

Classifiers in Kam-Tai Languages

**Classifiers in
Kam-Tai Languages**
A Cognitive and Cultural Perspective

Tian-Qiao Lu



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*Classifiers in Kam-Tai Languages:
A Cognitive and Cultural Perspective*

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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 selections. 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 femininity* but others in the group of *human masculinity* in the classification system of Dyrbal 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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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
pfv	Perfective aspect
poss	Possessive marker
pre	Prefix
q	Question marker
rel	Relativizer
suf	Suffix
vcl	Verbal classifier

1. Introduction

1.1. Linguistic genealogical position of Kam-Tai

Kam-Tai is a group name of a sub-branch of Tai-Kadai. The speakers of Kam-Tai languages are distributed in a vast area stretching from six provinces of southern China, namely, Guangxi, Guangdong, Hainan, Hunan, Guizhou, Yunnan, to five countries in Southeast Asia, including Laos, Thailand, northern Vietnam, Shan State of Myanmar (Burma) and Assam of India (see Map 1).¹ It is generally accepted that the Kam-Tai peoples are the direct descendants of the *Bai Yue* (lit. Hundred Yues) tribes. The earliest record of the Bai Yue tribes is found in *Lüshi Chunqiu* (221 B.C.), an encyclopaedic Chinese classic text, which mentions that Bai Yue tribes were located in the present-day Zhejiang, Jiangsu and other southeast provinces of China. The work *Shi Ji* ‘The Historical Records’ (91B.C.), the first universal history of China’s dynastic empires written by Sima Tan and his son Sima Qian, says that Gou Jian was appointed the king of the Kingdom of Yue in 496 B.C. and later defeated the Kingdom of Wu, approximately the present-day Jiangsu province.

The first morpheme *Kam* is the name of a language spoken in the southeast part of Guizhou province and the northeast part of Guangxi province in southern China, meant to represent the Kam-Sui branch of the Kam-Tai group, located at the northeastern border of Kam-Tai languages; while the second part of this group name *Tai* is taken from the

1 Ahom, also a Tai language spoken in Assam, became extinct in the nineteenth century.

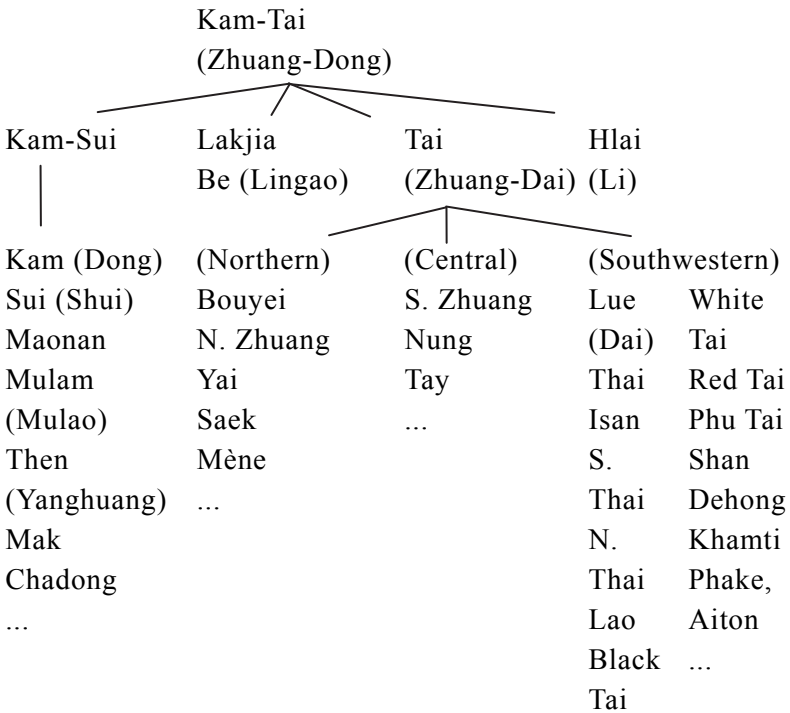
autonyms of language groups distributed in Thailand, Laos, northern Vietnam, southwest China, etc, which are located at the western border of the language group. Tai is sometimes written as Thai or Dai, or sometimes, Thai and Dai written as Tai in the literature. But researchers in this field have become more and more inclined to use Thai or Siamese to represent the language spoken in Thailand, Dai to mean a specific language spoken in southern part of Yunnan province of China and Tai to refer to a large group encompassing these two and other languages. The initials k- and t- of Kam and Tai are pronounced as unaspirated voiceless plosives by the local speakers or Kam-Tai researchers though they are often pronounced as aspirated voiceless by non-Kam-Tai researchers (cf. Diller, Edmondson *et al.*, 2008: 5).

This language group, also named as Dong-Tai or Zhuang-Dong in Chinese, is traditionally regarded by Chinese researchers as belonging to the Sino-Tibetan family which is said to include the language groups of Zang-Mian (Tibeto-Burman), Miao-Yao (Hmong-Mien),² Zhuang-Dong (Kam-Tai) and Sinitic languages, a speculative grouping formerly proposed by German scholar A. Conrady, French sinologist H. Maspero, Chinese Tai linguist Li Fangkuei, among others (Li, 1976: 230; Wang, Ouyang *et al.*, 1984: 1; Ma and Chen, 1985: 255; Liang and Zhang, 1996: 2; Ma, 2003: 6; Luo, 2008: 9-23). Sinologist and linguist August Conrady also connected Tai-Kadai, a larger group which covers

2 Hmong is an alternative term preferred for Miao in Southeast Asia because the speakers there deem Miao (or Meo, Meau) a derogatory term. But the Miao groups in Mainland China identify themselves as Miao because it has become a neutral term nowadays. Mien is one of the Yao languages spoken by the majority of Yao people.

Kam-Tai, Hlai and the Geyang languages, to Sino-Tibetan (Thurgood, 1994: 347). Other researchers, notably P. K. Benedict (Benedict, 1942: 600; 1975: 135), hold that Tai-Kadai is related to Austronesian rather than Sino-Tibetan, a view also shared by a number of subsequent linguists (Sagart, 1994: 303; 2004: 411; 2005: 161, 180) and Ni Dabai (Ni, 1990: 313-342).³ Benedict and other scholars treat shared vocabulary items between Chinese and Kam-Tai as loan words, arguing that they are cultural words that get borrowed frequently from one language to another.

Figure 1. The Kam-Tai group (after Diller et al. 2008)



3 Different from Benedict, Sagart includes Tai-Kadai family into a larger group called 'Sino-Tibetan-Austronesian'.

However, it still needs more solid evidence to establish such a larger group encompassing southern China, most parts of Southeast Asian and many of the Pacific islands. Researchers like Thurgood (1994: 363) agree that there is ‘genetic relationship’ between Tai-Kadai and Austronesian but it is pre-historical contact rather than inheritance.

Genetic relationship has now been treated as different from inheritance which means that some shared features were resulted from pre-historical contact rather than inherited from common ancestors because “language contact, if intense enough, can affect absolutely all areas of linguistic structure” (Matisoff, 2001: 291). General consent has not been reached as to the accurate number of languages to be included into this high-level group. The uncertainty or disputes over the grouping of these languages actually directly resulted from the over-simplicity of the metaphor of ‘family trees’ applied to this linguistic area. It might be an appropriate model within Indo-European linguistics but at least ‘not a sufficient model’ for the other linguistic areas (cf. Aikhenvald and Dixon, 2001: 4). Given the very complex migration history in southern China and Southeast Asia, “to understand...why there are difficulties in assigning a clear family-tree structure to the family, language contact must not only be taken into account, but must be considered a fundamental factor in the formation of the family” (LaPolla, 2006: 245). Comparatively speaking, the genealogical relations within the lower-level branch, the Kam-Tai group, have raised less controversy.

For want of a generally agreed upon model, we will still apply the traditional “family tree” model to our present work to concentrate on the behaviors of classifiers within this area. According to Diller *et al* (2008: 5-7), the Kam-Tai group along with Hlai and the Kra group, belongs to the Tai-Kadai

family.⁴ Kam-Tai covers approximately 30 languages spoken in southern China and Southeast Asia, including Aiton, Be, Black Tai, Bouyei, Chadong, Dehong, Kam, Khamti, Lakja, Lanna, Lao, Lue, Mak, Maonan, Mene, Mulam, North Zhuang, Nung, Phake, Phu Tai, Red Tai, Saek, Shan, South Thai, South Zhuang, Sui, Tay, Thai, Then, White Tai, Yai, among others, as illustrated in Figure 1. Please note that the language *Kham* spoken in Nepal does not belong to this language group but belongs to the Tibeto-Burman language family. In the present monograph, we adopt the genealogical classification by Diller *et al* (2008: 7).

Within the Kam-Sui sub-branch, Kam, Sui, Mulam, Chadong and Then (Yanghuang) seem to be more Sinicized because of their proximity to the densely Chinese populated areas in the north and the east; while Maonan, Mak, etc, on the southwest linguistic border of the Kam-Sui sub-branch, are relatively less influenced by Chinese. Languages within the Kam-Sui sub-branch are further divided by different branching of the numeral-classifier constructions. Kam and Sui have shifted all the numerals to the left of the classifier, forming a left-branching construction like the adjacent Chinese. But Maonan and Mak still retain the right-branching for the numeral-classifiers construction for the number *one* like other southern languages in the Tai sub-branch (see § 2.2.1 for more detailed discussion of its constituent position).

Of the Tai sub-branch, the southwest varieties are more influenced by other non-Kam-Tai languages in the south and west. For example, Thai is more influenced by Sanskrit and Pali in ancient India, especially lexically; White Tai and Red Tai by Vietnamese, though Black Tai has kept more of the

4 The Tai-Kadai group is approximately equivalent to the Kra-Dai proposed by some Thai scholars.

Proto-Tai features. However, Northern Tai languages, like Northern Zhuang, Bouyei, etc, have been influenced primarily by the Southwest Mandarin Chinese and other local Chinese dialects, specifically since the establishment of the People’s Republic of China. Within the east and southeast area of the Kam-Tai family, Southern Zhuang, Nung, Tay have been more affected by Cantonese, Pinghua (a Chinese dialect) or Vietnamese. Each Kam-Tai language spoken in this vast area can be found to take on regional features affected by other adjacent languages regarding all areas of phonology, morphology and syntax.

1.2. Typological features

1.2.1. Phonology

Tonality plays a very significant role in Kam-Tai languages. Lexical tones are an important word-formation device of the Kam-Tai languages. Each syllable carries a relatively stable tone although tone sandhi can take place under specific syntactic and semantic circumstances.

Table 1. Tonal categories of Maonan initials

		A	B	C	DS	DL
Voiceless stops & frictions	$p^h, t^h, k^h, ts^h, f, s, \text{ɕ}, h$	T1	T5	T3	T7	T7
Voiceless unaspirated pre-nasalized stops	$p, t, k, ^mb, ^nd, ^nd, ^g$	T1	T5	T3	T7'	T7
Glottal stop, preglottalized nasals, approximants	$ʔ, ^m, ^n, ^n, ^j, ^w$	T1	T5	T3	T7'	T7
Preglottalized & voiced stops	$^b, ^d, b, d, g, fi$	T2	T6	T4	T8	T8'

The number of tones these languages have is around 6 to 8. The language that has the greatest number of tones is Kam

which has 15 tones but only 11 of which is contrastive.

Historically, Kam-Tai tones can be divided into four tonal categories, conveniently marked as Tone A, B, C for smooth syllables and Tone D for checked syllables (Li, 1977: 28; Liang and Zhang, 1996: 62; Lu, 2008: 91).⁵ Each of these tone classes can be further divided into high and low series, high tones being represented as odd numbers and low series as even numbers. In most Kam-Tai languages, the tonal value of D tone typically coalesces with that of the B tone, with contrast for vowel length. In other words, the words within the D category do not have a contrastive tonal value but just different syllabic codas from other categories. It just follows the Chinese tradition to group syllables ending in -p, -t and -k into a category called *entering tone*, or *checked tone* by other later linguists. The symbols DS and DL (see Table 1) represent checked syllables with short and long vowels respectively as vowel length is significant for tonal behaviors. It is generally known in historical Kam-Tai linguistics that there is a close relationship between initials and tones. For example, from a historical-comparative perspective, the Maonan tonal system can be represented as the correlations in Table 1, following Gedney (1989: 202).⁶

From Table 1, we can see that preglottalized initials and voiced initials in Maonan only occur in syllables with even-numbered tones T2-T8. Other initials do not occur in these tonal categories.

Although the tonal values of each category are different

5 In Kam-Tai linguistics, smooth syllables refers to open syllables and those ending in nasals like *-m, -n, -ŋ*; while checked syllables mean syllables ending in stops like *-p, -t, -k*, etc.

6 A, B, etc, in the table represent the tonal categories in history and T1, T2, etc, represent the specific modern tonal categories.