A network analysis of the semantic evolution of 'fruit' and 'stone' in Tibeto-Burman languages

Yu Li, Qiu Mengyang
(Wuhan University, Trent University)

In this study, we adopt a network-based approach to explore the semantic evolution of 3D-classifiers from 'fruit' and 'stone' in 58 + 68 Tibeto-Burman languages by examining their semantic colexification networks and evaluating the effectiveness of the colexification patterns of the two nouns in predicting the presence/absence of a classifier in a particular language.

Findings of the present study confirm that 'fruit' and 'stone' are frequent sources of the 3D-classifiers in Tibeto-Burman. The colexification networks of 'fruit' and 'stone' support the claim that compound nouns play a critical role in the grammaticalization of TB classifiers (DeLancey 1986, Bisang 1999, Vittrant & Allassonnière-Tang 2021, and Aikhenvald 2022). We postulate that numeral classifiers for small round objects in a substantial number of TB languages were originated from the noun roots such as 'fruit' and 'stone'. They were then developed into class terms in compound nouns denoting varieties of fruits/stones and the shape class of small round objects. Finally, those noun roots lost their concrete meanings and derived into shape-based classifiers. The recurrent cline of semantic change 'fruit > round > generic' (Aikhenvald 2000) is attested in Tibeto-Burman languages, in which shape serves as a critical semantic basis in the semantic evolution of a classifier.

Nevertheless, 'fruit' and 'stone' differs significantly in their specific mode of semantic extension in Tibeto-Burman. The colexification pattern of 'fruit' but not that of 'stone' can effectively predict the occurrence of an 3D-classifier in a particular language, as the latter is more unstable. An implicational universal is proposed to predict the occurrence of a 'fruit'-related classifier in Tibeto-Burman. The colexification network of 'fruit' represents a well-established cross-linguistic pattern that derives 3D-classifiers following the path 'fruit-compounds for fruits-compounds for round body parts-CL'. This pattern is strongly associated with the subgroup of languages and is most prominent in Ngwi. To the contrary, the colexification network of 'stone' is somehow language-specific. No salient cross-linguistic semantic extension pattern can be generalized to account for the derivation of classifier from 'stone' in Tibeto-Burman languages.

References

Aikhenvald, Alexandra.Y (2000), *Classifiers: A Typology of Noun Categorization Devices*, Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press.

Aikhenvald, Alexandra.Y (2022), Classifiers: Setting the scene, an introduction to the special issue on classifiers in the languages of Asia, *Asian Languages and Linguistics* 3(2), 141–152.

Bisang, Walter (1999), Classifiers in East and Southeast Asian languages: Counting and Beyond, in J. Gvozdanović (ed), (1999), *Numeral Types and Changes Worldwide*, Berlin/New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 113–186. https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110811193.113

DeLancey, Scott. (1986). Toward a history of Tai classifier systems. In C. Colette (ed), (1986), *Noun Classes and Categorization*, Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 437–452.

Vittrant, Alice & Allassonnière-Tang, Marc. 2021. Classifiers in Southeast Asian languages. In P. Sidwell, and J. Mathias (eds), (2021), *The languages and linguistics of Mainland Southeast Asia: A comprehensive guide*, Berlin: De Gruyter Mouton, 733–772.