

Are All Languages ‘Numeral Classifier Languages’?*

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Greenberg (1975) observes that, “it is generally the case that numeral classifier languages will apparently lack a classifier in nouns indicating periods of time, units of distance and the word ‘time’ in such phrases as ‘five times’. [In Greenberg 1972] it was hypothesized that in these cases the correct interpretation was not that the classifier is omitted but that words like ‘day’, ‘mile’ and ‘time’ are themselves measures of verbal action so that we have to do with a subtype of the overall classifier or measure phrases. In other words, such phrases as ‘five days’ are rather to be identified with (Q <--> Cl) than (Q <--> N).” (p.30).¹

Certain numeral classifier languages provide direct evidence for this conclusion as the apparently classifier-less N does not occupy the normal position of the noun but that of the “absent” classifier. This is especially evident in Thai, where the noun and the numeral classifier are on opposite sides with respect to the numeral: N Num CL.

As Allan (1977,306f) notes, nouns like ‘year’, in adverbial constructions, unexpectedly appear with a numeral without an accompanying numeral classifier:

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¹ This is true of many Tai-Kadai, Sino-Tibetan, Mon-Khmer, and Austronesian languages (see, e.g., Thomas 1971,137; Manley 1972,126; Goral 1978,10,28,29-30; Kruspe 2004,209).

(1) nỳη pi·

one year

Num N

What is even more striking, Allan says, is that they do not appear in the ordinary position occupied by the noun (i.e., before the numeral – see *mǎ si tua* ‘dog four body’ = ‘four dogs’), but after the noun, in the position normally occupied by the classifier (see *si tua* ‘four body’ = ‘four (of them)’ [animals, coats, etc.]).

Very insightfully he concludes, citing Haas (1942,204), that in order to accommodate these facts *pi·* ‘year’ in (1) “must be interpreted as a classifier, and [(1)] must be given a new structural description, [(2)]” (p.307), adding that “the alternative, that the labels [Num] and N [...] be swapped, is absurd.” (p.307).²

(2) nỳη pi·

Num CL

It is at this point interesting to note that time units like ‘year’, when used adverbially, display properties of numeral classifiers of ‘numeral classifier languages’ (rather than those of ordinary nouns) even in ‘non numeral classifier languages’ like Italian or English.³

For example, it is generally the case that adjectives can modify nouns, and mensural “classifiers” (like ‘box’, ‘cup’, ‘kilo’, etc.), but not (sortal) numeral classifiers. See the contrast between (3) and (4), observed for Chinese in Cheng and Sybesma (1999,516):

(3) na yi xiao xiang shu

² Also see Simpson (2005, section 7), who suggests that cases like (2) involve raising of the N to CL.

³ The same is true of Bulgarian, which apart from the existence of three (or four) genuine numeral classifiers (Greenberg 1972,fn5; Cinque and Krapova 2007) is essentially a ‘non numeral classifier’ language.

that one small CL-box book

‘that (one) small box of books’

(4)a *yi da zhi gou

one big CL dog

b *yi da wei laoshi

one big CL teacher

Now exactly the same thing is found with the ‘nouns’ *anno* ‘year’ in Italian, *year* in English, and *godina* ‘year’ in Bulgarian, when they are used adverbially to express a time measure. See (5),(6), and (7):⁴

(5)a Sono rimasto a Londra per tre (*?bellissimi) anni

I.stayed in London for three (beautiful) years

b Tre (*bellissimi) anni fa ero a Londra

three (beautiful) years ago I.was in London

(6)a I lived in London (for) three (*beautiful) years

b Three (*beautiful) years ago I was in London

(7)a Živjax tri (*prekrasni) godini v London

I.lived three (beautiful) years in London

b Predi tri (*prekrasni) godini bjax v London

before three (beautiful) years I.was in London

‘Three (beautiful) years ago I was in London’

⁴ Although (6)a and b are felt as awkward by some speakers, Richard Kayne tells me that for him they are not completely impossible. The Bulgarian examples in (7) are from Cinque and Krapova (2007).

These facts suggest that in this usage Italian *anno*, English *year*, and Bulgarian *godina*, are really numeral classifiers in (5), (6), and (7), like Thai *pi* is in (2).

The fact that when they are used as arguments (say as objects of a transitive verb), they can be modified by adjectives (see (8), (9), and (10)), further suggests that they can also be ordinary nouns; which recalls the case of so-called ‘self-classifiers’ or ‘repeaters’ in many ‘numeral classifier languages’ (see (11), from Simpson 2005,832), except that in Italian, English, or Bulgarian, either the noun or the classifier, but not both, can be pronounced:⁵

(8) Ho passato/trascorso tre bellissimi anni a Londra

I.spent three beautiful years in London

(9) I spent three beautiful years in London

(10) Prekarax tri prekrasni godini v London

I.spent three beautiful years in London

(11)a hoong saam hoong (Thai)

room three CL-room

‘three rooms’

b cun ta cun (Burmese)

island one CL-island

‘one island’

⁵ Perhaps, in the adverbial classifier usage of these nouns, the noun itself raises to the classifier head, as Simpson (2005) suggested for Thai.

If this interpretation of the facts is plausible, then the conclusion is that even traditional “non numeral classifier’ languages *are* numeral classifier languages, with mostly abstract, or non pronounced, classifiers.⁶

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⁶ See Kayne (2003), who argues for the existence of a non pronounced numeral classifier ‘year’ in English (in expressions like *I am seven, at the age of seven*, etc.), and Kayne (2005), more generally, on the role of non pronounced functional elements in the languages of the world.

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