Split numeral classifiers in the Chinese variety spoken by the Lalo Yi people

Hongyong Liu

hongyongliu@um.edu.mo

University of Macau

The Chinese variety spoken by the Lalo Yi people, the so-called *yizu hanhua* (彝族汉语, YH) is the vernacular used by the Lalo Yi people in Dali City, Yunnan Province, China. The Lalo Yi people who do not know how to speak Lalo Yi use this vernacular as their mother tongue. The grammatical system of this language is non-stable. If the speaker has less contact with the Han people and is less fluent with Chinese, he will speak YH with more detectable Yi characteristics at phonological, morphological and grammatical levels.

This paper investigates the grammatical behaviors of numeral classifiers in YH. We first used pearl story to collect some connected speech data from two speakers, a male and a female. Both of them are native Lalo Yi speakers, fluent in both Lalo Yi and YH. When communicating with Lalo Yi speakers, they will speak Lalo Yi. When communicating with people who do not speak Lalo Yi, they will speak YH. The following data are extracted from our transcription of the two speakers’ pear-story telling.

(1) ʐə u 31 ʑi 55 thin 33, ʐən 31 ko 55 ɭe 31 ʑi 31 ka 55, phi 33 tso 33 so 33 ʑi 33.

有一天 TOP 人 过来 一个 披 着 袉衣
‘One day, a man who wears a raincoat came.’

(2) nə 55 ka 55 ʐən 31 sɨ 55 ʃən 33 ʑi 33 tɕɦuan 33 tɕo 33 ʑi 31 tɕin 55.

那个人 是 袉衣 穿 着 一 件
‘That man wore a raincoat.’

From (1) and (2), we observed that the indefinite meaning is expressed in YH by split numeral classifier phrases, and ‘split’ is in the sense that the head noun and the numeral classifier phrase is separated by the main predicate. In (1), the numeral classifier quantifies over the entity denoted by the subject. In (2), the numeral classifier quantifies over the entity denoted by the object.

We then use different types of verbs (unergative, unaccusative, transitive) to confirm that split numeral classifier is a legitimate and frequently-used way to express the indefinite reading in YH. Of particular interest is the ambiguous transitive sentences in YH, as shown in (3). (3a) is in the perfective aspect, and (3b) is in the progressive aspect. When the sentence is in the perfective aspect, the numeral classifier phrase can only quantify over the entity denoted by the object (patient). When the sentence is in the progressive aspect, the numeral classifier phrase can quantify over the entity denoted by either the subject (agent) or the object (patient), leading to ambiguous readings.
To disambiguate (3a) and (3b), the patient marker ʂaŋ³³ “上:” can be used after the patient.

Since the patient is overly marked and the sentence is in perfective aspect, (4a) has only one meaning. In progressive sentences, the patient marker has two functions. On the one hand, it marks the patient; on the other hand, it prevents the numeral classifier phrase from quantifying over the patient, so (4b) can have only one reading.

The grammatical behaviors of split numeral classifiers in YH is in exact accordance with the split numeral classifiers in Lalo Yi. More evidence of Lalo Yi grammar in YH is:
(i) the progressive aspect marker in YH tein³³ 进 is borrowed from the progressive aspect marker in Lalo Yi ʨi³³, whose lexical meaning can be traced back to the verb “put something in”, expressed in Chinese as 进.
(ii) the patient marker in YH ʂaŋ²² 上 is borrowed from the patient marker in Lalo Yi ȡi³¹, whose lexical meaning can be traced back to “on the top of”, expressed in Chinese as 上.
(iii) the evidential marker in YH is directly borrowed from Lalo Yi. When the sentence is in progressive aspect, the evidential marker is ni³³mu⁵⁵; when the sentence is in perfective aspect, the evidential marker is ʂaŋ³³mu⁵⁵.

Our investigation shows that the grammatical system of yizu hanhua (YH) is not stable. It oscillates between the Chinese grammar and the Lalo Yi grammar. The general trend is that YH is becoming more and more Chinese-like, despite the fact that some deeply rooted grammatical elements of Lalo Yi such as the aspect marker, the patient marker, and the evidential marker have tenaciously survived in YH. Lalo Yi is now an endangered language, because many Lalo Yi people have shifted their first language from Lalo Yi to YH. It is predictable that YH will play a more important role in Lalo Yi community, and deserves more research as a product of intensive language contact.