Taking the Measure of the Shan Plural Morpheme

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Background

- Shan is a Southwestern Tai language spoken in Myanmar and surrounding countries by approximately 3 million people (Lewis & Fennig 2016).
- Classifier languages often lack obligatory plural morphology on nouns (as noted by Greenberg 1972; Chierchia 1998; a.o.), as in (1)-(2):
  (1) màak nâm sìam tō dog one/three
  (2) nâm màak kkh̄ 3̄ 3 water one/three

- Many of these languages have a lexical plural morpheme, such as Mandarin (e.g., Cheng & Sybesma 1999, Bobković & Hsieh 2012), Japanese (e.g., Ueda & Haraguchi 2008), and Korean (e.g., Lee 1992).
- Classifiers must appear with numerals and some quantifiers and can appear with demonstratives and modifiers like adjectives and relative clauses:
  (3) màak tō jàum sìam tō tsī nāj dog CL.F.A big three CL.F.A PL this ‘these three big dogs.’

The Puzzle

Shan is a number neutral language, but has plural morpheme: tsī.

Questions:
1. What is tsī in (3)?
2. Why does it appear in a similar distribution to classifiers (1) and measure terms (2)?

Numeral Classifier

(4) NOUN NUM
a. CLASSIFIER
màak kkhōn bōj PL
b. PLURAL
màak kkhōn sîm PL

c. MEASURE
màak kkhōn sîm sām PL

Like Japanese and Korean, the Shan plural morpheme can appear with a numeral and classifier (7a), as can measure phrases, as in (7b).

While classifiers can appear in multiple places in the nominal expression, substituting a classifier for the plural morpheme in (7a) would be ungrammatical.

The measure phrase and plural morpheme are not strictly in complementary distribution with the classifier.

(7) NOUN NUM
a. PLURAL
(tsi) màak kkhōn sîm bōj PL
tsī nāj PL

b. MEASURE-CONTAINER
(kšg) màak kkhōn sîm bōj PL

(8) NOUN NAME
(a) tsi child-study
(tsi Khām)

(b) tsi Khām

(9) _ NOUN
(tsi) thā-khén

(10) _ PRONOUN
(tsi) hāw

Other uses of the plural morpheme

- tsī can precede nouns (8), pronouns (10), and names (9) —for a plural or associative plural interpretations.

Counts versus Measure

- Depending on the predicate a noun combines with and real world knowledge, a measure head noun may or may not be felicitous.

(11) COUNT
hāw ?aw #(kšg) nām sìam kkhōn tōk 1 take cup water three cup break
‘I broke three water cups //cups of water.’

(12) MEASURE
thɔ̌ŋ pān (#kšg) nām sìam kkhōn sām tōm mɔ add give cup water three cup put at in pot
‘Add three cups of water //water cups to the pot.’

(13) CONTAINER-CONTENTS
hāw ?aw (kšg) nām sìam kkhōn māa pān kkhōn 1 take cup water three cup give guest
‘I brought three cups of water for the guests.’

- When the distinction between contents and container is not relevant (see Partee & Borsley 2012), the container head noun is optional: (13).
- Rothstein (2016) argued that classifiers can express both count and measure semantics, and this is represented with different syntactic structures. The data in (11)-(13) support such an analysis for Shan (cf. Bale et al. 2019).
- Hundius & Köver (1983) and Simpson (2005), have noted that Thai has a set of measure terms which appear with no head noun.
- In Shan when a reifier classifier with the same form as the noun (14), the noun is optional for some words.

(14) (tšm tš̄m n̄g) tšm t̄m n̄g nām country two country that ‘those two countries’

(15) (t̄m) ≤ TL(z) [P(z) & GROUP(y) & ¬∃[P(y) & GROUP(y) & y < z)] (classifier form of plural morpheme; based on Nomoto 2013)

- The structures (7a)-(7b) come from a complex noun formed from the measure term màak kkhōn bōj ‘ten jujube’. When the container-contents distinction is not important, the measure term head noun can be deleted.

Conclusion

- The Shan plural morpheme is a noun meaning ‘group’ that can function as the head noun of a N-N compound, as in (8)-(10), or as a measure word, as in (6b) and (7a).
- The plural morpheme and measure terms like kšg ‘pile’ have the same distribution as classifiers, but they can combine with numeral-modified nouns to form a complex noun phrase.
- Measure terms can be used for a count, measure, or Container-Contents meaning. This distinction affects the syntactic structure.

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