Hóu Monkey (1944)

A ROMANCE PHILOLOGIST FACING MANDARIN CHINESE FOR THE FIRST TIME

by
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For Per Aage Brandt

After many years as a Professor emerita of Romance Philology and a rather radical rupture with everything related to my previous 'career', I decided to take up the challenge of learning Mandarin Chinese. An exotic language, seen from my perspective.

Many times during my years of active research in linguistics and semiotics I had felt the urge to incorporate a language from a linguistic family different from Romance.

Practical pressures and obstacles, however, always prevented me from doing so.

In my mind, Korean was the natural future project for me, since our son was adopted from Korea. However, when I retired from Academia, theoretical aims and personal desires were strongly de-emphasized in favour of more practical goals.

First of all, learning a new, completely remote, language seemed to be a good means of keeping senile dementia at bay longer than usual.

And when my Korean son happened to come home with a Chinese wife and also introduced her Chinese speaking family and colleagues, the Korean project shifted to Mandarin Chinese instead.

So, here you find me in a beginner's classroom, in September 2012, facing my first weekly Chinese lesson with manifold expectations and a bit of nervousness in the face of a pretty overwhelming first experience.

Needless to say, what follows is not meant to be a contribution to comparative linguistics or language typology in general, let alone to Chinese linguistics in particular. Neither will it be a guide to language acquisition or L2 didactics. I'm not in a position to offer you such a thing and never will be. If my small frivolous text has any relevance, it lies in its intentions.

First of all, I want to give testimony of the admiration I feel for Per Aage and his scientific work. You may read this as an acknowledgement of my profound gratitude towards a truly outstanding researcher, a stimulating colleague and above all, a loyal friend. I really am indebted to Per Aage.

A secondary intention is to point out some points of possible interest in a spontaneously listed and rather arbitrarily ordered catalogue of some striking features of Mandarin Chinese (MC), as they appeared to me personally; and not primarily to focus on the linguistic differences and similarities between the Romance and Chinese languages. More specifically, my aim is to look at these features from the perspective of possible future projects of investigation. I reckon the items of the catalogue could be developed according to the line of research that I share with Per Aage from our many years of working together in the field of cognitive and semiotic linguistics. Such an effort could yield both descriptive advantages, when compared with much of the extant literature on Chinese grammar, in addition to providing some new theoretical insights. Not only could further research within the cognitive linguistics paradigm benefit Chinese grammatical studies, but a Mandarin Chinese vantage point might also be a benefit the other way round, as these Chinese 'peculiarities' might yield new insights also for Western cognitive linguistics, for instance with regard to the syntax – semantics debate (hereunder the relation of the syntax to the lexicon and the role of morphology in linking the two); in addition, there is the issue of 'categorization', when it comes to Chinese classifiers. All of these are rich and promising themes for further investigation by the new

generations of semiolinguistic researchers (the 'fresh brains', as Per Aage used to say). At the same time, my catalogue represents some of the issues Per Aage and I have gone through together over the years in our seminars at the Center for Semiotic Research and the Department of Romance Languages at Aarhus University.

Even given the shift in attention that I mentioned above, and within the merely practical scope of learning a new language, one becomes aware that, whether one likes it or not, some of one's linguistic past sticks to one like a virus when accessing an unfamiliar language. From the start, I spontaneously took up a comparative linguistic position. Beginning with my first lessons I started to set up a list of 'striking' items, things I either found surprising at first sight, or that seemed particularly difficult to grasp from an 'ethnocentric', Western perspective; it really was just an inventory of what I met on my way and thought would need special care in my future learning process.

While doing this, I tried not to project too much of 'my' Romance language background onto the grammar of Chinese.[1] But going through the list of items, I could not help thinking that some of them would be fascinating topics for coming seminars, and worthy of further elaboration within a semiolinguistic approach.

The first hesitating and awkward steps in acquisition

1. Sound level

As a kind of mental preparation for my first lesson, I put on one of my favorite Chinese movies – with English subtitles – ''Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress'' by Dai Sijie.

As expected, I was unable to grasp or identify any Chinese words (for how could I?). I just got the music of the words (their 'tones'), together with a general impression of the intonation patterns of the
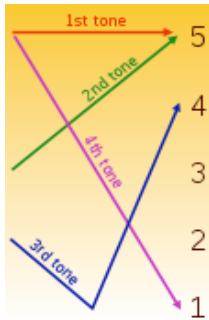
Fig. 1. The 5 Mandarin tones (from the Wikipedia article on Pinyin)

Chinese language. No word segmentation whatsoever being possible, the total impression was of sequences of incomprehensible sounds.

Chinese is a **tonal** language, as are many other South East Asian languages. According to David Crystal's *Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language*, half of the world's languages are likewise tonal, inasmuch as the semantics of their words change by a simple change of pitch.

There are 4 regular tones in MC; in addition there is a neutral tone used for particles and affixes.

Chinese uses the tones for lexical contrast. The tones affect the vocabulary due to these distinctive pitch levels. Typically, a morpheme (with a corresponding written character) is pronounced in a specific tone. Another morpheme (with its own corresponding character), written with the same pinyin spelling as the first one, only differs from it regarding the tone. Nonetheless, their meaning is distinct, without sharing any meaning part (or having a historically common origin). For the greater part of the lexicon, all four tones are used with one and the same spelling.

Obviously, a rich field of semantic investigation opens up here with regard to issues such as homophony, synonymy, to questions of semantic change as conceived of in historical linguistics, not to mention phonology in its own right.

A standard example of pitch distribution is:

tone 1: *mā* ('mother')
tone 2: *má* ('hemp')
tone 3: *mǎ* ('horse')
tone 4: *mà* ('scold')
Neutral tone: *ma* (interrogative particle)

Adding to this, I heard sounds whose phonetics were rather strange to me. Another, equally big source of difficulties in distinguishing individual words is the abundance of sounds that appear very close to one another, especially for one who does not yet master the right articulation and still has a limited vocabulary. As a beginner, you easily get lost in your efforts to identify a word form. You are very sensitive to, and dependent on, a clear pronunciation of the sounds, both individually and when inserted into the spoken sequence, in order to grasp their fine phonetic distinctions – not to speak of the difficulties in uttering them correctly. I would say that some more detailed descriptive accuracy could be wished for, even in beginners' textbooks. In order not to acquire bad habits, hard to get rid of later on, I could wish for more indications on tongue position and movement and on lip rounding, as well as attention to the relevant phonological oppositions in initial position: e.g. don't distinguish voiced/unvoiced, as you're used to, but +/- aspiration (in b-/p-, d-/t-, g-/k-), etc.

These problems may be especially troublesome in the beginning. As an example: many elementary Chinese textbooks for English speakers do not really account for the difference between the plain palatals: *j/q/x* and the corresponding retroflex sounds: *zh/ch/sh*, but instead, give a series of rather misleading English correspondences. Here, the 'ethnocentric' method certainly has its disadvantages, when learners are merely asked to project the sound system of English on to that of Chinese.[2]

This overall impression of a learner's initial difficulty might be summed up as him or her being confronted with an 'overcrowded' phonological system of sibilants, comprising the – for a European tongue – odd *retroflex* series. In a simplified schema:

	alveolar	retroflex	palatal
Unaspir. Affricate	*z*	*zh*	*j*
Aspir. Affricate	*zuò* ('to do') *c*	*zhèr* ('here') *ch*	*jìn* ('near') *q*
Fricative	*cóng* ('from') *s*	*cháng* ('long') *sh*	*qián* ('money') *x*
	sì ('4')	*shí* ('10')	*xià* ('under')

No wonder you feel lost as a foreign learner when meeting the MC sound system for the first time. You say to yourself: I wonder if I will ever reach my goal: intermediate level of production and comprehension of spoken MC? But don't lose courage. The goal takes time and effort.

2. Between sound and sentence

In what follows, I would like to emphasize two specific areas that I found particularly intriguing when I began my struggle with the learning process:

> The compounds
> The classifiers

Both these areas have been thoroughly investigated by cognitive linguists, albeit not so abundantly in writings dealing with MC. The first area has been profitably investigated within blended space theory (e.g. E. Sweetser). The second belongs to the theory of cog-

nitive 'categorization' and 'prototypicality' (E. Rosch, G. Lakoff). Real yum-yum for linguists.

a. Morphology

One of the first things you are told is that learning Chinese is easy, since there is scarcely any grammar. Good news! But what does that mean? For a linguist, a statement like this is pure nonsense. What is usually meant is that Chinese lacks the **inflectional morphology** we normally find in the European languages. The paradigmatic declinations and conjugations, with phenomena such as 'case', 'number', 'person', 'tense' etc., all marked by 'closed class' endings, are not found in Chinese. "How can Chinese speakers manage without them?", a Westerner tends to ask. Obviously, it is feasible: the Chinese do not 'lack' our inflections; they just do not need them to express themselves clearly.

The learner's burden of memorizing the intricacies of inflectional morphology (I remember my Latin lessons) is not there. But things never come for free. The same news can be good news one way, but bad news the other way round. The relief offered at the morphological level is a typical beginner's comfort. An equivalent corresponding burden will appear in other divisions of the grammar, in the form of e.g. the heavy impact of syntax (sentence construction and word order) and discourse or contextualization (pragmatics) as a means of disambiguation.

Mandarin is a so-called 'topic-prominent' language. This is one of the most salient features of Chinese sentence structure. Besides the syntactic functions 'subject' and 'direct object', the description of MC also includes 'topic' as a pragmatic sentence-initial element referring to "what the sentence is all about" and supposedly known by the speakers.

Likewise, MC's abundant use of 'clitic' particles (aspectual, struc-

tural, and modal bound morphemes), being a much less tangible phenomenon than the use of inflectional morphemes, requires a rather advanced level of Chinese studies for it to be grasped by the user and explained by the linguist.[3]

The first thing that struck me was the 'flexibility' of **word classes** or **lexical categories** in Chinese. The verb/adjective boundaries can be particularly challenging for a non native speaker to establish, since individual words often belong to more than one form class category. Yuen Ren Chao (1968:163) speaks of adjectives as being a species of verbs: 'quality verbs'. One of the first structural features to be learnt is that a predicative adjective does not use a copula like *shì* ('be'): *Wǒ hěn lèi* ('I'm tired').

As we will see later on, there is also a smooth transition between the *noun/verbs* and the *classifiers*. Equal fluidity is found between **prepositions** and **verbs**, in the sense that many prepositions developed historically from verbs. In both cases, the shifts can be conceived of in terms of 'grammaticalization'.

Given the lack of morphological markers, how can we identify the word class of a given element? Syntax (together with referential meaning) is the axis of orientation in this case.

Syntax is what orients us in deciding whether a given term is a preposition or a verb: *zài* ('at', 'in'; 'be' with a spatial sense), *gěi* ('to(wards)'; 'give') or *dào* ('till'; 'arrive' in space or time). E.g.

> *Césuǒ*   *zài*   *nǎr?*
> Toilet   is   where?
> ('Where is the toilet?')

> *Zài*   *Zhōngguó*

> *Wǒ gěi nǐ qián.*   'I give you the money'

> *Gěi*   *tā*   *dǎ*   *diànhuá*
> To   him   press   phone
> 'Give him a call'

> *Wǔ*   *fēnzhōng*   *jiù*   *dào*-le
> 5   minutes   just arrive-PERF
> 'You will be there (have arrived) in 5 minutes'

> *Dào*   *Zhōngguó*   *qù*
> To   China   go

Due to its lack of inflectional morphology, Western popular belief had it that Chinese was a language without distinct word classes. It is not unreasonable to argue that no such languages exist; in fact, there seem to be no natural languages that do not have at least two basic universal categories, corresponding to 'noun' and 'verb'. In the Chinese grammatical tradition, however, the very notion of 'lexical category' does not exist. Instead, all words were classified into full words (*shí*) with a concrete semantic content ('content words'), and empty words (*xū*) having only a grammatical meaning ('function words'). Studying Chinese morphology thus means studying something other than inflection. What, then, does Chinese morphology look like? I think part of the answer is in the **compounding** of words.

b. Words and Compounding

Chinese compounds occupy a border region between morphology and syntax; the tendency to form complex (predominantly disyllabic) 'words' is the most significant morphological feature of that language.[4] Chinese is a monosyllabic language: apart from a very few exceptions, to each syllable corresponds a morpheme, as a minimal unit of meaning. Besides, many grammarians do not distinguish

between 'word' and 'character' (graphic sign), based on the insight that to each character there corresponds a single morpheme. Many speakers follow these grammarians and consider the simple morpheme a 'word'.

Historically, this may be correct. There has been a general evolution from Chinese as a genuine **isolating** language, consisting of monosyllables, to a language making extensive use of compounding. Typically, two morpheme compounds became dissyllabic 'words'; a result, morpheme and 'word' were no longer identical. The evolution from proto-Sino-Tibetan to modern MC is said to have started during the Han dynasty, when a phonological and semantic reduction took place, with the corresponding processes of grammaticalization and lexicalization.[5] Tonal distinctions and final consonants have been lost with the result that many single-syllable words that were distinct at an earlier stage now have become **homophones**. The reduction led to a massive number of monosyllabic homophones – and characters with many very different meanings – in need of disambiguation. One means of disambiguating the homophones is by **compounding**. 70% of Chinese words are compounds, consisting of two units of meaning. So, compounding is not just a means of creating new words in the lexicon, as it is the case in 'our' languages; in Chinese it is primarily a means of disambiguation.

As a beginner, I immediately noticed a certain tendency for the language to form groups of two syllables. I did not know anything about Chinese compounds, but I observed a certain resistance against monosyllables in the sentence and an intuitive preference for two-morpheme formation. An almost 'rhythmic' principle, I would say. Even free monosyllabic 'root words' are prone to form dissyllabic groups. A monosyllabic word such as *hǎo* = 'good' is preceded by an adverbial *hěn* = 'very' (as in *Wǒ hěn hǎo* = 'I feel good'), without necessarily activating the full adverbial meaning of *hěn*. In negative sentences, *hěn* becomes superfluous, since now we have the negation forming a two syllable group: *Wǒ bù hǎo* ='*I* am not feeling well'.

Many verbs add an internal object: *jiànmiàn* = 'see face' ('meet'), *kànshū* = 'read book' ('read'). Also particles with neutral tones (such as suffixes and grammatical particles, e.g. *zi, de*) can provide a 'lacking' part to a monosyllabic element. But when I reached the genuine compounding section I was literally overwhelmed.

c. The status of 'word'

What then IS a 'word' in MC? In Chinese, 'word' does not seem to be a clear intuitive notion. Does this mean that the notion 'word' is not relevant for Chinese, that it is just another Western import? The meta-linguistic judgment of the Chinese speakers may be uncertain and does not support the existence of such a thing as a 'word' for MC. Maybe the meta-linguistic doubt of the Chinese speaker arises due to the fact that modern Chinese is a language full of **compounds**. Thus, there are two aspirants to the title 'word': the traditional monosyllabic morpheme and the polysyllabic (most often disyllabic) compound. Nevertheless, how the language really 'works', how a native speaker actually **uses** the forms within a given context, does not give rise to uncertainties. This roughly means that the minimal unit is not the morpheme (and its corresponding written character, called *zì*). Most of the time, a *zì* can't occupy a syntactic slot all by itself, but needs to enter a compound. Thus, the disyllabic compound seems to be the best candidate for a 'word'. Instead of the monosyllabic morpheme, the typical unit of spoken language appears to consist of two morphemes, bound together in what is called a *cí*. Not only nouns, but also other lexical classes may form compounds. However, there is no compositionality in a *cí* and the two constituents are not separately productive without causing the *cí* to lose its idiomatic meaning. Examples would be:

Dàxiàng = 'elephant' ('big' + 'image')
Lǎoshī = 'teacher' ('old' + 'professionally skilled person')

The size of the 'word' is an intricate problem in MC. Yuen Ren Chao says:

> What is ordinarily regarded as a polysyllabic morpheme can often be analyzed as a complex of morphemes, thanks to the genius of the Chinese language to read meaning into each syllable. (1968: 167).

Whether a given string of morphemes has the same meaning as the sum of their meanings or the whole has a new meaning which cannot be gathered from the meanings of the parts, demands reflection on the method(s) to test it. Are *hémǎ* = 'hippopotamus' ('river horse') or *hǎixiàng* = 'walrus' ('sea elephant') one or two morphemes for the speaker?

When does a complex morpheme represent one unitary idea (idea counting!) and how do we decide what is an idea? That's the question. Examples:

> *hēi zhǐ* = 'black paper'
> *hēi bǎn* = 'blackboard' (often green)
>
> *xiāo xīn* = 'small heart(-shaped object)'
> *xiāo xīn* = 'careful'

To rely only on semantic considerations, however, would be arbitrary. So, our two references opt for testing the unity of structure.

I give you Packard's initial remarks:

> My goal is to demonstrate that speakers of Chinese compose and understand sentences just as speakers of any language do, by manipulating sentence constituents using rules of syntax (…to string together words that are retrieved from a mental lexicon…), and that the smallest representations of these constituents have the size, feel, shape and properties of words. (2000: 1).

For Packard, the entity 'word' is a real cognitive construct that is also a linguistic primitive in natural languages. He claims that word structure is universal, and underpins this claim throughout his work. The 'word' cannot be reduced to an artificial construct or epiphenomenon. It is a unit in the spoken language, characterized by syntactic and semantic independence. And it is a basic unit of lexical retrieval from the mental lexicon. For Packard, access to the lexicon is not likely to happen via single morphemes (word components), when it comes to complex formations, since those formations have a semantics of their own.

How then do we identify a word and a word class in MC? The ultra-short answer would be: by syntax (and context). A 'word' can be defined as the minimal unit of syntax – a minimal free syntactic atom. But this in itself does not say much about the class of the word's components or its internal structure. According to Packard, the definition of 'word' is not about the structure of the written word; it is about the **bound roots**, **affixes**, **root words** and **function words**, as they used in the spoken language.[6] Packard recommends a form class description.

The great majority of complex words in Chinese consist of bound roots, which can be Start-Free or End-Free, but not both at a time (cf. Yuen Ren Chao):

> *Sānshì* = 'thirty' – *Shísān* = 'thirteen'

The second largest class uses free roots at both ends:
> *Lái* = 'comes'; *tiān* = 'sky'; *yǒu* = 'has'; *dà* = 'large'

How can we know that the disyllabic word is a kind of default in Chinese? In addition to a series of practical, pedagogical, historical arguments, supplemented with native speaker tests, there are psycholinguistic (and neurolinguistic) findings supporting this claim. Several recent studies suggest that two-morpheme words are indeed stored, retrieved and perceived as gestalt units (Packard 2000: 18).

But the debate has not yet been brought to a close, and I do not feel quite sure as to which option to choose for the status of the 'word' in MC. This doubt has also practical consequences, inasmuch as the search for a given morpheme in a pinyin dictionary can be an arduous task. Even the pinyin segmentation of 'words' itself in a text is not always that uniform.

The issue certainly needs further development. I think we need to rethink the relations between semantics and grammar, by following the guidelines of cognitive linguistics in order to refine the analysis. Syntax alone does not answer the question of the size of the morpheme, since both different types of complex formations can fill a syntactic slot. What is syntax (word external) and what is morphology (word internal) in this case?

There is a huge territory waiting to be explored, with almost as many specimens to study as there are compounds. An important issue is the analysis of the internal structure of the component; is a semantic or a syntactic description the most adequate? And if syntactic, what kind of syntactic method, since a syntactic surface analysis mimicking the grammatical relations of a sentence only applies in a limited way to word structure. It may be true that in its compound system, Chinese is a more 'syntax governed' language, inasmuch as we frequently find sentential grammatical relations between the components. We also witness the language rather consistently respecting the so called 'headedness principle': V to the left and N to the right: *zǒulù* = 'walk-road' ('to walk').

Nevertheless, one of the main arguments, I think, remains the syntactic one: the 'word' is a minimal unit as syntactic slot filler.

Syntactic operations on the complex formation are apt to reveal the character of the compound, such as the inseparability of the components, and show that in the system there is a 'cline' from compound = single word to compound = syntactic group of words (or 'phrase') filling one syntactic slot. (A typical illustration could be the V+O compounds, cf. Li & Thompson 1981: 73 ff.) We can state that if one of the components is a bound morpheme, the whole complex formation cannot be a phrase.

Another issue worth exploring is the relation between components and gestalt word (lexical categories and change of class), processes of lexicalization and grammaticalization, exceptions to the 'headedness principle', etc. etc. To perform that task, the researcher will have to rely on one or more native Chinese speakers.

d. Chinese classifiers

The obligatory presence of a quantifying classifier (CLF) between a numeral, demonstrative, or interrogative and a noun (Q – CLF – N) is a characteristic feature of MC. Chinese is a so-called 'numeral classifier language', a fact that the learner will probably notice at first glance, together with the observation that Chinese does not make use of a definite/indefinite article.

The classifier system of modern MC has evolved over time: from none, or a few CLF to today's rich inventory of several hundreds, and the obligatory grammatical presence of CLFs.

Now, what do I understand by the term 'classifier'? I take them to be entities that classify (and quantify) nouns according to certain semantic criteria. These criteria typically identify salient inherent perceptual properties of the referent of a given noun. But other semantic domains are possible candidates, too, such as social relations and function. Other South East Asian languages, such as Vietnamese,

Burmese, Korean, and Japanese are all classifier languages.

Numeral classification is an instance of the use of a linguistic device for the purpose of categorization. Classifiers define cognitive categories and reflect a human classification of the world. However, linguistic categorization seems to be a highly language-specific and culturally motivated activity as well.

Importantly, categories created by classifiers largely crosscut categories created by nouns. The noun lexicon is structured **hierarchically** around **taxonomic** relations, the classifiers usually yield semantic features such as animacy, shape, function, size, rigidity and social importance; they do not have hierarchical structures as the noun lexicon does. As Denny (1976) puts it: "…nouns have more to do with what is out there in the world, and classifiers more to do with how humans interact with the world (physical, functional and social interaction)."

I will go on to present some examples of how Chinese classifiers work. To begin, a well known example from Langacker (*Foundations* I, 164):

(a) *wǒ   xǐhuan   kàn   shū*
     I   like   read book
     ('I like to read books')

(b) *wǒ   kàn-le   yì   běn   shū*
     I   read-PERF   one   CLF   book
     ('I've read a book')

(c) wǒ   kàn-le   zhè-běn   shū
     I   read-PERF. this CLF   book
     ('I've read this book')

I quote Langacker (p. 164): "The classifiers of a language can range in number from a handful to many dozen. Though a wide variety of semantic categories are represented in classifier systems – pertaining to animacy, consistency, quantity, social status, etc. – shape specifications can perhaps be considered prototypical."

Danish and English are not classifier languages and have only got 'measure words'. Elementary textbooks of Chinese tend to treat 'classifiers' and 'measure words' as if they were the same. They tell us that the measure word indicates the category of the noun: expressions like 'a glass of water', 'a bottle of wine', 'a slice of bread' are put into the same category as the Chinese classifiers. A corresponding Chinese example of a measure word could be:

   yì bēi shǔi   'a glass of water'

That is, no distinction is made in the textbooks between the two types of markers on the noun. As a matter of fact, it may be true that the distinction between a measure word and a classifier is not always clear-cut, as the classifier sometimes will perform both functions at the same time: classifying and quantifying. But fundamentally the two types are distinct (which can be tested syntactically, as in Chinese); a classifier is never the exact equivalent of a measure word. A classifier is used with a noun when it does not form a bounding of the unit, whereas a measure word does. Measure words typically transform the referent of a mass noun – temporarily – into a **discrete**, countable entity due to its quantification; they do not refer to inherent qualities. By contrast, a classifier **names** the unit and points to its semantic structure.

Measure words normally function as independent nouns, free form content words, in their own right, whereas classifiers often do not have a full meaning of their own. Sometimes they will be weakened/bleached nouns, i.e. grammaticalized into elements of a (nearly) closed class. That said, there also is a **cline** in the weakening/

bleaching: not every classifier is an empty, completely grammaticalized element.[7]

In cases like those involving *kǒu* ('mouth', 'orifice'), *tóu* ('head'), *bǎ* ('grasp', 'hold'), it is still possible to detect a motivated relation between classifier and noun. Compare an example like

Nǐ   jiā   yǒu   jǐ   kǒu   rén?
Your   home   has   how many   mouth people
'How many members does your family have?'

In other cases, the classifier is related to big animals with big heads:

Yi tóu dàxiāng   'an elephant'

The shape classifier is used when the referent has a handle:

Yì bǎ yùsǎn   'an umbrella'

With classifiers, we touch the point where conceptual categorization meets linguistic categorization: a rather complex issue that requires further investigation. G. Lakoff's cognitive semantics clearly assumes that classifier categories reflect speakers' conceptual representations; the semantics that is inherent in the noun and which stems from the conceptualization of the referent governs the selection of a given classifier – a line of research which holds out great expectations. But although in general, the relationship between a noun and its classifier is cognitively motivated, it is not always transparent and consistent; the use of a given classifier may seem quite arbitrary, so that even native speakers disagree on the choice, among other reasons due to their level of education (knowledge of classical Chinese), the formality and level of style, etc. Also, the classifier system is not rigidly closed, but one that evolves dynamically all the time.

Some categories, **shape** classifiers in particular, cover a very broad range of things and show low category coherence, as they include members from many different taxonomic categories as well as many for which the semantic basis of their membership is not too transparent. For example, the range of objects covered by *tiào* is very broad, including both animals and inanimate objects (e.g. roads, jumping rope, rivers, snakes, or fish), as well as abstract nouns without any visible physical features (e.g. life). Here, broad and non-cohesive categories are more frequent than are tight, cohesive ones, as observed by Saalbach (2011).

Different nominals show varying degrees of grammaticalization, but even if the tendency exists in modern MC, such grammaticalized elements never quite reach the level of a proper system of articles (definite or indefinite).

In Chinese we have a general classifier *gè*, as in

Yí ge nán rén   'a man'

There can be a tendency even among Chinese native speakers (such as young children) to over-generalize *gè* as a syntactic 'place-holder'; here, one might say that in classifier acquisition, syntax takes the lead over semantics – perhaps because the semantic structure depends on the speaker's cognitive abilities of categorization.

Erbaugh (1986) has found that adults tend to use more classifiers and more specific ones than do children, which could indicate that children start using more general classifiers and fine-tune their classifier use as they mature. A learner, in order not to get stuck on the same general classifier *gè* for each and every noun, must progress in the acquisition of more specific classifiers in accordance with the nouns classified, just like any Chinese child is expected to.

A noun can sometimes be associated with various classifiers without its grammaticality suffering, even if one of those classifiers tends to be predominant.[8]

Yì zhī māo   'a cat'

The classifier *zhī* is a classifier signifying '(animal-like) animacy' and as such is frequently used with nouns denoting animals. Even so, the use of the classifier *tiáo* (signifying some long, slender, bendable or flexible object) is also allowed. The dimension of this variation may be represented by a straight line. *Tiáo* is used of ropes, belts, ties, trousers, rivers, roads and the like, and is thus an acceptable option also with certain animals such as snakes, worms and others. However, when the referent is long and slender, but straight and rigid instead of flexible, there is a preference for the classifier *gēn*; this applies to nouns like banana, cigarette, stick, finger, etc. Thus, the two classifiers for long and thin objects are not interchangeable. E.g.

yì gēn xiāngjiāo   'a banana'

Another classifier is *zhāng*. It is normally used when the objects referred to are two-dimensional, plane, and thin, with a flat, square or rectangular, regular surface, such as sheets of paper, credit cards and tickets. E.g.

sān zhāng zhuōzi   'three tables'
sān zhāng liǎn   'three faces'

In the two-dimensional domain, the classifier *piàn* shares most of the schematic features of *zhāng* except the property 'regular'. *piàn* is used when the contour of the entity is perceived as being irregular, e.g.:

yí piàn shùyè   'a leaf'

A given classifier is able to profile some aspect of the noun while backgrounding the rest, thereby rendering the referent of the noun in a different way than another, also viable classifier would. By

selecting different classifiers with the same noun, one can stress different nuances inherent to an entity. A classifier does not simply double the semantics of its noun, but is able to coerce a particular meaning. An important characteristic of Chinese numeral classifiers is their function to specify and clarify the referential meaning of a noun that has multiple meanings.

The following is an example from Szu-Yen Liang (2009: 32):

diànhuá telephone   'electric talk'

may be classified with either *xiàn* or *zhī*:

yí xiàn diànhuá   'a telephone line'
yì zhī diànhuá   'a telephone set' (the concrete physical entity)

But how does the non-native speaker choose among the close to a hundred of the most frequent classifiers, if not by learning the possible combinations by heart? As L2 learners, we need to memorize the semantics both of the classifier and the noun, as their use and combinations are not always predictable.

But what dictates the use (and even the (a)grammaticality) of a certain classifier, compared to another, in the native speaker's intuition? Native speakers of a classifier language have clear and shared intuitions about what category a new object belongs to. If classifier use were dependent entirely on memorizing individual instances, such user productivity would not exist. Therefore, it is desirable to get an understanding of the underlying principles that govern the selection of the correct classifier in varying contexts.

I think this is one of the most fascinating and challenging issues of Chinese grammar and as such, worth a more profound study in the light of general categorization theory.

My closing statement will be a quotation from Heymann Steinthal (1854; quoted in Edmondson, p. 711):

> The Chinese language', as my honorable teacher, Mr. Stanislaus Julien, expressed it approximately in his oral lectures, 'The Chinese language is not a language of memory and grammar, but of logic and reason.' These logical relationships remain – because they are logical – complete internal, not outwardly expressed, inaudible, invisible. The reader has to complete them by his own spiritual effort, not just to guess them, but to unlock them.

I think we can read the quotation from Steinthal (1854), cited above, as pointing to a more recent way of expressing the same insight into the peculiarity of Mandarin Chinese in terms of **iconicity** (Haiman 1985). By **iconicity** I am here pointing to the fact, in a rather rude/rough manner, that the structure of language directly reflects the structure of reality. One of the most noticeable features of Chinese is indeed its **iconicity**.

Iconicity is a significant means of coding grammatical relations among syntactic units by a direct mapping between conceptual structure and sentence structure, an isomorphism so to speak. Chinese is a language that gives priority to fixed word order as such a procedure. Word order corresponds to the thought flow in a natural way. Chinese can be said to be a truly 'pictorial' (iconic) language, not only in its writing system but equally in speech.

Where 'my' Romance languages use inflection and grammatical rules that do not mimic the cognitive organization of the world, Chinese tends towards iconicity. The temporal sequencing of events is a clear example (cf. Tai 1984). Event 1 comes before event 2. I borrow an example from Tai to illustrate the principle:

> *Nǐ gěi tā qián, tā cái gěi nǐ shū.*
> 'You give him money, he first give you book'
> 'He won't give you the book until you give him the money'

Through a number of different examples Tai shows convincingly that in MC word order follows the temporal order of the states represented in the perceived ('real') world. A principle that is apt to become even more generalized in other fields. As Tai himself says (1984: 63): "the essential strategies of Chinese grammar is to knit together syntactic units according to some concrete conceptual principles."

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Notes

1   I omit making reference to the Chinese characters and the written language, limiting my observations to what is transcribed, as until now, my only access to MC has been through the Romanized transcription system called *pinyin* (*Hànyǔ Pīnyīn* – literally 'spelled-out sounds', i.e. an alphabetical writing system). I am told that this is also the traditional way that Chinese children are introduced to written Chinese and the characters.

2   The correspondences/resemblances found e.g. in the beginner book *Easy Peasy Chinese* come without further indications of articulation :
The palatal series *j/q/x = jeep/cheese/ship* (between *ship* and *sip*)
The retroflex series *zh/ch/sh = germ/chin/shirt*

3   Further cognitive linguistic studies of 'image schemes' and 'conceptual structure', along the lines of work by researchers such as L. Talmy, R. Langacker, G. Lakoff, W. Croft, are certainly needed here; the same goes for theoretical trends like 'blended space' theory (G. Fauconnier & M.Turner), 'construction grammar' (E. Sweetser, Adele Goldberg) and 'frame semantics' (C. Fillmore). An example can be seen in Mei Chun Liu (1994).

4   For the following considerations, I rely heavily on the works by J.L. Packard: *The Morphology of Chinese* and Yuen Ren Chao: *A Grammar of Spoken Chinese.*

5   Givón's maxim: "today's morphology is yesterday's syntax" is valid for Chinese too.
Free content words (root words) tend to become bound roots. At the same time, the function words derive from bound roots and root words. There is a general tendency in natural languages towards grammaticalization (the bounding and semantic bleaching of free forms).

6   When we speak of compounding from a European point of view, we normally refer to the combination of two independent **root words**, each with their own autonomy outside the actual compound. In Chinese, however, the great majority of so-called compounds consist of **bound root words**, by far the largest class of morpheme type in Chinese. In Mandarin, bound roots form words by combining with other bound roots.

7   The majority of words that function as classifiers are also used in other contexts as other parts of speech. Dictionary definitions show that only 15% function solely as classifiers.

8   Szu-Yen Liang, The acquisition of Chinese nominal classifiers by L2 adult learners. (Doctoral diss., University of Texas at Arlington 2009)