Evolution of the Chinese Classifiers That Modify the Tree Name Nouns

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Abstract

By investigating the examples of the Chinese classifiers that modify the tree name nouns, which recorded in the unearthed documents and handed-down literatures, this paper has made an analysis of their evolution, and come to a conclusion that the motivation of their evolution is related not only to the sticking to the precise and economical principles, but also to the numerically quantified noun structure, Chinese dialects and the tendency of the bi-syllabification of Chinese vocabulary.

Key words: Chinese language; Classifier; Tree name noun; Evolution; Motivation

INTRODUCTION

Classifier is a unique part of speech in Sino Tibetan language family especially in China. But since the start of the modern linguistics study in China, the definition of classifier until 1950s has been determined, and classifier has been treated as an independent category in Chinese vocabulary (He, 2000) In view of the particularity of classifiers, the purposes of this study is to get the rules of evolution in Chinese classifiers by investigating a certain class of classifiers. And the object of this paper is the Chinese classifiers that modify the tree name nouns, which does not include the classifiers that modify flowers,

fruit or some else about trees. Many old studies tend to research one of those classifiers individually, and the class of classifiers that modify the tree name nouns have not yet been researched systematically. In this paper, we mainly talk about the classifiers that modify the tree name nouns in historical stages and investigate the evolution of those classifiers in chronological order, then analyze the motivation of their development and evolvement.

1. EVOLUTION OF THE CLASSIFIERS THAT MODIFY THE TREE NAME NOUNS

No one classifier that modify the tree name nouns was found in oracle bone inscriptions and bronze inscriptions by now, that is to say, there was no classifier that modify the tree name nouns in early Chinese language. However, in the Warring States and Qin and Han Dynasties (BC475-AD220), there were six classifiers be used to modify tree name nouns in Chinese language, they are "ben (本)", "shu (树)", "mu (木)", "zhang (章)", "ge (箇)" and "mei (枚)". And the use cases of those classifiers，which be recorded by the unearthed documents and handed-down literatures，as the following:

(1) *Xunzi· Fuguo Chapter*: "Each melon tree, peach tree, jujube tree and plum tree can bear its fruitages that need be hold by big container." (《荀子·富国》："瓜桃枣李一本数以盆鼓.")

(2) *Shiji· Biographies of Trade*: "There are thousands of jujube trees in Wei kingdom and thousands of chestnut trees in Yan kingdom and Qing kingdom." (《史记·货殖列传》："安邑千树枣，燕秦千树栗.")

(3) *Shiji· Biographies of Trade*: "One thousand woods and ten thousand *bamboos*." (《史记·货殖列传》："木千章，竹竿万个.")

(4) *Suan Shu Shu* of the Han Dynasty bamboo slips unearthed in Zhangjiashan: "Cut off sixty *bamboos one day*." (张家山汉简《算数书》："一日伐竹六十箇.")

(5) *Fengzhenshi* of the Qin Dynasty Bamboo slips

unearthed in Shuihudi: "There was ten mulberry trees front the door." (睡虎地秦简《封诊式》："门桑十木.")

(6) Bamboo and wooden slip of Han Dynasty unearthed Juyan area, Number E.P.T40-16: "Forty short bamboos on the mat of carriage." (居延新简E.P.T40：16："车荐短竹四十枚.")

The number of classifiers that modify the tree name nouns is more than before in the Qin and Han Dynasties, even so, it is not much all, so this period including Oracle Era, Bronze Age and Qin and Han Dynasties is still an embryonic stage of this kind of classifiers.

In the Wei Jin Southern and Northern Dynasties (AD220-AD589), Chinese classifiers got an unprecedented development. As suggested, "the complete system of Chinese classifiers is formed in this era". (Liu, 1965) It is no doubt that, in such a background, the classifiers about tree name nouns have been inherited and developed to a certain extent. Based on inheriting the Qin and Han dynasties, many new member of classifiers that modify the tree name nouns have appeared, such as "ge (个)", "cong (丛)", "zhu (株)", "gen (根)", "gan (竿)", "ting (梃)", "zhi (枝)", "ke (窠)" and so on. And the use cases of those classifiers as the following:

(7) Liuhui, *Jiuzhangsuanshu*:" Two thousand three hundred and fifty bamboos." (刘徽《九章算术》："竹二千三百五十个.")

(8) Hexun, *Wang xie qian shui da Cui Lushi*: "Bamboos are swaying and soughing." (何逊《望廨前水竹答崔录事》："萧萧丛竹映")

(9) Jia Sixie, Preface of *Qimingyaoshu:* "Let each person plant one elm." （贾思勰《齐民要术·序》："令口种一株榆.")

(10) Weishou, *Weishu· Biographies of six dukes:* "A dozen of big pine trees." (魏收《魏书·献文六王传》："大松树十数根.")

(11) Yuxin, *Xiaoyuan Fu:* "Two or three bamboos." (庾信《小园赋》："三竿两竿之竹.")

(12) Hanyu, *Lantian Xiancheng tingbi ji:* "There are one thousand giant bamboos beside the south wall." (韩愈《蓝田县丞厅壁记》："南墙巨竹千梃")

(13) Liu Changqing, *Shici Anlu Ji Youren:* "How many little willows among the five willows front of the door?"（刘长卿《使次安陆寄友人》："门前五柳几枝低？")

(14) Du Fu, *Jiang fu Chengdu caotang tu zhong you zuo xian ji Yanzheng gong*: "Bad bamboos should be cut off in thousands."（杜甫《将赴成都草堂途中有作先寄严郑公》："恶竹应须斩万竿.")

(15) Du Fu , *Xiao ba mingfu shi chu mi taozai:* "To beg one hundred peach seedlings under orders." （杜甫《萧八明府实处觅桃栽》："奉乞桃栽一百根.")

(16) Pang yuanying, *Wenchangzalu: "An apricot tree in dooryard is so huge."*（庞元英《文昌杂录》）："堂前杏一窠极大.")

To the Tang and Song Dynasties (AD581-AD1279), the classifiers that modify the tree name nouns mainly followed the usage of last period that is the Wei and Jin

dynasties and the northern and Southern periods, and there was almost no new member during this period. Because in order to communicate easy, the language will not create a lot of new words, but increase the vocabulary semantics and expand the use scope of old words (Tian, 2012). For example, the original meaning of Chinese word "tou (头)" is head of humans and animals, and as a classifier, the word "tou (头)" is used to modify animal name nouns like "牛（Cattle）" and "羊 (sheep)" in the Han Dynasty. Then the number of nouns that the word "tou (头)" can modify became more and more during the period that from the Wei and Jin Dynasties to Tang and Song Dynasties. A use cases of the word "tou (头)" that modify tree noun as the following:

(17) Zhangji, *Zeng Yinshanren:* "Ten thousand orange trees have been planted."（张籍《赠殷山人》："已种千头橘.")

On the other hand, in ancient and middle ancient times, it was a universal modification way that the numerals and classifiers follow the nouns phrase, so did the classifiers that modify the tree name nouns. However, the classifiers that modify the tree name nouns occurred occasionally before the nouns phrase, certainly the case was not much.

After the germination of the Qin and Han Dynasties, the growth of the Southern and Northern Dynasties and the consolidation of the Tang and Song dynasties, the classifiers that modify the tree name nouns entered the preliminary maturity period in the Yuan Ming and Qing Dynasties (AD1206-AD1911). Due to the language accuracy, some classifiers were used to describe the flower name nouns specially, which did not modify tree name nouns any more, such as "cong (丛)", "zhi (枝)" and so on. At the same time, the function of some classifiers began to be simplify, which only be used to modify the tree name nouns, such as "ben (本)", "zhu (株)" and so on. But the division of function in some classifiers was still undefined. For example, the pronunciations of three classifiers including "ke (窠)", "ke (颗)" and "ke (棵)" were identical, and all of them could be used to modify tree name nouns, while the words "ke (窠)" and "ke (颗)" could be used to describe small, granular or round objects like seals, pearls and so on. With the development of language, the division of function in classifiers become more specific than before, "ke (棵)" is only used to modify plant nouns, and "ke (窠)" gradually disappear from the vocabulary, then "ke (颗)" is used to be used to describe small, granular or round objects. In addition, the position of classifiers that modify tree name nouns is still unstable in this period, that means, those classifiers could occurred before the noun phrase or behind it in a sentence.

In the modern times, the classifiers that modify tree name nouns have entered a normative period. First of all, the division of function in classifiers is more clear and definite. In past historical periods, there were many different classifiers can modify the tree name nouns, but the number of those classifiers is less than before, even

just use the word "ke (棵)" to modify the tree name nouns in spoken Chinese nowadays. Secondly, some disyllabic classifiers have been used during this period, most of them are measurement scales such as kilometer(千米), kilogram (公斤) and hectare (公顷). It must be emphasized that most of the disyllabic classifiers in modern Chinese language are loanwords, they appeared with China's modernization. And the use cases of those classifiers we mentioned as the following:

(18) The distance between the earth and the moon is 380,000 kilometers. (地球与月球的距离是三十八万千米.)

(19) I'm going to buy 2 kilograms of apples.（我要去买两公斤苹果.）

(20) The area of this farm is 50 hectares. (这个农场的面积是50公顷.)

For grammatical position, the classifiers that modify tree name nouns occur before the nouns phrase generally nowadays. That is to say, the Numerically Quantified Noun Phrase[1] is a customary and fixed language structure in modern Chinese.

According to investigation we thought that the Chinese classifiers that modify the trees name nouns were similar to echo classifiers in the beginning.[2] Meanwhile, there are some classifiers, for convenience, which also be borrowed from the universal classifiers to modify tree name nouns, such as "mei (枚)". After the middle ancient times, with the gradual development of "numeral + classifier + nouns" structure in Chinese, some classifiers such as "shu (树)" and "mu (木)" began to be replaced by other classifiers. After all, the number of Chinese classifiers that modify the tree name nouns have got more and more and the division of function in those classifiers have became clear gradually.

2. MOTIVATION OF THE EVOLUTION

Professor Wang Li once said that the development of classifiers showed the rigor of Chinese grammar (Wang, 1990). So did the classifiers that modify the tree name nouns. Through investigating the evolution of those classifiers, we thought that the motivation of Chinese classifiers that modify the tree name nouns at least include the following five aspects:

2.1 The Exactness of Language

Human beings use language to communicate information. Therefore, the expression of language must be clear and definite, and then the hearers can understand and accept it. For example, the words "ke (窠)", "ke (颗)", "ke (棵)" and "ke (科)" all can be used to modify some tree name nouns in the Southern and Northern Dynasties. But "ke (窠)" and "ke (颗)" not only can be used to qualify trees, but also qualify the granular or round things. Therefore, if people use "ke (窠)" and "ke (颗)" to modify a tree name noun, hearers would mistakenly believe that the tree is a small one. Undoubtedly, it can affect our communication. So they do not be used to modify the tree name nouns slowly, but only to modify small, granular or round objects like seals, pearls and so on. The words "ke (科)" can be used to qualify plant name nouns before the modern times, and it is gradually used to describe curriculum or business and so on now. The words "ke (科)" is gradually being replaced by the "ke (棵)", it means people use "ke (棵)" to modify plant name nouns instead of "ke (科)" in mandarin.

2.2 The Economy of Language

As suggested, "it will violate the economical principle of language if some different classifiers could be used to modify a same noun or verb phrase without difference of meaning." (Feng, 1999) And then the words usually compete with each other for survival of the language. For instance, the usages of the words "ge (个)" and "ge (箇)" are same in middle ancient Chinese language. But usages of that two words are different in the Qin and Han Dynasties, and the word "ge (个)" have a longer history and more usages than the word "ge (箇)". The earliest use case of "ge (箇)" was found in the bamboo and silk manuscripts that belong to the Han Dynasty but no one in the documents of Pre Qin Period. And the word "ge (箇)" was only used to modify the word "zhu (竹)" (meaning bamboo). With the internal competition of words, the word "ge (个)" is used more frequently than "ge (箇)" after the middle ancient times, and the word "ge (箇)"was eliminated at last.

2.3 The Progressive Development of the Numerically Quantified Noun Phrase

Scholars generally consider that the "noun + numeral + classifier" structure has a significant impact on the occurrence of echo classifiers. In other words, the structure is a catalyst of the emergence and development of echo classifiers. Similarly, the occurrence of classifiers like "shu (树)" and "mu (木)" that were only used in Qin and Han Dynasties owe to the influence of the "noun + numeral + classifier" structure. However, from the beginning of the Southern and Northern Dynasties, the increasing number of classifiers and the progressive development of the "numeral + classifier +noun" structure led to the disappearance of the echo classifiers.

2.4 The Influence of Chinese Dialect

In modern times, some classifiers are generated by the influence of Chinese dialect. And some classifiers are only used in dialect area. For example, the word "dai (埭)" in "yi dai shu (一埭树)" is just prevalent in the Wu dialect. And the word "gu lu er (骨辘儿)" in "yi gu lu er zhu zi (一骨辘儿竹子)" is totally influenced by the r-ending retroflexion of the northern dialect.

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[1] Numerically Quantified Noun Phrase we talk about is a noun phrase constructed by numeral, classifier and noun in order.
[2] Echo quantifier is a kind of quantifier that have the same form including pronunciation and writing with the noun (or verb) which it modify. The echo quantifiers have appeared in oracle bone inscriptions and bronze inscriptions, and it is regarded as the rudiment of the quantifier.

2.5 The Influence of Disyllabification in Chinese

As we know, most of ancient Chinese words are monosyllables, on the contrary, most of modern Chinese words are syllables. This evolution, from monosyllable to syllable, has a great influence on the Chinese language system. And the classifiers, one part of vocabulary, have been influenced by this trend certainly. In fact, the double syllable classifiers that modify the tree name nouns have appeared and been used in Chinese language. And most of the disyllabic classifiers in modern Chinese language are loanwords like千米（kilometer），公斤（kilogram）and 公顷（hectare）we mentioned, Chinese introduce new concepts from western world and translated them into new syllables under the trend of disyllabification in Chinese language.

SUMMARY

The evolution of the classifiers that modify the tree name nouns is concordant with the development of Chinese classifiers. In other words, the evolution of those classifiers is a microcosm of the development of the classifiers system. Because the classifiers that modify the tree name nouns not only experienced a short stage of echo classifiers, but also followed the rules of language development. It is constantly updated and expanded to adapt to the requirement of language communication.

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