

Hainan Cham and the Chamic noun classifiers:  
New data on an old system.  
Graham Thurgood, CSU Chico  
gthurgood@csuchico.edu

This paper examines three classifier systems found in Hainan Cham, a language now only spoken near Sanya on Hainan Island, in southern China. It is also referred to in the literature as Tsat, an Anglicized version of the autonym [tsã:nʔ<sup>32</sup>]; tsã:nʔ<sup>32</sup> itself is simply the reflex of Proto-Chamic [c. 2000 years ago] \*cam ‘Cham’. The complete database consists of four short stories and some 400 sentences, collected from 1985-1993, by Zheng and Ouyang.

Hainan Cham has three classifier systems readily distinguishable on the bases of their syntactic configurations and meanings: mensural classifiers (measure words), sortal classifiers, and noun classifiers.

Mensural classifiers tell how much of the entity there is (Lyons 1997:463). All Hainan Cham mensural classifiers have the same syntactic configuration: number + mensural classifier + entity being measured or number + mensural classifier. The mensural classifiers are mostly Chinese borrowings.

The sortal classifier “individuates whatever it refers in terms of the *kind* of entity that it is” [italics added] (Lyons 1977:463). There are around 173 tokens of sortal classifiers in the database, 143 tokens are of either se<sup>55</sup>/se<sup>11</sup> ‘CLF. people, animals, birds; general classifier (for animates)’ < PC \*dreɣ ‘body’ or p<sup>h</sup>o<sup>11</sup>/p<sup>h</sup>o<sup>55</sup> ‘round object classifier, piece; general classifier (for inanimates)’ < PC \*boh ‘fruit, round object CLF’. That is, 85% of the time se<sup>55</sup>/se<sup>11</sup> or p<sup>h</sup>o<sup>11</sup>/p<sup>h</sup>o<sup>55</sup> was used. The remaining sortals, with the exception of za:nʔ<sup>32</sup> ‘CLF.

for people', deal with inanimates. Structurally, although various other modifiers may be present, the basic construction consists of a classifier phrase plus a head noun, sometimes in one order, sometimes in the other. If there is a number, it precedes the classifier.

The sortal classifiers have variation in syntactic configuration associated with discourse considerations (cf. Riddle 1989), that is, classifiers are used to introduce entities into a discourse, to distinguish between different introduced entities, and, where needed, used to track subsequent references to them. These considerations determine the order of the classifier phrase and head noun: (1) Presentatives, which highlight the introduction of a new entity into discourse, begin with a locative; the classifier phrase then precedes the head noun. (2) Next but without the initial locative are other foregrounded entities in the order classifier phrase head noun, introducing an entity into discourse. (3) With entities already introduced, the order is reversed with the head noun before the classifier phrase, typically to distinguish one established entity from another or to focus on a particular entity accessible from context. Finally, there are classifier phrases completely lacking a head noun. These are inevitably backgrounded, totally accessible material, with the head noun obvious for one reason or another.

Noun classifiers are evident in a careful examination of the Hainan Cham lexicon. Grinevald (1992:262) describes noun classifiers as semantically characterizing the noun and syntactically occurring with the characterized noun in a noun phrase.

The Hainan Cham system of noun classifiers is limited to less than a dozen items. It is not clear how productive the Hainan Cham system is; the nouns that occur with noun classifiers always occur with

noun classifiers in the texts. However, these same nouns sometimes occur in Zheng's lexicon without the classifier. Diachronically they are unequivocally a noun classifier plus a noun.

Within our Hainan Cham data there is evidence, somewhat fossilized, of at least seven noun classifiers: na<sup>11</sup> 'great grandparent, spirit; body parts, birds, animal names, and tools', naʔ<sup>24</sup> 'kinship terms', tsun<sup>33</sup> 'birds', ŋa<sup>11</sup> 'flowers; earrings', ʔia<sup>33</sup> 'water; liquids', p<sup>ho</sup><sup>55</sup> 'barnyard grass', ʔianʔ<sup>32</sup> 'vegetables', and hu<sup>11</sup> 'two bird names, a small number of body parts, and a number of vegetables', and ʔa<sup>11</sup>, which marks snakes, a subset of insects, and a large number of kinship terms. Each is discussed in turn in the fuller paper, accompanied by comments on similar noun classifiers elsewhere in Chamic.

While synchronically, the noun classifier constructions no longer seem to be noun-noun compounds (NN), diachronically there is no doubt that the construction originated in NN compounds. For the Chamic languages, however, it is argued that the initial noun has become encliticized to the following noun.

Despite the limited database, the available data allow comparison with typologically-similar, etymologically-related systems in other Chamic languages. One is ultimately from Mon-Khmer but apparently dating back to PC is the form tsun<sup>33</sup> 'birds'. Only two noun classifiers have unclear etymologies.

The noun classifier system itself, although only containing a handful of Mon-Khmer loans, may in part be the result of long-term, intense contact with Mon-Khmer, but these suspicions remain to be investigated.

Aikhenvald, Alexandra Y. 2000. *Classifiers: A typology of Noun*

- Categorization Devices*. Oxford University Press.
- Craig, Colette Grinevald. (ed.). 1986a. *Noun Classes and Categorization: Proceedings of a Symposium on Categorization and Noun Classification, Eugene, Oregon, October 1983*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Delancey, Scott. 1986. Toward a history of Tai classifier systems. In Colette Craig (ed.), *Noun Classes and Categorization*. J. Benjamins, pp. 437-452.
- Grinevald, Colette. 1992. Classifiers in a functional perspective. In M. Fortescue, P. Harder, and L. Kristoffersen (eds.). *Layered structure and reference in a functional perspective*. Amsterdam: J. Benjamins. 277-301.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2002. Making sense of nominal classifier systems: noun classifiers and the grammaticalization variation. In Ilse Wischer and Gabriele Diewald (eds.), *New Reflections on Grammaticalization*. J. Benjamins, pp. 259-275.
- Hopper, Paul J. 1986. Discourse functions of classifiers in Malay. In *Noun classes and categorization*, ed. by Colette Craig. J. Benjamins, pp. 309-325.
- Marnita, R. 1996. Classifiers in Minangkabau. MA thesis. ANU.
- Ouyang, Jueya and Zheng Yiqing. 1983. The Huihui speech of the Hui nationality in Ya County, Hainan. *Minzu Yuwen* 1:30-40.
- Riddle, Elizabeth. 1989. White Hmong noun classifiers and referential salience. XXII ICSTLL. Manoa: University of Hawai'i.
- Zheng, Yiqing. 1997. *Huihui Yu Yanjiu* [A Study of Cham]. Shanghai Yuandong Chuban She [Shanghai Far East Publishers].