



A Diachronic Semantic Study on the Chinese Classifier 架 (*jià*)

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Abstract

*Diachronic semantic analysis is employed in the present study to probe the origin and semantic evolution of the classifier 架 (*jià*). Through enumerating its origin and development, this preliminary study intends to (a) probe and comprehend the emergence and development of the Chinese classifier 架 (*jià*), and (b) attest the perspective of the fundamental role of human cognition and perception in the classifier language system as signified by Tai and Wang (1990). The result of this study proved that the classifier 架 (*jià*) is in no wise an arbitrary linguistic device; instead, its utilization throughout history reflects human categorization in reliance on the perceptual property of the supporting framework of the referents.*

Keywords: Chinese classifier, etymological origins, diachronic development, cognition

1. Introduction

A multitude of impertinent and geographically dispersed languages worldwide manifest enormous similarities in using a nominal classification system. While grammatical gender is employed to categorize nouns in some Indo-European languages, as per Tai (1994), measure words can be found in every language, including English [5]. However, some languages such as Chinese and Thai, from the cognitive perspective, have classifiers that are “used to ‘categorize’ an object in reference to its salient perceptual properties” (Allan, 1977) [1]. Chinese and several other languages are designated as Classifier Languages (Tai, 1994) [5].

2. Related studies

It is indisputable that Chinese is a language exceedingly abundant in the use of classifiers. For example, 兩個人 (*liǎng ge rén* [two people]) will be ungrammatical if the classifier 個 *ge* is absent. Allan (1977) delineated a classifier as an independent morpheme which “denotes some salient perceived or imputed characteristic of the entity to which an associated noun refers (or may refer)” (p. 285) [1]. Moreover, it is noteworthy that almost the same set of parameters are utilized for categorization classifiers in these Classifier Languages, such as material, shape, size, or other inherent characteristics of the referent (Allan, 1977) [1]. Nouns among these Classifier Languages are further categorized by classifiers, particularly for Chinese classifiers. Nevertheless, Tai and Wang (1990) argued that it is still nebulous “whether they reflect conceptual structures or are merely arbitrary forms without a conceptual basis” [6].

Over the past decades, the classifier has been explored from the perspectives of semantics (Tai & Wang, 1990) [6], idiosyncrasies (Lakoff, 1986) [4], and discourse pragmatics. Nonetheless, not much attention has been focused on the systematical study of the Chinese classifier system, especially from the cognitive perspective. Tai (1994) introduced the first cognition-based systematic study of classifiers systems across Chinese dialects [5]. The findings demystified the classifier systems in Chinese reflect conceptual structures and human categorization. Furthermore, Tai (1994) denoted that “the Chinese classifier systems are cognitively and semantically motivated and *not* arbitrary” [5].

Regarding the Cognitive Linguistic (CL) Approach in the Chinese classifier acquisition, Zhang and Jiang (2016) stressed that “the functions of individual Chinese classifiers are not as arbitrary as the way they are presented in the textbook” (p. 467) [7]. They argued that “there is always a semantic relation between a classifier and associated nouns referenced by the classifier, and the functions of an individual classifier are normally related to a central sense” (p. 467) [7]. Thereby, the findings proved that the CL Approach by



illustrating the polysemy network and the underlying motivations could hasten the progress of Chinese classifier learning.

Thus, through enumerating the origin and development, this preliminary study aims to probe and comprehend the emergence and development of the classifier 架 (*jià*) and attest the perspective of the vital role of human cognition and perception in the classifier language system as signified by Tai and Wang (1990) [6]. The following examples were derived from the Center for Chinese Linguistics Corpus and the Chinese National Corpus.

3. Origin and development of 架 (*jià*)

There are approximately hundreds of classifiers in Chinese, among which most of them can be traced back historically to their origins. Each individual classifier has its own semantic network. Per Jiang (2017), “the relationship among the nouns assigned to a classifier should not only reflect the synchronic semantic network of the classifier but also indicate the diachronic semantic development pattern of the classifier” (p. 26) [3]. Therefore, it is suggested that synchronic semantic analysis is expected to work in tandem with the diachronic development examination. Such a collaborative approach may promisingly lead to more comprehensive and convincing observations (Jiang, 2017) [3].

3.1 Etymological origins of the character 架 (*jià*)

The character 架 (*jià*), as a later-formed compound, is composed of the semantic 木 (*mù* “wood”) and the phonetic 加 (*jiā* “to add”). 架 (*jià*) is not included in *Shuowen*—the first dictionary reflecting the systematic study of Chinese script. Instead, its variant 枷 (*jià*) is included. In the *Kangxi* Dictionary—the standard Chinese dictionary during the 18th and 19th centuries, it explains the character as follows: “杙也，所以舉物” (“little wooden stakes, so can hold things”). Hence, 架 (*jià*) originally constituted a noun, referring to “a frame” used to hold up things as illustrated in (1) below:

(1) 凡以竿爲衣架者，名曰箴。《爾雅·釋器疏》

fán yǐ gān wèi yījià zhě, míng yuē yí. 《ěr yǎ·shì qì shū》

[Anything used as a pole to be a clothes hanger is called *yí*.]

Afterward, it has been extended a corresponding verbal meaning of “to prop up (things with the frame),” then more precise verbal meanings of “to build,” and later more abstract verbal meanings of “to support.”

The verbal function of 架 (*jià*) emerged from the Pre-Qin period (221 B.C.), and its both nominal and verbal meanings were concurrently used till the Wei, Jin, and the Southern and Northern Dynasties (A.D. 266–589) (Dong, 2017) [2], as demonstrated in example (2) below:

(2) 構架斫削，工匠之力也。《論衡》

gòujià zhuó xuē, gōngjiàng zhī lìyě. 《lùn héng》

[Constructing, propping, chopping, and cutting, those are craftsmen’s abilities.]

Thereafter, the character 架 (*jià*) evolved into a classifier and its classifier function was progressively developed during the Wei, Jin, and the Southern and Northern Dynasties, as shown in example (3) below:

(3) 既立宅宇，而所起五間六架。《宋書·五行志》

jì lì zhái yǔ, ér suǒ qǐ wǔ jiān liù jià. 《sòng shū·wǔ xíng zhì》

[The residence place has been constructed, it is a place where five rooms and six structures are built up.]



3.2 Diachronic development of the classifier 架 (*jià*)

As aforementioned, its classifier function was evolved and developed during the Wei, Jin, and the Southern and Northern Dynasties. Afterward, from the Tang Dynasties (A.D. 618–907), the usage of 架 (*jià*) as a classifier was applied extensively, particularly indicating referents that need support or bone structural items and racks for putting and hanging items like bells and chimes (Dong, 2017) [2], as manifested in examples (4) and (5) below:

(4) 陳鍾十二架，當十二辰之位。《通典》

chén zhōng shí'èr jià, dāng shí'èr chénzhī wèi. 《tōng diǎn》

[There are twelve bell chimes, each representing a position for twelve hours.]

(5) 一架長條萬朵春，嫩紅深綠小窠勻。《唐詩·薔薇》

yī jià cháng tiáo wàn duǒ chūn, nèn hóng shēn lǜ xiǎo kē yún. 《tángshī·qiángwēi》

[Thousands of roses grow on a long rose branch, light-red flowers, dark-green vines, and small and well-proportioned buds.]

Prior to the Tang Dynasties, 架 (*jià*) had been employed to categorize referents with a larger size or heavier weights, whereas 架 (*jià*) in the example (5) was used to depict the light-weighted rose branch. Apparently, it revealed a newly emerging trend of the classifier 架 (*jià*)—generalization.

Thence, during the Song and Yuan Dynasties (A.D. 960–1368), the classifier 架 (*jià*) was experiencing a continuation of the process of generalization. Accordingly, even though the primary semantic function of the classifier 架 (*jià*) remained unaltered, its utilization was generalized to more abstract referents.

Examples (6) and (7) are provided as follows:

(6) 陰陰一架紺雲涼。《全宋詞·鷓鴣天》

yīnyīn yī jià gàn yún liáng. 《quán sòngcí·zhègū tiān》

[One shady dark-purple color cloud brings coolness.]

(7) 翠虯寒、一架清香。《全宋詞·聲聲慢》

cui qiú hán, yī jià qīngxiāng. 《quán sòngcí·shēng shēng màn》

[The incense in the incense burner carved with the green scorpion pattern is burned out, and there are still strands of fragrance in the room.]

In the examples above, 架 (*jià*) was employed metaphorically to measure “cloud” and “fragrance,” respectively—those more abstract objects with no need to be supported or held up by a frame. Per Lakoff (1987), metaphor implies a cross-domain mapping in the conceptual system [4]. Therefore, based on one well-established existing conceptual domain, “we use our embodied experiences to form more complex conceptual structures in order to understand other things” (Jiang, 2017, p. 19) [3]. Further, Jiang (2017) suggested that the metaphor extension in the case of Chinese classifiers contributes to developing intricate networks of interrelated categories expressed by one word [3].

Shortly, Ming and Qing Dynasties (A.D. 1368–1911) witnessed the heyday of the utilization of the classifier 架 (*jià*) (Dong, 2017) [2]. The number of its referents considerably surpassed any previous dynasties. Example (8) is illustrated as follows:

(8) 正中間設一架紙爐。《西遊記》

zhèng zhòng jiān shè yī jià zhǐ lú. 《xī yóu jì》

[There is a paper stove in the middle.]



As a classifier, 架 (*jià*), fully developed in the Ming and Qing Dynasties, was used for a variety of referents with a supporting framework involving plants, instruments, machines, tools, household items, etc.

4. Conclusion and implications

Per Jiang (2017), “each individual extension of the uses of a classifier has its own historical cognitive basis that can result in a very complicated domain” (p. 185) [3]. Thereby, a diachronic semantic analysis is employed in the present study to probe the origin and semantic evolution of 架 (*jià*). It originally refers to an object used to hold up things. Afterward, it has been extended a corresponding verbal meaning of “to prop up (things with the frame),” then more precise verbal meanings of “to build” and later more abstract verbal meanings of “to support.” Through the Wei, Jin, and the Southern and Northern Dynasties, 架 (*jià*) evolved into a classifier, and its classifier function obtained a preliminary development. From the Tang Dynasties, the utilization of 架 (*jià*) as a classifier could be found extensively—primarily indicating referents that need support or bone structural items and racks for putting and hanging items like bells. Such a generalized process proceeded through the Song and Yuan Dynasties. Consequently, its applications were generalized to more abstract referents. Compared with the previous periods, Ming and Qing Dynasties witnessed a full development with the broadest application scope of the classifier 架 (*jià*) and the highest numbers of its referents.

Clearly, the diachronic semantic evolvement and development pattern of the classifier 架 (*jià*) reveals the inherent semantic network of Chinese classifiers and demonstrates the cognition and perception development of Chinese people. Indeed, those conceptual structures and cognitive perceptions have been profoundly rooted in ancient civilization, cultural practices, and primarily, people’s daily lives. Hence, this study proved that the classifier 架 (*jià*) is certainly not an arbitrary linguistic device; instead, the classifier 架 (*jià*) utilization throughout the history reflects human categorization in reliance on the perceptual property of the supporting framework of the referents. Hence, more future studies on the classifiers acquisition are expected to be in consonance with the conceptual structure of the classifiers’ domains and the cognitive linguistic approach in favor of providing Chinese language learners with a more natural, comprehensive, and efficient acquisition mode.

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