Definite article in Southwest Mandarin Chinese

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It is generally expected that articles are absent in Sinitic languages, but it is not always the case. This paper will describe the syntactic phenomenon that in Zunyi dialect (Southwest Mandarin, Sino-Tibetan), post-nominal classifiers are used exclusively to express the definite meaning, as illustrated in example (1a). In contrast, pre-nominal classifiers are used as numeral classifiers, and do not bare definite meaning.

(1) a *yifu*   *jian*
        clothes   CL
        'the clothes'

     b *yi*   *jian*   *yifu*
        one   CL   clothes
        'one piece of clothes'

On the basis of the above-mentioned contrast between the function of pre-nominal and post-nominal classifiers, I argue that the post-nominal classifier in Zunyi dialect can be analysed as definite article in the sense that it functions to express definite meaning. Although post-nominal classifiers are not obligatorily used after every noun, we cannot ignore its function of expressing definite meaning.

Generic classifier *ge* is used post-nominally as definite article without constraint, while specific classifiers are restricted to a small set of nouns, most of which are very frequent used in daily life, such as *gangbi* ('pen'), *yifu* ('clothes'), and *diannao* ('computer'). Generally speaking, the more frequent the noun is, the more natural it is to allow the specific corresponding classifier being used post-nominally. However, the most frequent and most grammaticalized usage is the generic classifier. In fact, all post-nominal specific classifiers can be substituted by the generic classifier *ge*. This is illustrated by the following example.

(2)　a　　*gangbi　zhi*

　　　　　　pen　　　CL

　　　　　　'the pen'

　　　b　　*gangbi　ge*

　　　　　　pen　　　CL.generic

　　　　　　'the pen'

　　　　Furthermore, the post-nominal classifier differentiates itself from demonstratives in that the post-nominal classifier does not show deictic meaning, although both can be used to express definite meaning. As is shown in example (3), the post-nominal classifier (3b) cannot be used in deictic context contrasting with another demonstrative, while the demonstrative can (3a).

(3)　a　*wo　　bu-yao　　zhe　　zhi　　gangbi,　yao　　na　　zhi　　gangbi*

　　　　　1SG　NEG-want　this　　CL　　pen,　　want　that　CL　　pen.

　　　　　'I don't want this pen, and I want that one.'

　　　b.　**wo　　bu-yao　　gangbi　zhi　　yao　　　na　　zhi　　gangbi*

　　　　　1SG　NEG-want　pen　　CL,　　want　　that　CL　　pen.

　　　　The definite use of the post-nominal classifier in Zunyi dialect is clearly associated with the topic position. As illustrated in example (4), the nominal phrases with post-nominal classifiers as a whole are exclusively used in topic positions (4a), but not allowed in the non-topic position (4b). Since the topic position is normally associated with definite meaning, this can also be taken as a piece of evidence for the definite function of the post-nominal classifier.

(4)　a.　*gangbi　ge　　　lan　　lo.*

　　　　　pen　　CL　　　broken　PAST

　　　　　'The pen is broken.'

　　　b.　**ta　　　zheng　lan　　　lo　　　gangbi　zhi*

　　　　　3SG　　cause　broken　PAST　pen　　　CL

　　　　　'He made the pen broken.'