and ‘mass’ nouns respectively. They further claim that mass and count classifiers are structurally different. They assume that count classifiers belong to a functional class and mass classifiers belong to a lexical class (derived from nouns). They furthermore propose that count classifiers are base-generated in the position of CI°, while mass classifiers start out in N and then undergo N-to-Cl movement. Cheng and Sybesma suggest that the distinction between mass and count classifiers can be demonstrated by using two syntactic tests: (i) the presence of an adjective preceding the classifier for mass classifiers, as illustrated in example (1), and (ii) the possibility of using the subordinative particle de after the classifier for mass classifiers, as shown in example (2): ¹

(1a) yi da zhang zhi [mass classifier]
    one big CLF-piece paper
    ‘a big piece of paper’

(1b) *yi da zhi gou [count classifier]
    one big CLF dog

(2a) san wan de tang [mass classifier]
    three CLF-bowl SUB soup
    ‘three bowls of soup’

¹ Chinese examples are provided without tone marks as in the dissertation.