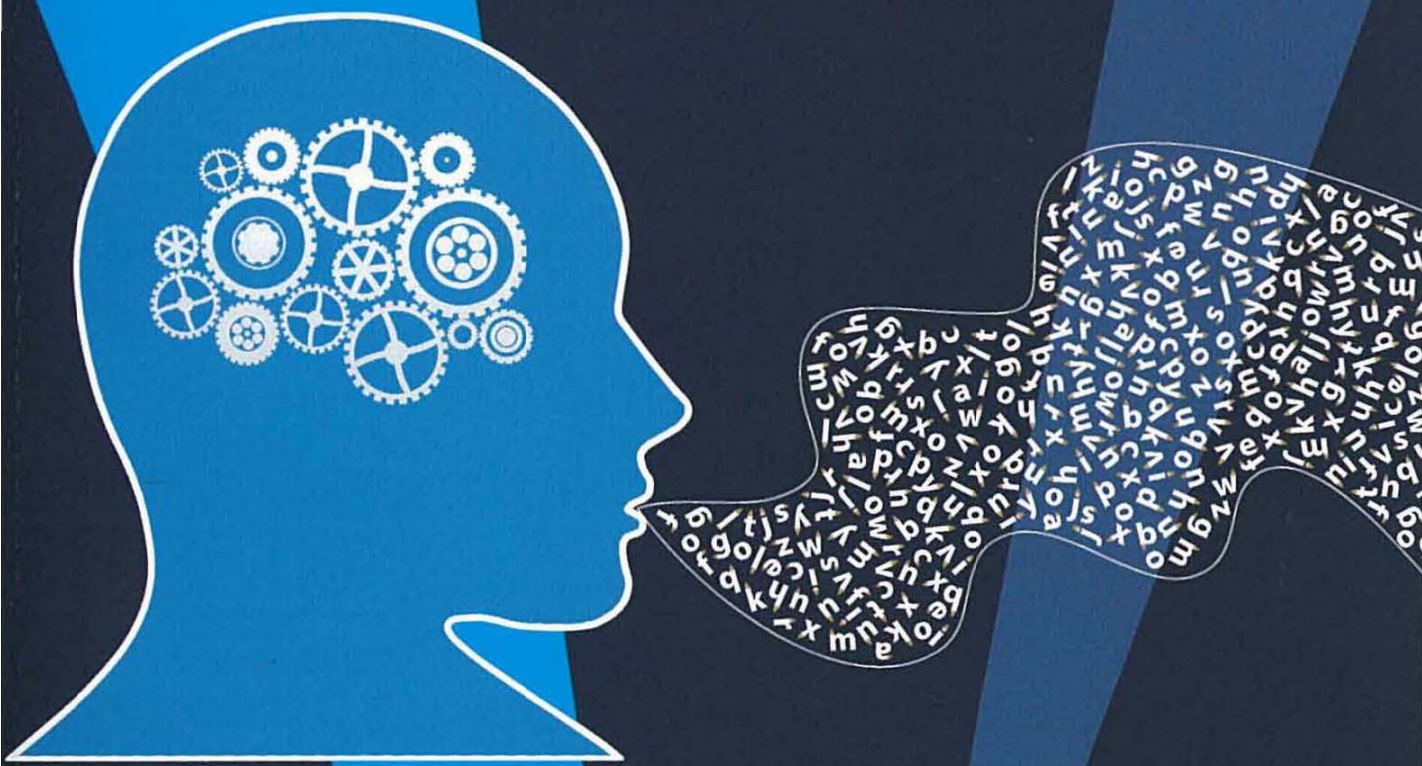
Classifiers in Kam-Tai Languages



A Cognitive and Cultural Perspective

Tian-Qiao Lu

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Author's Preface

This book is a monograph of description and analysis of the Kam-Tai languages from the aspects of syntactic structures and cultural implications in the usages of classifiers with special emphasis on sociocultural factors. This work is intended to provide useful information for specialists in linguistic and anthropological fields and also a textbook for students studying linguistics, anthropology or other relevant subjects as their major or minor.

There have been many publications on the subject of classifiers, among which, most notably, is the volume *Classifiers: A Typology of Noun Categorization Device* (Aikhenvald, 2000), the first comprehensive study on noun classification strategies of more than 500 of the world languages. Apart from the detailed account on the noun classification devices, the author also addresses the cultural implications of noun classifications in her work. Some sections, like *Semantic functions of noun classifiers* and *Semantics of noun classifiers*, investigate the social factors in classifier selctions. The chapter *Semantic Organization and functions of Noun Categorization* also gives description of the cognitive, social, cultural aspects of noun classification. A few other researches also have described the cultural aspects of noun classifications. For example, Dixon (1982: 180) finds that some birds are classified in the group of *human feminity* but others in the group of *human masculinity* in the classification system of Dyirbal because of their different mythical associations, although he distinguishes classifiers from noun classes because "they are quite different at the grammatical level" (*ibid*: 211-218).

Many studies related to the classifier usages in Kam-Tai languages have been published. But analysis from the aspects of biological, social, cultural, attitudinal implications, etc, is relatively limited. For example, Hundius and Koelver (1983:

183) claim that classifiers in Thai "*primarily* and essentially serve a *syntactic* function" because many of them like repeaters do not classify at all and that there is no "clear-cut boundaries between classes" as to the semantic properties, but "conversely, the very productive classifiers often cover strikingly wide and diversified ranges of nominal notions" (*ibid*: 204-205). The perceptual and generic natures of application of Thai classifiers, respectively referred to shape and function, kind or material, etc, are observed by some researchers like Placzek (1992: 154). Folk taxonomies in Thai classifier were discussed by Beckwith (1995: 11). But most of his researches, including his recent work on classifiers in languages in East and Southeast Asia, discuss mainly the syntactic structures of classifiers (Beckwith, 2010). Hiranburana (1979: 40-51) argues that "there is a definite semantic connection between a noun and its classifier" in Thai but his classification covers only the semantic properties of amount, shape, function, etc. Social or cultural description is not included in his study. But some linguists warned that "the view that categories are defined by common properties is not without problems" (Jaturongkachoke, 1996: 252-264). In Jaturongkachoke's study, many metaphorical usages from prototypical meanings in Thai classifiers are analyzed from a cognitive angle. From an earlier time, it has been aware that although there is predictable semantic relationships between classifiers and nouns, "it frequently happens that there is fluctuation in the choice of classifier for a given concrete noun, both from the point of view of the whole speech community and for individual speakers" (Noss, 1964: 105-109). Although Noss perceived the social characteristics of Thai classifiers, he did not discuss the cultural properties as a subject in his study. Diller (1985) was among the first few to have observed the cultural factors in selection of classifiers in Kam-Tai languages. He pointed out that it has

long been a custom in Thai to follow a *diglossic* system in the usage of classifiers. The same noun selects different classifiers in High and Low Thai (*ibid*: 64). Juntanamalaga (1988: 319-320) was also aware of the "royal vocabulary" in the usage of Thai classifier. He found that birds, horses and elephants fall in two categories in royal and common registers. A number of scholars (Carpenter, 1987; Deepadung, 1997; Aikhenvald, 2000; Burusphat, 2007b) have also demonstrated from a cognitive perspective that the Thai classifier *tua*, which is prototypically used to categorize animals, has an extensive usage to refer to shirts, tables and then problems, university courses, etc, undergoing some kind of semantic reanalysis. Barz and Diller (1985: 155) draw our attention to the fact that the research of classifiers to date "have mainly focused on syntactic issues, such as word order relative to head nouns". They suggest that "for a more detailed understanding of classifier evolution and spread, sociolinguistic and stylistic issues need to be considered." In his study of Lao classifiers, Enfield (2007: 128) observes that the cultural importance of classifiers "stems not only from their association with material artifacts, but also with the social significance of knowing the right classifier for a given noun" although he does not go much further into this subject. In short, there are still some gaps in the social and cultural investigations of the Kam-Tai classifiers.

My present study focuses on the obligatoriness and sociocultural properties of the Kam-Tai languages. The Kam-Tai family is also regarded in the study as *classifier prominent* languages. That is, the usages of classifiers in these languages seem to be almost omnipotent and more syntactically complex comparing with other classifier languages in this area, like Chinese and Japanese. The prominence of the Kam-Tai classifiers usage is embodied in two major aspects: their syntactic obligatoriness and syntactic

multi-functions, apart from many interesting aspects of their sociocultural implications. Individual attitudes are also a factor that affects the selection of classifiers. Although a classifier often co-occurs with a noun, many Kam-Tai classifiers are free lexemes that can occur in nominal phrases independently with an adjective, a verb, a determiner or many other word classes. A Kam-Tai classifier often occurs without a noun or a numeral although it is usually obligatory in a quantitative noun phrase. In daily conversations, classifiers rather than nouns occur as the head of a nominal phrase. Although classifiers are often used as anaphors, they often occur without syntactic antecedents. This is because they are often understood in proper contexts in daily speech. Classifiers are obligatory when individuation is involved. If the noun refers to a specific object, a classifier must be present (Singhapreecha, 2001: 260). Obligatoriness and particularization are often linked together. The use of a classifier often denotes a higher degree of particularization (Haas, 1942: 204). As can be seen in this book, cultural factors play an important role in the noun classification device in Kam-Tai languages. It is interesting to note how [+human] and [-human] are categorized in different cultures of the Kam-Tai peoples. I hope this book can serve as a complementary study of classifiers and provide useful materials for specialist to further investigate the inherent natures of classifiers.

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Finally, I would like to thank my wife Lisa Yue Liu for her assistance in material collection and other logistic work.

Illustrations

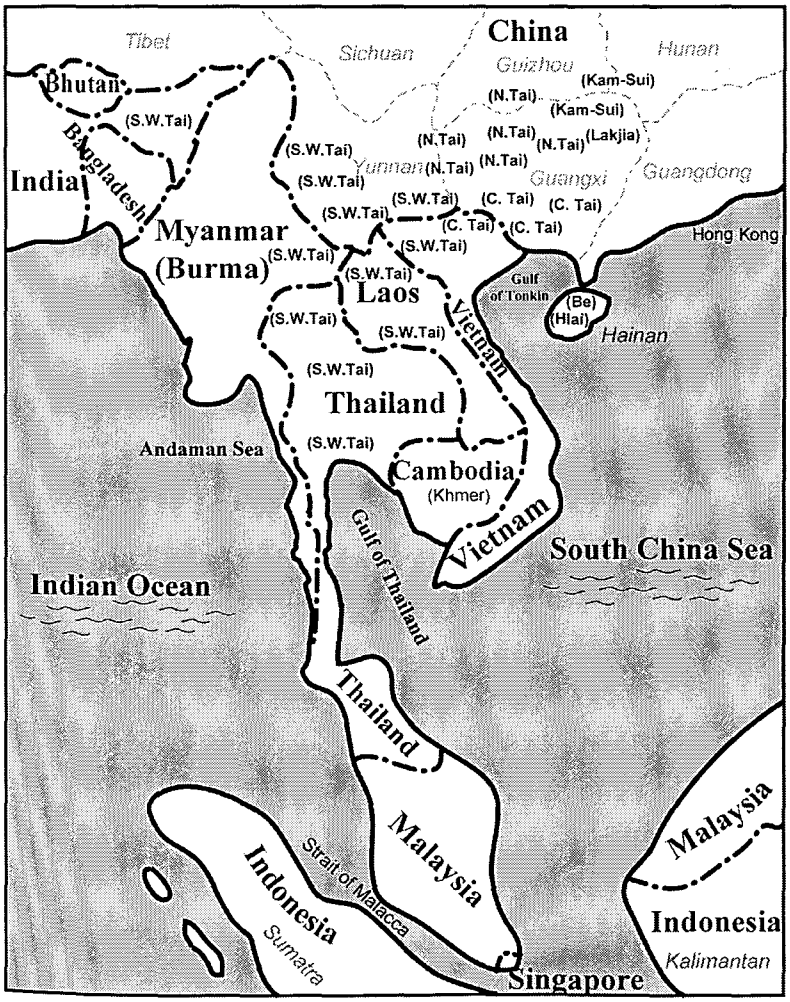
Map 1. The distribution of the Kam-Tai languages

C. Tai=Central Tai branch;

N. Tai=Northern Tai branch;

S.W. Tai=Southwestern Tai branch;

Kam-Sui=Kam-Sui branch



Abbreviations and Symbols

*...	Ungrammatical or proto-form
?...	Uncommon
1pl:excl	First person plural exclusive
1pl:incl	First person plural inclusive
1sg	First person singular
2pl	Second person plural
2sg	Second person singular
3pl	Third person plural
3sg	Third person singular
asp	Aspect marker
att	Attributive marker
cl	Classifier
crs	Current relevant state
dem	Demonstrative
dem:dist	Distal demonstrative
dem:prox	Proximal demonstrative
det	Determiner
det:dist	Distal determiner
det:prox	Proximal determiner
fem	Feminine
gen	Genitive
irr	Irrealis
mas	Masculine

mw	Measure word
num	Numeral
part	Particle
perf	Perfect marker
pfc	Perfective aspect
poss	Possessive marker
pre	Prefix
q	Question marker
rel	Relativizer
suf	Suffix
vcl	Verbal classifier