

Learners' Choice of Nominal Forms to Introduce a New Referent in Chinese Discourse

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New referents which are specific are usually introduced into Chinese discourse by nominals containing a numeral classifier, although bare nominals are structurally less marked and can function as arguments as well. The different functions of different nominal forms may pose challenges to L2 learners. This study investigates the nominal forms L2 learners of Chinese adopt to introduce new referents into discourse, using data collected through 'pear story' narratives. It is found that low intermediate level students preferred bare nominals when introducing new referents into discourse, and were not sensitive to the factor of specificity of the nominals. With the improvement of overall proficiency, however, learners' performance on choosing correct forms of nominals for single specific referents also improved. The factor of number also played a role in the learners' choice of nominal forms and is also discussed.

0. Introduction:

All languages need to have linguistic devices to introduce new referents into discourse and maintain the referents thereafter. A speaker's choice of the linguistic form to mark a new referent will indicate to the listener that they need to make a new representation of a referent in the shared discourse. On the other hand, the selection of the linguistic form to maintain the reference will suggest to the listener to track the referent that is already in discourse. These devices differ from language to language, and present challenges for language learners. This paper investigates the nominal forms that English learners of Chinese use to introduce new referents into discourse. It will show that despite the similarity between the indefinite article in English and the numeral *yi* in Chinese, learners had problems acquiring the discourse function of nominals with numeral classifiers, namely, to introduce new referents into discourse. This is due to the interference of bare nouns, which can also have indefinite interpretations in Chinese, and is structurally less marked than a numeral classifier phrase.

1. Forms of indefinite Chinese nominal phrases

This section introduces the forms of indefinite nominals in Chinese and restrictions on their distribution. First, a nominal phrase containing a number and a

classifier (CL) is necessarily interpreted as indefinite in Chinese¹, which has the form as follows:

- (1) 一 个 人
 one CL person
 'a person'

It is usually suggested that such indefinite expressions cannot be topics or subjects in Chinese, and thus are often introduced by the existential verb *you* 'to have'. For instance:

- (2) *(有) 一 个 人 很 聪 明
 Have one CL person very smart
 '* (There is) a person who is very smart'.

It is possibly because of this that Hickmann and Liang (1990) proposed that "newness must be marked by clause structure (for example, post-verbal position), regardless of whether it is marked in the NP" (p. 1168). Whether marking through post-verbal position is obligatory, however, is controversial. For instance, Huang et al. (2009) have shown that there are counter examples to this generalization, although it is agreed that the acceptability of such sentences would be improved if the existential verb *you* was inserted before the indefinite nominal phrase.:

- (3) 一 个 人 来 了 / 正 在 念 书
 One-CL person come-LE/right at read book
 'A man came/is reading' (p. 320, example (76))

To explain the contrast between (2) and (3), they proposed that this is because sentences containing stage-level predicates have a higher degree of acceptability with an indefinite in the subject position than sentences containing an individual-level predicate such as (2). They further propose that sentences describing direct perceptions of situations are generally more acceptable. For example:

- (4) 看, 一 片 枫 叶 掉 下 来 了.
 Look one-CL maple leaf fall down LE.
 'Look, a maple leaf fell down'. (p. 324, example (82))

¹ Li (1998) has made a clear distinction between the structural representations of a quantity-denoting expression and an individual-denoting expression, even though they bear the same surface form. What is relevant to our discussion in this paper is only the individual-denoting interpretation of such phrases.

The indefinite expression *yi-pian feng ye* 'a maple leaf' can occur in the pre-verbal position because the sentence describes an observation of an occurrence. Therefore, an indefinite nominal with the form of a numeral+CL+N often occurs post-verbally, and is often introduced by the existential verb *you* 'to have', unless the sentence describes a perceived situation, in which case it could occur in the subject position.

Apart from nominals containing a numeral, bare nouns in Chinese can also occur in an argument position. The syntactic positions they occur in can help determine definiteness, as pointed out in previous research (e.g. Cheng and Sybesma, 1999). For example, pre-verbal bare nouns can only be interpreted as definite, whereas post-verbal bare nouns allow both definite and indefinite interpretations. For instance:

(5) 客人 来 了。

Guest arrive LE

'The guest has arrived.' Not 'A guest has arrived.'

(6) a. 胡斐 买书 去了。

Hufei buy book go LE

'Hufei went to buy a book/books.'

b. 胡斐 喝 完 了 汤。

Hufei drink-finish-ASP soup

'Hufei finished the soup.'

(Cheng & Sybesma, 1999)

The bare noun *keren* 'guest' can only be interpreted as definite in (5). On the other hand, *shu* 'book' in (6a) can have both definite and indefinite interpretations, depending on the context. *Tang* 'soup' in (6b) can only have a definite interpretation, because the verb phrase contains a resultative complement *wan* 'finish'.

To summarize, indefinite nominals in Chinese can be either bare or marked with a numeral and a classifier. Whereas a nominal containing a numeral and a classifier is necessarily indefinite, a bare noun can have either definite or indefinite interpretations. Apart from the marking within an NP, syntactic positions of the nominals also contribute to the definite and indefinite interpretations. Indefinite nominals often occur post-verbally, such as when introduced by the existential verb *you* 'to have', and a pre-verbal position precludes an indefinite interpretation of bare nouns.

Even though both bare nouns and nouns marked with numerals can have an indefinite interpretation, it has been proposed that *yige* 'one-CL' in Chinese is frequently used to introduce a newly mentioned but unfamiliar referent into the discourse (Liu, M 2010). Further, Sun (1988) conducted an investigation into how numeral classifiers were used in natural discourse and found that the majority discourse entities with important thematic status were introduced with a nominal marked with a numeral and a classifier.

He thus proposed that there is a correlation between the use of numeral classifiers and the thematic status of the discourse entities.

2. Chinese indefinite nominals and L2 research

Hickmann and Liang (1990) conducted research on how Chinese adults and children introduce new referents into discourse, focusing on the marking within an NP and word order variation. They discovered that for adults most nominals used for referent introductions were accompanied by numeral determiners (86%), and were in post-verbal positions (80%), such as introduced by the existential verb *you* 'to have'. On the other hand, Chinese children showed difficulties in the acquisition of marking newness. It is only at 5- and 6-years that children begin to use numeral determiners but they also make frequent use of other NP types, particularly bare nominals. 7 and 10 year olds seem to have acquired the marking within an NP, and make systematic use of numeral forms, while 4-year olds used bare nominals predominantly. In terms of marking through the post-verbal position, the children overall did not show as high a percentage as the adults did. The 7-and 10-year-olds show a preference for post-verbal first mentions but the younger children did not. Their study suggests that children tend to rely more on NP types than on word order to mark newness.

Through a picture-telling experiment, Crosthwaite (2014) also suggested that in Mandarin discourse-new referents may be introduced pre- or postverbally and are usually accompanied by a numeral + classifier construction before the noun when they are neutral or noninferable from the context. On the other hand, inferable referents were introduced with bare nominals in 90% of cases, even though such referents were new to the discourse. For instance:

(7) 这个 时候他们 叫 来 了 老师。(in a school setting)

This-CL time they call over LE teacher

'At this time they called the teacher over'

In a school setting, *laoshi* 'the teacher' is inferable even though it is new to the discourse, and is introduced by a bare nominal. Such a distinction in the treatment between inferable and noninferable nominals gave Chinese learners of English positive transfer in learning equivalent English expressions, and they performed better than Korean subjects in the study, whose native language does not make such a distinction.

Even though Chinese numeral *yi* 'one' was suggested to be an emerging indefinite article in Chinese (e.g. M. Liu, 2010), the usage of *yi* is more restricted than 'a(n)' in English. Liu, X. (2004) and Liu, H. (2014) both suggested that English learners of Chinese may overuse *yi* due to transfer from English. Through a questionnaire experiment focusing on the acquisition of Chinese bare nominals, Zhang (2012) discovered that learners made mistakes in the usage of bare nominals with indefinite interpretations and confirmed their suggestion. However, to over use nominals with

numeral classifiers when bare nouns are needed does not guarantee that learners will use nominals with numeral classifiers correctly when they are needed. For instance, Teng et al. (2010) have shown that Japanese learners demonstrated the 'U-shape' in their acquisition of *yige* 'one-CL'. That is to say, after the initial stage, learners' performance on the usage of *yige* deteriorated: they did not use *yige* when it was needed. It was unclear how English learners of Chinese acquire the discourse functions of nominals with numeral classifiers, especially the function of referent introduction into discourse. Furthermore, Chaudron and Parker (1990) predicted that learners use more bare nouns at the lower proficiency levels cross-linguistically since such nominals are structurally less marked than nominals with numerals. This is also what Hickmann and Liang (1990) found out in L1 acquisition as reviewed in the above section (Hickmann and Liang 1990). Given the two conflicting factors, I proposed the following research question: what nominal forms will English learners of Chinese use to introduce new referents into discourse? Will they prefer the bare nouns because of their structural simplicity, or will they prefer nominals with numeral classifiers because of L1 transfer?

3. Methodology

Two groups of American college students, of low-intermediate (12) and high-intermediate (6) Chinese levels, participated in the study. A group of 12 Chinese college students served as the control group. They were asked to write down the 'Pear Story' in Chinese after watching the video (<http://pearstories.org/>). The low-intermediate group had completed the equivalency of two years of Chinese study (12 credits) and the high-intermediate group had completed the equivalency of three years of Chinese study (18 credits).

The story is about a boy who stole a basket of pears from a farmer and ran away. He ran into a girl on the way and fell down. Three boys helped him, and he gave them some pears in return. Five referents are involved in the story: the boy, the farmer, the pears that the farmer was picking, the girl and three other boys. The times that the five referents appeared in the story were not the same, and each of them has a different status in the discourse. Being the main character, the boy obviously has the most important thematic status. The farmer and the three boys have similar status since each of them has one encounter with the boy and with each other. The girl has a less important discourse status since she has only one encounter with the boy. In fact, not all the subjects in our study even included the girl in their narratives. In contrast to the four animate referents, 'pear', when first introduced into the discourse, has a nonspecific interpretation. 'Pear' and 'three boys' are also different from the other three nominals in terms of being plural.

4. Results and discussion

When coding the data, nominals marked with a numeral and a classifier and nominals marked with a classifier only are categorized together, since both forms can only have the indefinite interpretation (Cheng and Sybesma, 1999). For example,

- (8) 小 男孩 在路上 遇见 个 小女孩
 Little boy on road meet CL little girl
 'The little boy ran into a girl on the road.'
- (9) 从 远方 来 了 一位 少年
 From far come LE one CL boy
 'A boy came from down the road.'

Both *ge xiao nühai* 'CL little girl' and *one CL shaonian* 'one CL boy' are categorized as nominals marked with a numeral and/or a classifier.

Nouns modified by a possessive or an adjectival phrase, but not containing a numeral or a classifier, are all categorized together with bare nouns since nominal modifiers are adjuncts and do not change the syntactic structure of the nominal phrase. For instance:

- (10) 男人 给 他的朋友 一个水果
 Man give his friend one CL fruit
 'The man gave his friend(s) a fruit.'

In this sentence, *tade pengyou* 'his friend(s)' was used wrongly by a student to introduce the group of children who helped the boy who stole some pears into the discourse. Such phrases are classified in the group with the bare nouns.

The nominal forms that native speakers used to introduce each referent into discourse are summarized in Table I:

Table I: Native speakers

	No Num/CL	Numeral/Classifier	Pre-verbal	Post-verbal
farmer	2 (16.67%)	10 (83.33%)	9 (75%)	3 (25%)
boy	0	12 (100%)	6 (50%)	6 (50%)
girl	1 (9.09%)	10 (90.91%)	2 (18.18%)	9 (81.82%)
Three boys	0	12 (100%)	5 (41.67%)	7 (58.44%)
pear	12 (100%)	0	0	12 (100%)

The analysis reveals that native speakers adopted predominantly nominals with a numeral and a classifier to introduce a new referent, except for the 'pears'. Bare nominals were only used in two cases for 'the farmer' and in one case for 'the girl'. The reason that 'pears' was introduced by a bare noun into the discourse is because it was used as a non-specific nominal and often occurred after the verb *zhai* 'to pick'. For instance:

- (11) 一个 果农, 在树上 摘梨
 One CL orchardist, on tree pick pear
 'One orchardist was picking pears from the tree'.

Therefore, even though both bare nouns and nominals with numeral classifiers can be interpreted as indefinite in Chinese, nominals with numeral classifiers tend to be used to introduce specific referents into discourse, whereas bare nouns are used for nonspecific ones.

In terms of syntactic positions, it was not obvious that the native speakers used the post-verbal positions to mark indefiniteness, contrasting with what Hickmann and Liang (1990) found. Whereas 'the girl' occurred in the post-verbal position in 81.82% of instances, 'the farmer' occurred pre-verbally in 75%. That is to say, the results conform with Huang et al. (2009)'s observation that indefinite nominals can occur pre-verbally and function as subjects.

The nominals that the 2nd year students used are summarized in Table II:

Table II: Nominals used by second year L2 learners of Chinese

	Demonstrative	No Num/CL	Numeral/Classifier	Pre-verbal	Post-verbal
farmer	1 (8.33%)	4 (33.33%)	7 (58.33%)	12 (100%)	0
boy		6 (54.55)	5 (45.45%)	10 (90.91%)	1 (9.09%)
girl		3 (60%)	2 (40%)	0	5 (100%)
Three boys		3 (27.27%)	8 (72.73%)	10 (90.91%)	1 (9.09%)
pear		9 (75%)	3 (25%)	0	12 (100%)

Compared to the native speakers, the 2nd year students, however, did not use nominals with numeral classifiers predominantly for the specific referents, except for the 'three boys'. This suggests that the learners may not be aware that nominals with numeral classifiers usually bear the function of introducing new referents into discourse, and L1 positive transfer did not seem to override the structural markedness of the numeral classifier phrases. Therefore, even though X. Liu (2004) and H. Liu (2014) both have warned that English learners of Chinese may overuse *yige* in nonreferential nominals, at least at the lower intermediate level in this study, learners also tend to omit the numeral classifiers when they are needed.

Among the referents, 'three boys' have the highest percentage of numeral classifier usage. This can be attributed to the help of number. The numeral classifier in this case not only introduced new referents, but importantly it marked the plural characteristic of the referents. Therefore, plural referents are more salient for the learners to use numeral classifiers.

As for 'pear', it has the lowest percentage of numeral classifier usage (25%), although not as low as with the native speakers (0%). This suggests that the majority of students have sensed that 'pears' in this discourse is nonspecific and do not need the marking of a numeral classifier.

To summarize, to use bare nominals to introduce nonspecific referents into discourse does not seem to present much challenge to the low-intermediate group. Comparatively, to use nominals with numeral classifiers to introduce specific referents seem to more challenging, except in the case where the factor of plurality is present.

The nominals that the 3rd year students used are summarized in Table III:

Table III: Nominals used by third year L2 learners of Chinese

	pronoun	No Num/CL	Numeral/Classifier	Pre-verbal	Post-verbal
farmer	1 (16.67%)	1 (16.67%)	4 (66.67%)	6 (100%)	0
boy		0	6 (100%)	6 (100%)	0
girl		2 (50%)	2 (50%)	0	4 (100%)
Three boys		2 (33.33%)	4 (66.67%)	5 (83.33%)	1 (16.67%)
pear		4 (66.67%)	2 (33.33%)	0	6 (100%)

Unfortunately, the 3rd year students are a smaller group with only six subjects. However, it still shows that 3rd year learners had a higher percentage of usage of numeral classifiers for 'the farmer' and 'the boy' than the 2nd year learners. Regarding 'the boy', all the learners used the numeral classifier form, just like the native speakers did. This suggests that the 3rd year learners out-performed the 2nd year learners regarding the acquisition of using numeral classifiers to introduce specific referents into discourse. However, in terms of the 'three boys' and 'pear', the performance of the 3rd year learners was surprising in that the 2nd year learners out-performed them. Regarding 'three boys', two learners used *bieren* 'other people' and *tade pengyou* 'his friends' respectively to introduce it into discourse. Even though the two phrases were not the appropriate nominal forms to use in this context, one point worth noting is that both of them could have the plural interpretation. The two learners made the mistake of not using numeral classifiers to introduce a specific referent, but correctly chose nominal forms that could have the plural interpretation. On the other hand, for the 'pear', two learners used *henduo* 'many' and *yixie* 'some' to mark it, although the majority of the students still chose the bare form. Thus, out of the five referents, the 3rd year students performed worse than the 2nd year learners particularly for two referents: 'three boys' and 'pear', which happen to be the two that have plural interpretations. The small size of the subjects may not grant the conclusion that the result demonstrates the U-shape learning. However, the 3rd year learners have used more varieties of nominal forms than the 2nd year learners. It is

possible that since the 3rd year learners were exposed to more nominal forms, it created more interference for them to choose the correct one.

Even though native speakers did not use post-verbal position predominantly to mark newness in this study, compared to the learners, native speakers had more post-verbal new referents than the L2 learners except for the 'girl' and the 'pears'. This seems to suggest that just as with L1 learners of Chinese, syntactic marking of new referents is acquired later than morphological marking by L2 learners (Hickmann and Liang, 1990). The current study focuses on the nominal forms that learners choose, and leave the acquisition of syntactic variation for future study.

5. Summary

This study investigated the nominal forms that L2 learners of Chinese used to introduce new referents into discourse through data collected on the 'Pear Story'. All five referents involved have different characteristics and discourse status, and enable us to examine different factors affecting the choice of the nominal forms. In Chinese whereas bare nouns are preferred for nonspecific referents, nominals marked with numeral classifiers are usually adopted to introduce new referents into discourse. Such a distinction presents challenges to the learners, particularly at the lower level. Even though an indefinite article is commonly used to introduce a new referent in English (Du Bois, 1980), 2nd year learners failed to transfer such a function into L2 Chinese and preferred bare nominals. Third year learners performed better in terms of single referent introduction than 2nd year learners. Second year learners used a higher percentage of numeral classifiers for plural referents than for single referents, which suggests number is another factor that affects the choice of nominal forms.

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