ABSTRACT

Proto-Karen Worldview as Reflected in the Use of Noun Classifiers in Six Modern Karenic Languages, Sgaw, Pwo, Pa-o, Kayah, Kayan, and Kayaw[*]

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In the modern Karenic languages, Sgaw, Pwo, Pa-o, Kayah, Kayan and Kayaw, there are two major types of noun classifier, i.e. the general or basic type and the specific one. The former occurs more frequently since its use is less restricted or, in other words, general noun classifiers are used to classify many more things than specific classifiers.

Karen speaking people make a distinction between 'human beings' and 'non-human beings'. There is only one classifier for nouns belonging to the human category, e.g. /ɣa^{33}/, /ɣa^{55}/ and /pra^{33}/ in N. Sgaw, N. Pwo and Kayan, respectively. The non-human category comprises animals (animate) and things (inanimate). Animal species (except mammals) and inanimate objects are classified with the same set of classifiers depending primarily upon their shape; for example, in Kayan, the classifier /bɔ^{453}/ which has the semantic feature [+long] is used to classify snakes, pangolins, crocodiles, eels, millipedes, earthworms, chameleons, as well as needles, candles, cigarettes, incense sticks, pestles, bangles, roads and so forth.

To reconstruct Proto-Karen noun classifiers with a focus on the general type and Proto-Karen worldview as reflected in the use of classifiers, a three-step data collecting method was devised: a general interview, an in-depth interview after preparing working hypotheses and a final interview based on the devised thematic word list. The data used for the analysis is fresh and solely collected by the author. To compare and conclude the research findings, the comparative method was applied.

Six basic noun classifiers were reconstructed: *bra^A, *ʔdə^A, *ʔbɔN^A, *ʔba^B, *hma^A and *phloŋ^B. To comprehend the worldview of the Karen, the cognitive or conceptual system of noun classification was analysed using binary and descriptive semantic features, i.e. [±human], [±animate], [±mammal], [±big], [+long], [+flat] and [+round].

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