

Classifier language plurals: more than plural

Languages can be divided into plural-marking languages and classifier languages, the claim being that a classifier language lacks plural morphology (Chierchia 1998, Krifka 1995). However, it has been observed that Korean, Chinese and other CLs do have plural markers, whose meaning is more nuanced than simply marking number (Corbett 2000). They are associative, distributive, collective, etc. The range of variation within plural-marking languages has been extensively studied, but the the range of variation of plural marking within classifier languages has received more sporadic attention. This paper will primarily look at Korean *-tul* and Chinese *-men*, their similarities and differences, and what they suggest more broadly about the structure of plurality in classifiers languages.

- (1) a. Wuli-nun cha-lul sassta
We-TOP car-ACC buy.PST.DC
We bought a car
- b. Wuli-tul-un cha-lul sassta
We-TUL-TOP car-ACC buy.PST.DC
We bought a car/All our members bought a car
- (2) *sakwa-tul sey kay
apple-TUL 3 CL
three apples (Park 2008)

Both *-tul* in Korean and *-men* in Chinese attach to specific NPs, cannot be generic, and cannot be a predicate (Kim 2004). *-Tul* can appear on any common count noun, while *-men* is primarily restricted to human nouns. Unlike *-men*, *-tul* cannot get an associative reading on proper nouns. *-Tul* cannot appear with classifiers¹. *-Men* also cannot appear with count classifiers, but can with group-forming classifiers (Cheng & Sybesma 1998). Frequently *-tul* is described as simply a plural marker (An 2016, Kang 1994, Kwak 2003), or a plural cum specificity marker (Song 1975, Kim 2008), but I will follow Joh (2005) and Park (2008) in describing it as a distributive marker. A number of people claim *-men* is a plural marker (Li 1999, Huang et al 2009), others that it marks plurality and definiteness (Kurafuji 2004) and still others that it is a collective marker (Norman 1988, Iljic 2005). I will simply treat it as a specific plural.

¹It was pointed out by a reviewer that (i) is possible. However after consulting native speakers, it seems this gets more of a partitive reading: *Three of the students came*.

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| (i) | haksayng-tul-(i) sey-myeng-i wassta
student-TUL-(NOM) 3-CL-NOM come.PST.DC
Three students came | (ii) | haksayng(-tul)-i seys tochakhayssta
student(-TUL)-NOM 3 arrive.PST.DC
Three students arrived. (Kim1994) |
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Kim (1994), in (iv), does mention N-*tul* with a bare numeral, behaving as a floating quantifier, is allowed. Either way, these constructions are only available for human nouns. I will, of course, look into it further.

- (3) a. xuesheng-men
student-MEN
the students
- b. *san ge xuesheng-men
three CL student-MEN (Li 1999)
- (4) zhe qun haizi-men
this CL child-MEN
this group of children (Yu 1957)

In both Korean and Chinese, the plural markers and count classifiers are in complementary distribution². In previous analyses, the plural marker is generated in Num, an N raises to D, through Cl and Num. However, this paper will present a new perspective based on a span-based theory of words (Svenonius 2020). A N-Cl/Num-D would spell out as either as a nonspecific numeral-classifier and noun or a specific plural marked noun. This would allow us to capture the complementary use of classifiers and plural markers, as well as the similarity of these types of plurals across languages while still allowing for internal variation of the span in different languages.

As this and other work show, plural markers in classifier languages are not at all unexpected, as once thought. A more accurate generalization should be that plural markers in CLs are not merely plural; they contribute some additional meaning. There is considerable syntactic and semantic variation among these markers but the generalization of that they and the nouns they modify comprise a span captures their similar distribution with classifiers.

²Group-forming classifiers do not share the same structure as count-classifiers. They can be thought of more like nouns rather than true classifiers (Cheng & Sybesma 1998)

²**References:** An, D.-H. (2016). On some expressions of plurality in Korean and their implications: With reference to Chinese and Japanese. *Linguistic Research*, 33(2):205–227. Cheng, L. L.-S. and Sybesma, R. (1998). Yi-wan tang, yi-ge tang: Classifiers and massifiers. *Tsing Hua journal of Chinese studies*, 28:385–412. Chierchia, G. (1998). Plurality of Mass Nouns and the Notion of “Semantic Parameter”. In Rothstein, S., editor, *Events and Grammar*. Kluwer, Dordrecht. Corbett, G. (2000). *Number* (Cambridge Textbooks in Linguistics). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Huang, C. T. J., Li, Y. H. A., & Li, Y. (2009). *The syntax of Chinese* (Vol. 10). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Iljic, R. (2005). Personal collective in Chinese. *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 68:77–102. Joh, Y.-k. (2005). A semantic analysis of the Korean plural marker ‘tul’. In *Proceedings of Sinn und Bedeutung*, volume 9, pages 170–182. Kang, B.-M. (1994). Plurality and other semantic aspects of common nouns in Korean. *Journal of East Asian Linguistics*, 3(1):1–24. Kim, J. (2008). The parameterization of plural markings in classifier languages. Kim, J.-y. (2004). Specific nominals in Chinese and Korean. *Language and Linguistics*, 5(1):243–270. Kurafuji, T. (2004). Plural morphemes, definiteness, and the notion of semantic parameter. *Language and Linguistics*, 5:211–242. Krifka, M. (1995). *The generic book*, 398. Kwak, E.-J. (2003). Interpretations of plural noun phrases in Korean. *언어학*, (35):3–38. Li, Y.-H. A. (1999). Plurality in a classifier language. *Journal of East Asian Linguistics*, pages 75–99. Park, S.-Y. (2008). Plural marking in classifier languages: a case study of the so-called plural marking -tul in Korean. *Toronto Working Papers in Linguistics*, 28:281–295. Song, S. C. (1975). Rare plural marking and ubiquitous plural marker in Korean. *어학연구*. Svenonius, P. (2020). A span is a thing: A span-based theory of words. Yu, M. (1957). Mingci, dongci, xingrongci (noun, verb, adjective). *Shanghai: Xin zhishi chubanshe*.