

MAGDALENA PLINTA
Uniwersytet Wrocławski, Poland

Chinese classifiers (measure words): A phenomenon that is hard to translate

This article examines the different methods in which Chinese and Polish students study Chinese classifiers (measure words). The processes in which students from these two separate countries learn classifiers (measure words) are comparably different.

There is no clear term for the word classifier (measure word) in the Polish language (Zemanek 2013:86). However, Polish uses grammatical techniques similar to classifiers in Chinese but the usage of them is optional. It is only compulsory when we are speaking about uncountable nouns like e.g. *water* – *dwa wiadra wody* ('two buckets of water'), *dwie szklanki wody* ('two glasses of water'); *wine* – *dwie lampki wina* ('two glasses of wine'), *dwie butelki wina* ('two bottles of wine'); *sugar* – *dwa kilo cukru* ('two kilograms of sugar'), *dwie łyżeczki cukru* ('two teaspoons of sugar'). If we want to measure an object's quantity a counter is needed otherwise the sum of the object is unclear. Occasionally some countable nouns in Polish also require a 'classifier', e.g. *dwie pary butów* ('two pairs of shoes'). In addition, the rules are unclear as to when classifiers are needed in a sentence, which can be problematic for a foreigner studying Polish as a second language. This is especially the case for a Chinese student learning Polish as a second language. Although the word classifier is present in "Słownik języka polskiego" (Polish Language Dictionary), it does not describe a word that matches this specific description of classifier.

In contrast, the usage of classifiers in Chinese is always compulsory. In Polish we can say: *Jedna kostka masła* ('one cube of butter') but we can also say *jedno masło* ('one butter'). In Chinese it will always be *yi he huangyou* ('one cube of butter'); the use of *yi huangyou* ('one butter') is incorrect and will confuse a native Chinese speaker which will be explained precisely further on.

The two terms classifier and measure word are generally treated and used interchangeably as equivalents although they are not exactly the same. A classifier

(also called a counter word) is a morpheme that stands between a numeral and a noun, e.g. *wu* (numeral) *ge* (classifier) *ren* (noun) ('five measure word people') or between a demonstrative pronoun and a noun e.g. *na* (demonstrative pronoun) *ge* (classifier) *ren* (noun) ('this measure word person'). The name classifier is used with count nouns, while the term measure words are used for mass nouns: "A classifier categorizes a class of nouns by picking out some salient perceptual properties, either physically or functionally based, which are permanently associated with entities named by the class nouns; a measure word does not categorize but denotes the quantity of the entity named by noun" (Tai and Wang 1990:38 as cited in: Tai 1994:481).

Furthermore, classifiers are called sortal classifiers and measure words, mensural classifiers (Senft 2000 as cited in: Tang 2005:434), but the difference between the two is still unclear, as the source above explains. It is called a classifier, because it classifies the object by the shape, if it's long or round. It is sometimes challenging to determine the classifier that needs to be added to the noun (this topic I will discuss later).

As mentioned above, the terms classifier and measure word are not the same, but when used in daily routine they are equivalents. I will use these two terms in my article interchangeably (although in science they are treated and used differently). Classifiers can be divided into four main groups: measure words for nouns, measure words for verbs, double-function measure words, and compound measure words (He Jie Bianzhu 2005:III). One measure word can be used for different specific groups. The measure word gives specific features to the sentence. For instance the classifier *ba*:

1) double-function measure word

a) can be used either for nouns, e.g.:

一 把 椅子

yi ba yizi

one CLF chair

'jedno krzesło'

b) or for verbs, e.g.:

司机 一把 推开 了 他/她

siji yi ba tui kai le ta

driver CLF push away PST he/she

'kierowca odepchnął go/ją'

2) individual classifier for things that we can handle, e.g.:

一 把 花生

yi ba huasheng

one CLF peanuts

‘jedna garść(paczka) orzechów’

From my experience students associate measure words mainly combined with a noun rather than with a verb, where “The frequency of actions can be counted” (Li/Cheng 2008:83), e.g. *wo* (person) *yi* (numeral) *ci* (measure word) *qu* (verb) (‘I once measure word go’). In the following couple of paragraphs, I will focus on measure words for nouns. It is also interesting that measure words cannot serve as sentence elements by themselves (Li/Cheng 2008:76–77). They can only stand in a sentence on their own when the object in question was already mentioned at the beginning (of the previous sentence). As an example: *Ni xihuan du na ben shu? Zhe ben,* (‘You like read which measure word book? This measure word’).

Allan (1977 as cited in: Tai 1994:483) outlines seven categories of classification but only four of them are relevant to Chinese classifiers. These categories are divided into the following subcategories:

1. MATERIAL: animacy, inanimacy, abstract, verbal nouns.
2. SHAPE: long, flat, round.
3. SIZE: big, small.
4. CONSISTENCY: flexible, hard (rigid), non-discrete.

Each of these groups has specific classifiers for describing an object. The subcategory *animacy* helps to distinguish animate objects from inanimate objects. Generally, Chinese speakers use the classifier *zhi* for animals, e.g. *yi* (‘one’) *zhi* (classifier) *mao* (‘cat’), although there are many exceptions to these rules. The same classifier that is used for cats, birds or hamsters cannot be used for animals like horses, snakes, pigs, etc. Some animals have their own classifier because they belong to other subcategories. For example *she* (‘snake’) uses the classifier *tiao* that describes long things or objects. Therefore, an object or an animal in one group can easily belong to another one. The object or animal can still be combined with a classifier from another group or subcategory.

Another interesting aspect that is associated with classifiers is that some of them carry their own meaning, while others do not. As above, for example, *tiao* means long on its own yet the classifier *pi* (the classifier that can be only combined with the noun *horse*) has no meaning when used on its own. When asked, Chinese

people will always translate the classifier *pi* as the classifier for a horse. James HY Tai (1994:491) argues that we can find the answer to this question: “Like linguistic signs in general, a classifier can become ‘fossilized’ and become conventionalized by losing its original semantic motivation”.

The need for an exact classifier when discussing a countable object is a topic that has been debated intensely over time. However, there are some explanations for the presence of classifiers for countable nouns. Two of them are appropriate in my opinion. Doetjes (Doetjes 1996 as cited in: Tang 2005:460) argues the use of this kind of classifiers as the countable objects (that will be combined with the right classifier) need to have a semantic denotation. On the other hand Peyraube’s (1991 as cited in: Tang 2005:460) claims that classifiers have to be used because there is no plurality marker. We have to remember that there is no equivalent to a plural form in the Chinese language, so there is a need to place something between the numeral and the object that will allow the object to be further described.

Due to the fact that there are many dialects within China, the number of measure words cannot be accurately established. However, in some sources it is believed that there are over a thousand of them (of course most of them are not used anymore). In some Chinese grammar books (for foreign Chinese language learners) we can find an explanation of 314 classifiers only in Mandarin language that will enable the reader to develop a better understanding and help them to study classifiers (He Jie Bianzhu 2005).

Now that the main section of classifiers has been explained, I will continue to discuss the process in which students learn classifiers differently in Chinese schools and Polish universities (language schools). I interviewed in total 30 Chinese native speakers and Polish students that are studying Chinese. I have also been studying Mandarin for 3 years now and I received a scholarship to study in China for a semester. From this time spent in China I was able to gain most of the information needed to explain this section.

The way in which students learn classifiers is completely different for Chinese speakers. Native Chinese speakers grow up with classifiers when they learn to talk, although they do not know why they use them in sentences. During their primary school years, teachers will start explaining the general idea of classifiers; however it is rare that the teacher will explain the reason for learning them. At Polish universities (or language schools) students who are learning Chinese are confronted with the term classifier during their first couple of classes. The difference between these two student groups is that native Chinese speakers start to learn classifiers in a practical way, without asking why. Afterwards in primary school they will learn what a classifier is called and what kind of meaning it conveys. Polish college students first need to study the theory (what, why and when to use different classifiers) before they can apply them in practice. The process in which Polish and Chinese students start to learn and understand classifiers takes

place in completely different ways. Most of the Polish students learn classifiers by heart or use a structure which helps them to remember which classifiers belong to which group (that matches a certain noun). Chinese native speakers treat the classifiers differently; they have a picture in their mind (mostly the shape) of the object (in their daily communication) that they are talking about. The classifier gives specific features to the object, e.g. when Chinese people are discussing a fish, they imagine a long fish in their minds, because the classifier of a fish is *tiao* which means ‘long’. Another example is the classifier *zhang* meaning ‘flat’ in English, nouns like *chuang* (‘bed’), *zhi* (‘paper’), *zhuozi* (‘table’) are always found combined with this classifier. In European languages there is no term equivalent to a classifier that will give the object specific features. Polish students do not think about the features of the object in question while talking, hearing or thinking about it.

Even if an object has its specific classifier it does not mean that it cannot be combined with another. This phenomenon cannot be explicitly explained. In my own opinion this is probably because of China’s long history and because of the many dialects (where the classifiers have been moved with their users from province to province).

Chinese children do not have any specific classes for studying classifiers, “we will learn the classifier when a new noun appears” as some of the Chinese students told me. During my Chinese lessons with a Chinese teacher (this fact is very important) I learned that the process is very similar. This is because the teacher will not devote some lessons to the explanation of classifiers; he/she will just explain specific Chinese grammar and give some examples. When there is a Polish or English speaking teacher teaching Chinese as a second language, they will dedicate more time and focus to the explanation of classifiers, because they understand how hard it is for a foreigner to gain a full grasp of the intention of classifiers.

The exercises for memorizing classifiers are exactly the same in Poland as they are in China. Most of the time, students have to fill in the blanks with a missing classifier, e.g.:

一 椅子	一 花
<i>Yi (...) yizi</i>	<i>Yi (...) hua</i>
一 窗户	一 床
<i>Yi (...) chuanghu</i>	<i>Yi (...) chuang</i>

(Nowak/Yang 2008:112)

Another exercise is to link the numeral, classifier and the noun correctly together, e.g.:

Numeral:	Classifier:	Noun:
Liang 两	Ben 本	Bao 包
Yi 一	Xie 些	Kafei 咖啡
Si 四	Ge 个	Shu 书

(Lin/Pawlak 2009:74–75)

Chinese students will study the classifiers by their function. Most of the time, the students already know that the noun in question will be connected with a certain classifier. The teacher will just emphasize and focus on the ‘hard one’ (classifiers). ‘The hard ones’ for Chinese native speakers are those that cannot be memorized because of their specific characteristics and features. For example the classifier *pi* that can only be combined with the noun *horse*, which does not have an individual meaning, also cannot be translated into other languages (this problem has already been described in this paper). During Chinese classes in Poland the teacher will mainly explain the classifiers according to the different categories Allan describes, e.g. due to the shape of an object.

Chinese native speakers use approximately 50 classifiers in their daily routine, while Polish students know only around 20 (on average) of them. Additionally, they are used quite infrequently (this is an approximate number after the public informative survey that I conducted). Chinese is already a complicated language for non-native speakers (no alphabetical system, tones etc.) so it is unlikely we will devote an appropriate amount of time learning to choose the right classifier. Most of the time we will use *ge* which is a neutral classifier and can be used with a wide range of nouns from different categories.

While studying Chinese and becoming acquainted with some Chinese citizens I have noticed that they do not try to translate their classifiers and use them in other languages. They will explain how a language without classifiers makes it easier to learn. However, they will always have the image of an object already in their mind when speaking. On the other hand, a lot of Polish students consider Chinese classifiers as non-problematic. This is probably because they are unaware of the great number and of the importance of classifiers in the Chinese language, especially at the beginning of their Chinese studies.

At the advanced level of Chinese language learning we recognize how important the classifiers are in daily routine. When we want to learn Chinese properly and communicate with Chinese native speakers using correct grammar we need to use the appropriate classifiers, instead of always using *ge* which is treated as a universal classifier. In reality *ge* is not universal. Even though it can be connected with different nouns from different categories and subcategories, this does not mean that it can be considered universal. There are a lot of nouns

that cannot be used with the classifier *ge*. When asked ‘why not?’, the Chinese will commonly answer: “because it sounds funny for us”. When I say *yi* (‘one’) *ge* (classifier) *mao* (‘cat’) instead of *yi* (‘one’) *zhi* (classifier for animals) *mao* (‘cat’) a Chinese native speaker will find this humorous and will start to laugh. On the other hand, when I say *yi* (‘one’) *ge* (classifier) *shouji* (cellular phone) instead of *yi* (‘one’) *bu* (classifier for electronic objects) *shouji* (cellular phone) it is not a major problem as even a native Chinese speaker will use this combination, even though it is neither grammatically correct nor precise. The problem with the classifier *ge* is that it has an idiomatic character, which is specific for this language, so it is hard for foreigners to learn which noun it can be combined with.

In this article I paid attention only to a minor grammatical phenomenon in the Chinese language. It is a small but also a very important one that in my opinion should be paid more attention to. The classifiers will help us (foreigners) also to develop a better understanding of the Chinese perception of the world and of the objects that exist around us.

Before I conclude, I would just like to point out that when I mention “hard to translate” I do not mean the complicated grammar (Chinese grammar is relatively easy) but the way Chinese people treat, use and describe objects by using specific words. Classifiers are just one, small phenomenon that is already hard to comprehend for us. Additionally, there are many more aspects in this language that force us to see things differently about the world.

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