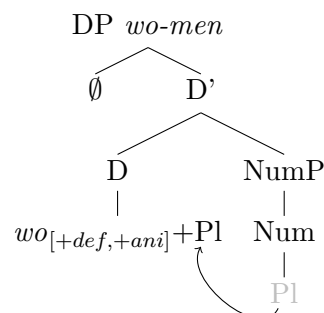


Plurality, animacy and the morpheme *men* in Mandarin Chinese

This paper investigates the morpheme *men* in Mandarin Chinese (hence MC), which attaches to animate nominals (pronouns, proper names and animate common nouns), denoting a definite plural reading and argues that *men* is a plural marker.

- (1) a. Wo qu zhao haizi-men.
 I go find child-MEN
 ‘I will go and find the children.’
 b. Wo qu zhao haizi.
 I go find child
 ‘I will go and find the/some
 child/children.’
- (2)



I follow Huang et al. (2009) in assuming that *men* is the morphological realisation of the plural (Pl) feature under the Num head. I propose that *men* carries a [+definite, +animate] feature bundle. The Pl can be realised as *men* only when these two features are satisfied. That is to say, only animate elements that appear in D can be suffixed with *men*. As an illustration, the plural pronoun *wo-men* ‘I-MEN, we’ has the structure in (2), in which the Pl moves to D and gets realised as *men*.

Semantically, I would like to argue that plural pronouns denote a “collective” reading rather than a plural reading. For instance, the first person plural pronoun *wo-men* ‘I-MEN, we’ does not mean a multiple instances of ‘I’, the speaker, but rather the speaker plus the person(s) that are considered by the speaker as within a group with him/her (Iljic 1994). That is, *wo-men* represents a group of people anchored by the speaker.

I propose that this “collective” reading originates from the special pluralization mechanism of pronouns rather than *men*. Specifically, unlike the inanimate nominal *apple* or the animate *student*, pronouns (*I*, *you* and *he/she*) cannot be counted, that is, *two Is* and *three hes* are impossible. In other words, pronouns cannot be pluralised in the same way as common nouns such as *apple* and *student* are, i.e. by simply multiplying the same kind of object. As a result, when they co-occur with the plural marker *men* which requires plural semantics, they have to adopt a different mechanism: by including other person(s) depending on their relationship with the speaker. This analysis provides an account for the fact the “collective” reading is only available when *men* is suffixed to pronouns such as in *Xiaoqiang ta-men* ‘Xiaoqiang and others’ and the fact that common nouns or proper names suffixed by *men* such as *Xiaoqiang-men* ‘all the Xiaoqiangs’ can only have a plural reading. Since in the latter, there is no subjective origin, the “collective” reading cannot be generated.

An alternatively explanation can be drawn by considering the role animacy plays in this issue. As the proper name *Xiaoqiang* is lower than pronouns in the animacy hierarchy, it is generally assumed that the reference of a proper name is less definite than that of pronouns. Consequently, it is easier to anchor a group of people by a personal pronoun than by a proper name. Moreover, as mentioned earlier, *men* only attaches to animate nominals, denoting a definite interpretation. The question that is worth pondering upon is whether the definiteness is related to the fact that *men* only suffixes to animate nominals. Put differently, it is possible to assume that *men* only has one feature [+animate] and the definite reading comes from the animacy of the pronoun, proper names and animate common nouns.

References

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