

Form, Interpretation and Distribution of Nominal Expressions in Two Classifier Languages: A Comparative Study of Hmong and Vietnamese

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1. Background & Objectives

Research questions

- What are possible relationships between different forms of nominal expressions and (in)definiteness/(non-)specificity?
- How does the positioning of the nominal expressions in a sentence affect their interpretations?
- How do classifiers affect the interpretations of the nominal expressions they appear in?

Problem

- Results of previous studies on different languages are often difficult to compare due to different research methods.

Objectives

- To determine similarities and differences in the distribution and interpretation of different forms of nominal expressions in Hmong and Vietnamese using the same methodology.
- To present results of a preliminary study making use of parallel Hmong and Vietnamese folktales.

2. Method

Procedure

- Identify all nominal expressions in the Hmong and Vietnamese folktales.
- Categorize them by their syntactic types:
 - Bare N
 - Num-Cl-N
 - Cl-N
 - (Num)-(Cl)-N-Det
 - Poss-Cl-N (Hmong) [The corresponding pattern in Vietnamese, i.e. N-Cl-Poss, does not exist.]

[Det: determiner; Cl: classifier; N: noun; Num: Numeral; Poss: possessor]
- Determine their interpretation in context:
 - Definite**: The intended referent is uniquely identifiable by the speaker and the hearer.
 - Specific indefinite**: The intended referent is uniquely identifiable by the speaker.
 - Non-specific indefinite**: The referent is not uniquely identifiable by the speaker.
- Note their syntactic positions:
 - Subject
 - Object
 - Object of preposition

Excerpts of folktales

Hmong

Tab sis thaum **txiv huab tais** tuaj txog tom **nkawd lub tsev** ntawd, but when man king come arrive at 3DUAL CL house there **tus txiv** tseem tab tom mus txiav **taws** lawm. CI man still PROG go cut firewood COMPL Tsuas tshuav **tus poj niam** tib leeg nyob hauv **tsev** xwb. only remain CI wife one person stay in house only

‘But when the king arrived at the couple’s house, the man was out in the forest gathering wood. Only the wife was at home alone.’

(‘Tus neeg txiav taws, nws tus lau qaib thiab nws poj niam [The woodcutter, his rooster, and his wife]’, Johnson 1985:257-265)

Vietnamese (translation)

Khi **nhà vua** đến **nhà** **đôi vợ chồng**, when CI king go house CI wife-husband **người chồng** đã vào **rừng** kiếm **củi**. CI husband PAST enter forest fetch wood Ở **nhà** chỉ có **người vợ** một mình. in house only be CI wife one person

3. Results

Form/position/interpretation correlations observed in the Hmong folktale

	Subject	Object	Object of preposition
Bare N	definite ¹	definite	definite
	specific	specific	specific
	non-specific	non-specific	non-specific ²
Num-Cl-N	definite	definite	definite
	specific	specific	specific
	non-specific	non-specific	non-specific
Cl-N	definite	definite	definite
	specific	specific	specific
	non-specific	non-specific ³	non-specific

Form/position/interpretation correlations observed in the Vietnamese folktale

	Subject	Object	Object of preposition
Bare N	definite	definite	definite
	specific	specific	specific
	non-specific	non-specific	non-specific
Num-Cl-N	definite	definite	definite
	specific	specific	specific
	non-specific	non-specific	non-specific
Cl-N	definite	definite	definite
	specific	specific	specific
	non-specific	non-specific	non-specific

Notes

- All instances are *(txiv) huab tais* ‘king’.
- All instances are *luag* ‘others’.
- Only one instance is observed, i.e. *tus ab tsi* ‘[Cl] what’.

4. Generalizations from the Hmong and Vietnamese folktale data

Bare N

- H & V**: occur with definite interpretations in all positions.
- H & V**: have non-specific indefinite interpretations in Object and Object-of-preposition positions.

Num-Cl-N

- H & V**: occur with indefinite interpretations (specific or non-specific) in Object positions.

Cl-N

- H & V**: occur with definite interpretations in Subject and Object positions.
- V**: also occur with a definite interpretation in Object-of-preposition position.
- H**: occur with non-specific indefinite interpretations in Object position.

(Num)-(Cl)-N-Det

- H & V**: occur with definite interpretations in Object and Object-of-Preposition positions.
- H**: also occur with definite interpretations in Subject position.

Poss-Cl-N (Hmong)

- H**: occur with definite interpretations in all positions.

Subject

- H & V**: interpreted as definite.

Object

- H & V**: interpreted as definite, specific or non-specific.

Object of preposition

- H & V**: interpreted as definite or non-specific.

5. Discussion

Relationship between definite CI-N and definite bare N

- Some classifier languages allow a CI-N sequence to occur with a definite interpretation (e.g., Cantonese, Wenzhou) while others do not (e.g., Mandarin, Min) (Cheng and Sybesma 2005). Hmong and Vietnamese pattern like Cantonese.
- Is there a connection between the existence of a CI-N sequence with a definite reading and the lack of a definite reading in a bare N in the same language?

	Cantonese	Mandarin
CI-N with a definite interpretation:	√	*
Bare N with a definite interpretation:	*	√

(Cheng and Sybesma 1999, 2005)

- Hmong and Vietnamese present a problem for this connection.

	Hmong	Vietnamese
CI-N with a definite interpretation:	√	√
Bare N with a definite interpretation:	√	√

- The connection also faces difficulty with data from Wenzhou discussed in Cheng and Sybesma (2005).

Non-specific indefinite CI-N in Hmong

- According to Bisang (1999), Hmong CI-N sequence differs from Vietnamese and Cantonese in that Hmong cannot have non-specific indefinite interpretation whereas Vietnamese and Cantonese can (cf. Cheng and Sybesma 1999).
 - However, we found one instance in our Hmong text where a CI-N form has a non-specific indefinite interpretation.
- ... tiam si ho tsis muaj **tus ab tsi** li.
but Part not have CI what Part
‘but there isn’t anything (to prepare)!’

6. Future study

- We will determine
 - whether the form-interpretation pairs that we did not find in the folktales are possible, and
 - whether the observations based on single items (see 3. Results) hold true with nouns in general.
- We will use questionnaires with sentences from the same folktales and some others, with some of the nominal expressions replaced with a selection of nominal expressions of different types. Native speakers of Hmong and Vietnamese will be asked to choose the form(s) that they find appropriate for the flow of the story (cf. Kassevitch 2005).