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Modification and reference in the Chinese nominal

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Modification and reference in the Chinese nominal

Modification and reference in the Chinese nominal investigates the encoding of referential properties in the Chinese nominal. This study argues that even though Chinese does not have articles, the encoding of referential properties can still be detected by looking at modified noun phrases. This study proposes a theory for the encoding of specificity and definiteness in the Chinese nominal based on Cantonese, Mandarin and Wenzhou data.

By manipulating the positions of modifiers, it is shown that in Chinese, some structure to the left of the Numeral Phrase is responsible for the encoding of specificity, an observation that is obscured in unmodified noun phrases. This motivates the existence of a projection called the Specificity Phrase in Chinese. The Specificity Phrase is present in all specific noun phrases but absent in non-specific ones. The tie between specificity and definiteness is captured by an AGREE relation between the Specificity Phrase and the Classifier Phrase. The latter is where definiteness is encoded. The interplay between the two projections determines the overall referential properties of a noun phrase.

Modifiers in Chinese come in two types. They appear either bare or with a modification marker element. The two types of modifiers interact differently with the referential property of the noun phrase and deserve different structural status. This study argues that bare modifiers are specifiers and marker modifiers are adjuncts, motivated by their distinct distributions and licensing requirements.

The theory proposed here has been extended to non-Chinese languages like Miao and Zhuang.

This thesis is of relevance to anyone interested in the study of the referential properties of noun phrases, nominal modification, or in the study of different languages in China.

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