

= Chinese classifier =

The modern Chinese varieties make frequent use of what are called classifiers or measure words . One of the basic uses of classifiers is in phrases in which a noun is qualified by a numeral . When a phrase such as " one person " or " three books " is translated into Chinese , it is normally necessary to insert an appropriate classifier between the numeral and the noun . For example , in Standard Mandarin , the first of these phrases would be ??? y? ge rén , where y? means " one " , rén means " person " , and ge is the required classifier . There are also other grammatical contexts in which classifiers are used , including after the demonstratives ? ( ? ) zhè ( " this " ) and ? nà ( " that " ) ; however , when a noun stands alone without any such qualifier , no classifier is needed . There are also various other uses of classifiers : for example , when placed after a noun rather than before it , or when repeated , a classifier signifies a plural or indefinite quantity .

The terms " classifier " and " measure word " are frequently used interchangeably ( as equivalent to the Chinese term ?? ( ?? ) liàngcí , which literally means " measure word " ) . Sometimes , however , the two are distinguished , with classifier denoting a particle without any particular meaning of its own , as in the example above , and measure word denoting a word for a particular quantity or measurement of something , such as " drop " , " cupful " , or " liter " . The latter type also includes certain words denoting lengths of time , units of currency , etc . These two types are alternatively called count @-@ classifier and mass @-@ classifier , since the first type can only meaningfully be used with count nouns , while the second is used particularly with mass nouns . However , the grammatical behavior of words of the two types is largely identical .

Most nouns have one or more particular classifiers associated with them , often depending on the nature of the things they denote . For example , many nouns denoting flat objects such as tables , papers , beds , and benches use the classifier ? ( ? ) zh?ng , whereas many long and thin objects use ? ( ? ) tiáo . The total number of classifiers in Chinese may be put at anywhere from a few dozen to several hundred , depending on how they are counted . The classifier ? ( ? ) , pronounced gè or ge in Mandarin , apart from being the standard classifier for many nouns , also serves as a general classifier , which may often ( but not always ) be used in place of other classifiers ; in informal and spoken language , native speakers tend to use this classifier far more than any other , even though they know which classifier is " correct " when asked . Mass @-@ classifiers might be used with all sorts of nouns with which they make sense : for example , ? hé ( " box " ) may be used to denote boxes of objects , such as lightbulbs or books , even though those nouns would be used with their own appropriate count @-@ classifiers if being counted as individual objects . Researchers have differing views as to how classifier ? noun pairings arise : some regard them as being based on innate semantic features of the noun ( for example , all nouns denoting " long " objects take a certain classifier because of their inherent longness ) , while others see them as motivated more by analogy to prototypical pairings ( for example , " dictionary " comes to take the same classifier as the more common word " book " ) . There is some variation in the pairings used , with speakers of different dialects often using different classifiers for the same item . Some linguists have proposed that the use of classifier phrases may be guided less by grammar and more by stylistic or pragmatic concerns on the part of a speaker who may be trying to foreground new or important information .

Many other languages of the Mainland Southeast Asia linguistic area exhibit similar classifier systems , leading to speculation about the origins of the Chinese system . Ancient classifier @-@ like constructions , which used a repeated noun rather than a special classifier , are attested in Old Chinese as early as 1400 BCE , but true classifiers did not appear in these phrases until much later . Originally , classifiers and numbers came after the noun rather than before , and probably moved before the noun sometime after 500 BCE . The use of classifiers did not become a mandatory part of Chinese grammar until around 1100 CE . Some nouns became associated with specific classifiers earlier than others , the earliest probably being nouns that signified culturally valued items such as horses and poems . Many words that are classifiers today started out as full nouns ; in some cases their meanings have been gradually bleached away so that they are now used only as classifiers .

## = = Usage = =

In Chinese , a numeral cannot usually quantify a noun by itself ; instead , the language relies on classifiers , commonly also referred to as measure words . When a noun is preceded by a number , a demonstrative such as this or that , or certain quantifiers such as every , a classifier must normally be inserted before the noun . Thus , while English speakers say " one person " or " this person " , Mandarin Chinese speakers say ??? ( yí ge rén , one @-@ CL person ) or ??? ( zhè ge rén , this @-@ CL person ) , respectively . If a noun is preceded by both a demonstrative and a number , the demonstrative comes first . ( This is just as in English , e.g. " these three cats " . ) If an adjective modifies the noun , it typically comes after the classifier and before the noun . The general structure of a classifier phrase is

demonstrative ? number ? classifier ? adjective ? noun

The tables below give examples of common types of classifier phrases . While most English nouns do not require classifiers or measure words ( except in rare cases like " five head of cattle " ) , nearly all Chinese nouns do ; thus , in the first table , phrases that have no classifier in English have one in Chinese .

On the other hand , when a noun is not counted or introduced with a demonstrative , a classifier is not necessary : for example , there is a classifier in ??? ( sān liàng chē , three @-@ CL car , " three cars " ) but not in ??? ( wǒ de chē , my @-@ possessive car , " my car " ) . Furthermore , numbers and demonstratives are often not required in Chinese , so speakers may choose not to use one ? and thus not to use a classifier . For example , to say " Zhangsan turned into a tree " , both ???????? ( Zhāngsān biànchéng -le yí kē shù , Zhangsan become PAST one CL tree ) and ?????? ( Zhāngsān biànchéng -le shù , Zhangsan become PAST tree ) are acceptable . The use of classifiers after demonstratives is in fact optional . Likewise , in colloquial speech and in certain idioms , classifiers are sometimes not used even in numeral phrases .

It is also possible for a classifier alone to qualify a noun , the numeral ( " one " ) being omitted , as in ??? mǎi pǎ mǎ " buy CL horse " , i.e. " buy a horse " .

## = = Specialized uses = =

In addition to their uses with numbers and demonstratives , classifiers have some other functions . A classifier placed after a noun expresses a plural or indefinite quantity of it . For example , ?? ( shù @-@ bō , book @-@ CL ) means " the books " ( e.g. on a shelf , or in a library ) , whereas the standard pre @-@ nominal construction ??? ( yí bō shù , one @-@ CL book ) means " one book " .

Many classifiers may be reduplicated to mean " every " . For example , ??? ( gè @-@ ge rén , CL @-@ CL person ) signifies " every person " .

Finally , a classifier used along with ? ( yí , " one " ) and after a noun conveys a meaning close to " all of " or " the entire " or " a \_ \_ \_ ful of " . The sentence ????? ( tiānkōng yí piàn yún , sky one @-@ CL cloud ) , meaning " the sky was full of clouds " , uses the classifier ? ( piàn , slice ) , which refers to the sky , not the clouds .

## = = Types = =

The vast majority of classifiers are those that count or classify nouns ( nominal classifiers , as in all the examples given so far , as opposed to verbal classifiers ) . These are further subdivided into count @-@ classifiers and mass @-@ classifiers , described below . In everyday speech , people often use the term " measure word " , or its literal Chinese equivalent ?? liàngcí , to cover all Chinese count @-@ classifiers and mass @-@ classifiers , but the types of words grouped under this term are not all the same . Specifically , the various types of classifiers exhibit numerous differences in meaning , in the kinds of words they attach to , and in syntactic behavior .

Chinese has a large number of nominal classifiers ; estimates of the number in Mandarin range from " several dozen " or " about 50 " , to over 900 . The range is so large because some of these

estimates include all types of classifiers while others include only count @-@ classifiers , and because the idea of what constitutes a " classifier " has changed over time . Today , regular dictionaries include 120 to 150 classifiers ; the 8822 @-@ word Syllabus of Graded Words and Characters for Chinese Proficiency ( Chinese : ?????????????? ; pinyin : Hànyǔ Shuǐpíng Cíhuì yú Hànzì Dēngjī Dàng ) lists 81 ; and a 2009 list compiled by Gao Ming and Barbara Malt includes 126 . The number of classifiers that are in everyday , informal use , however , may be lower : linguist Mary Erbaugh has claimed that about two dozen " core classifiers " account for most classifier use . As a whole , though , the classifier system is so complex that specialized classifier dictionaries have been published .

= = = Count @-@ classifiers and mass @-@ classifiers = = =

Within the set of nominal classifiers , linguists generally draw a distinction between " count @-@ classifiers " and " mass @-@ classifiers " . True count @-@ classifiers are used for naming or counting a single count noun , and have no direct translation in English ; for example , 一本书 ( yì bō shū , one @-@ CL book ) can only be translated in English as " one book " or " a book " . Furthermore , count @-@ classifiers cannot be used with mass nouns : just as an English speaker cannot ordinarily say \* " five muds " , a Chinese speaker cannot say \* 五泥 ( wǔ ge nì , five @-@ CL mud ) . For such mass nouns , one must use mass @-@ classifiers .

Mass @-@ classifiers ( true measure words ) do not pick out inherent properties of an individual noun like count @-@ classifiers do ; rather , they lump nouns into countable units . Thus , mass @-@ classifiers can generally be used with multiple types of nouns ; for example , while the mass @-@ classifier 个 ( hé , box ) can be used to count boxes of lightbulbs ( 一盒灯泡 yì hé dēngpào , " one box of lightbulbs " ) or of books ( 一盒教科书 yì hé jiàocái , " one box of textbooks " ) , each of these nouns must use a different count @-@ classifier when being counted by itself ( 一个灯泡 yì zhāng dēngpào " one lightbulb " ; vs. 一本教科书 yì bēn jiàocái " one textbook " ) . While count @-@ classifiers have no direct English translation , mass @-@ classifiers often do : phrases with count @-@ classifiers such as 一个人 ( yí ge rén , one @-@ CL person ) can only be translated as " one person " or " a person " , whereas those with mass @-@ classifiers such as 一群人 ( yì qún rén , one @-@ crowd @-@ person ) can be translated as " a crowd of people " . All languages , including English , have mass @-@ classifiers , but count @-@ classifiers are unique to certain " classifier languages " , and are not a part of English grammar apart from a few exceptional cases such as head of livestock .

Within the range of mass @-@ classifiers , authors have proposed subdivisions based on the manner in which a mass @-@ classifier organizes the noun into countable units . One of these is measurement units ( also called " standard measures " ) , which all languages must have in order to measure items ; this category includes units such as kilometers , liters , or pounds ( see list ) . Like other classifiers , these can also stand without a noun ; thus , for example , 磅 ( bàng , pound ) may appear as both 三磅肉 ( sān bàng ròu , " three pounds of meat " ) or just 三磅 ( sān bàng , " three pounds " , never \* 三磅肉 ( sān ge bàng ) . Units of currency behave similarly : for example , 十元 ( shí yuán , " ten yuan " ) , which is short for ( for example ) 十元人民币 ( shí yuán rénmínbì , " ten units of renminbi " ) . Other proposed types of mass @-@ classifiers include " collective " mass @-@ classifiers , such as 一群人 ( yì qún rén , " a crowd of people " ) , which group things less precisely ; and " container " mass @-@ classifiers which group things by containers they come in , as in 一碗粥 ( yì wǎn zhōu , " a bowl of porridge " ) or 一袋糖 ( yì bāo táng , " a bag of sugar " ) .

The difference between count @-@ classifiers and mass @-@ classifiers can be described as one of quantifying versus categorizing : in other words , mass @-@ classifiers create a unit by which to measure something ( i.e. boxes , groups , chunks , pieces , etc . ) , whereas count @-@ classifiers simply name an existing item . Most words can appear with both count @-@ classifiers and mass @-@ classifiers ; for example , pizza can be described as both 一个披萨 ( yì zhāng bǐsà , " one pizza " , literally " one pie of pizza " ) , using a count @-@ classifier , and as 一块披萨 ( yí kuài bǐsà , " one piece of pizza " ) , using a mass @-@ classifier . In addition to these semantic differences , there are differences in the grammatical behaviors of count @-@ classifiers and mass @-@ classifiers ; for example , mass @-@ classifiers may be modified by a small set of adjectives ( as in 一大群人 yí dà qún

rén , " a big crowd of people " ) , whereas count @-@ classifiers usually may not ( for example , \* ???? yí dà ge rén is never said for " a big person " ; instead the adjective must modify the noun : ???? yí ge dà rén ) . Another difference is that count @-@ classifiers may often be replaced by a " general " classifier ? ( ? ) , gè with no apparent change in meaning , whereas mass @-@ classifiers may not . Syntacticians Lisa Cheng and Rint Sybesma propose that count @-@ classifiers and mass @-@ classifiers have different underlying syntactic structures , with count @-@ classifiers forming " classifier phrases " , and mass @-@ classifiers being a sort of relative clause that only looks like a classifier phrase . The distinction between count @-@ classifiers and mass @-@ classifiers is often unclear , however , and other linguists have suggested that count @-@ classifiers and mass @-@ classifiers may not be fundamentally different . They posit that " count @-@ classifier " and " mass @-@ classifier " are the extremes of a continuum , with most classifiers falling somewhere in between .

= = = Verbal classifiers = = =

There is a set of " verbal classifiers " used specifically for counting the number of times an action occurs , rather than counting a number of items ; this set includes ? cì , ? biàn , ? huí , and ? xià , which all roughly translate to " times " . For example , ??????? ( w? qù @-@ guo s?n cì B?ij?ng , I go @-@ PAST three @-@ CL Beijing , " I have been to Beijing three times " ) . These words can also form compound classifiers with certain nouns , as in ?? rén cì " person @-@ time " , which can be used to count ( for example ) visitors to a museum in a year ( where visits by the same person on different occasions are counted separately ) .

Another type of verbal classifier indicates the tool or implement used to perform the action . An example is found in the sentence ?????? t? t? le w? y? jì?o " he kicked me " , or more literally " he kicked me one foot " . The word ? jì?o , which usually serves as a simple noun meaning " foot " , here functions as a verbal classifier reflecting the tool ( namely the foot ) used to perform the kicking action .

= = Relation to nouns = =

Different classifiers often correspond to different particular nouns . For example , books generally take the classifier ? b?n , flat objects take ? ( ? ) zh?ng , animals take ? ( ? ) zh? , machines take ? tái , large buildings and mountains take ? zuò , etc . Within these categories are further subdivisions ? while most animals take ? ( ? ) zh? , domestic animals take ? ( ? ) tóu , long and flexible animals take ? ( ? ) tiáo , and horses take ? p? . Likewise , while long things that are flexible ( such as ropes ) often take ? ( ? ) tiáo , long things that are rigid ( such as sticks ) take ? g?n , unless they are also round ( like pens or cigarettes ) , in which case in some dialects they take ? zh? . Classifiers also vary in how specific they are ; some ( such as ? du? for flowers ) are generally only used with one item , whereas others ( such as ? ( ? ) tiáo for long and flexible things , one @-@ dimensional things , or abstract items like news reports ) are much less restricted . Furthermore , there is not a one @-@ to @-@ one relationship between nouns and classifiers : the same noun may be paired with different classifiers in different situations . The specific factors that govern which classifiers are paired with which nouns have been a subject of debate among linguists .

= = = Categories and prototypes = = =

While mass @-@ classifiers do not necessarily bear any semantic relationship to the noun with which they are used ( e.g. box and book are not related in meaning , but one can still say " a box of books " ) , count @-@ classifiers do . The precise nature of that relationship , however , is not certain , since there is so much variability in how objects may be organized and categorized by classifiers . Accounts of the semantic relationship may be grouped loosely into categorical theories , which propose that count @-@ classifiers are matched to objects solely on the basis of inherent features of those objects ( such as length or size ) , and prototypical theories , which propose that

people learn to match a count @-@ classifier to a specific prototypical object and to other objects that are like that prototype .

The categorical , " classical " view of classifiers was that each classifier represents a category with a set of conditions ; for example , the classifier ? ( ? ) tiáo would represent a category defined as all objects that meet the conditions of being long , thin , and one @-@ dimensional ? and nouns using that classifier must fit all the conditions with which the category is associated . Some common semantic categories into which count @-@ classifiers have been claimed to organize nouns include the categories of shape ( long , flat , or round ) , size ( large or small ) , consistency ( soft or hard ) , animacy ( human , animal , or object ) , and function ( tools , vehicles , machines , etc . ) .

On the other hand , proponents of prototype theory propose that count @-@ classifiers may not have innate definitions , but are associated with a noun that is prototypical of that category , and nouns that have a " family resemblance " with the prototype noun will want to use the same classifier . For example , horse in Chinese uses the classifier ? p? , as in ??? ( s?n p? m? , " three horses " ) ? in modern Chinese the word ? has no meaning . Nevertheless , nouns denoting animals that look like horses will often also use this same classifier , and native speakers have been found to be more likely to use the classifier ? the closer an animal looks to a horse . Furthermore , words that do not meet the " criteria " of a semantic category may still use that category because of their association with a prototype . For example , the classifier ? ( ? ) k? is used for small round items , as in ???? ( yì k? z?dàn , " one bullet " ) ; when words like ??? ( yuánz?dàn , " atomic bomb " ) were later introduced into the language they also used this classifier , even though they are not small and round ? therefore , their classifier must have been assigned because of the words ' association with the word for bullet , which acted as a " prototype " . This is an example of " generalization " from prototypes : Erbaugh has proposed that when children learn count @-@ classifiers , they go through stages , first learning a classifier @-@ noun pair only ( such as ?? tiáo yú , CL @-@ fish ) , then using that classifier with multiple nouns that are similar to the prototype ( such as other types of fish ) , then finally using that set of nouns to generalize a semantic feature associated with the classifier ( such as length and flexibility ) so that the classifier can then be used with new words that the person encounters .

Some classifier @-@ noun pairings are arbitrary , or at least appear to modern speakers to have no semantic motivation . For instance , the classifier ? bù may be used for movies and novels , but also for cars and telephones . Some of this arbitrariness may be due to what linguist James Tai refers to as " fossilization " , whereby a count @-@ classifier loses its meaning through historical changes but remains paired with some nouns . For example , the classifier ? p? used for horses is meaningless today , but in Classical Chinese may have referred to a " team of two horses " , a pair of horse skeletons , or the pairing between man and horse . Arbitrariness may also arise when a classifier is borrowed , along with its noun , from a dialect in which it has a clear meaning to one in which it does not . In both these cases , the use of the classifier is remembered more by association with certain " prototypical " nouns ( such as horse ) rather than by understanding of semantic categories , and thus arbitrariness has been used as an argument in favor of the prototype theory of classifiers . Gao and Malt propose that both the category and prototype theories are correct : in their conception , some classifiers constitute " well @-@ defined categories " , others make " prototype categories " , and still others are relatively arbitrary .

= = = Neutralization = = =

In addition to the numerous " specific " count @-@ classifiers described above , Chinese has a " general " classifier ? ( ? ) , pronounced gè in Mandarin . This classifier is used for people , some abstract concepts , and other words that do not have special classifiers ( such as ??? hàn?ob?o " hamburger " ) , and may also be used as a replacement for a specific classifier such as ? ( ? ) zh?ng or ? ( ? ) tiáo , especially in informal speech . In Mandarin Chinese , it has been noted as early as the 1940s that the use of ? is increasing and that there is a general tendency towards replacing specific classifiers with it . Numerous studies have reported that both adults and children tend to use ? when they do not know the appropriate count @-@ classifier , and even when they do but are

speaking quickly or informally . The replacement of a specific classifier with the general 个 is known as classifier neutralization ( " 个??? " in Chinese , literally " classifier 个 @-@ ization " ) . This occurs especially often among children and aphasics ( individuals with damage to language @-@ relevant areas of the brain ) , although normal speakers also neutralize frequently . It has been reported that most speakers know the appropriate classifiers for the words they are using and believe , when asked , that those classifiers are obligatory , but nevertheless use 个 without even realizing it in actual speech . As a result , in everyday spoken Mandarin the general classifier is " hundreds of times more frequent " than the specialized ones .

Nevertheless , 个 has not completely replaced other count @-@ classifiers , and there are still many situations in which it would be inappropriate to substitute it for the required specific classifier . There may be specific patterns behind which classifier @-@ noun pairs may be " neutralized " to use the general classifier , and which may not . Specifically , words that are most prototypical for their categories , such as paper for the category of nouns taking the " flat / square " classifier 张 ( 张 ) zhāng , may be less likely to be said with a general classifier .

== Variation in usage ==

It is not the case that every noun is only associated with one classifier . Across dialects and speakers there is great variability in the way classifiers are used for the same words , and speakers often do not agree which classifier is best . For example , for cars some people use 辆 bù , others use 台 tái , and still others use 部 ( 部 ) liàng ; Cantonese uses 架 gaa3 . Even within a single dialect or a single speaker , the same noun may take different measure words depending on the style in which the person is speaking , or on different nuances the person wants to convey ( for instance , measure words can reflect the speaker 's judgment of or opinion about the object ) . An example of this is the word for person , 人 rén , which uses the measure word 个 ( 个 ) gè normally , but uses the measure 伙 kǒu when counting number of people in a household , and 位 wèi when being particularly polite or honorific , and 名 míng in formal , written contexts ; likewise , a group of people may be referred to by classifiers as 群 ( yì qún rén , " a group of people " ) or 帮 ( yì bāng rén , " a gang / crowd of people " ) : the first is neutral , whereas the second implies that the people are unruly or otherwise being judged poorly .

Some count @-@ classifiers may also be used with nouns that they are not normally related to , for metaphorical effect , as in 一堆 ( yì duī wǎn?o , " a pile of worries / troubles " ) . Finally , a single word may have multiple count @-@ classifiers that convey different meanings altogether ? in fact , the choice of a classifier can even influence the meaning of a noun . By way of illustration , 三 sān jié kè means " three class periods " ( as in " I have three classes today " ) , whereas 三 sān mén kè means " three courses " ( as in " I signed up for three courses this semester " ) , even though the noun in each sentence is the same .

== Purpose ==

In research on classifier systems , and Chinese classifiers in particular , it has been asked why count @-@ classifiers ( as opposed to mass @-@ classifiers ) exist at all . Mass @-@ classifiers are present in all languages since they are the only way to " count " mass nouns that are not naturally divided into units ( as , for example , " three splotches of mud " in English ; \* " three muds " is ungrammatical ) . On the other hand , count @-@ classifiers are not inherently mandatory , and are absent from most languages . Furthermore , count @-@ classifiers are used with an " unexpectedly low frequency " ; in many settings , speakers avoid specific classifiers by just using a bare noun ( without a number or demonstrative ) or using the general classifier 个 gè . Linguists and typologists such as Joseph Greenberg have suggested that specific count @-@ classifiers are semantically " redundant " , repeating information present within the noun . Count @-@ classifiers can be used stylistically , though , and can also be used to clarify or limit a speaker 's intended meaning when using a vague or ambiguous noun ; for example , the noun 课 kè " class " can refer to courses in a semester or specific class periods during a day , depending on whether the classifier 个

( ? ) mén or ? ( ? ) jié is used .

One proposed explanation for the existence of count @-@ classifiers is that they serve more of a cognitive purpose than a practical one : in other words , they provide a linguistic way for speakers to organize or categorize real objects . An alternative account is that they serve more of a discursive and pragmatic function ( a communicative function when people interact ) rather than an abstract function within the mind . Specifically , it has been proposed that count @-@ classifiers might be used to mark new or unfamiliar objects within a discourse , to introduce major characters or items in a story or conversation , or to foreground important information and objects by making them bigger and more salient . In this way , count @-@ classifiers might not serve an abstract grammatical or cognitive function , but may help in communication by making important information more noticeable and drawing attention to it .

= = History = =

= = Classifier phrases = =

Historical linguists have found that phrases consisting of nouns and numbers went through several structural changes in Old Chinese and Middle Chinese before classifiers appeared in them . The earliest forms may have been Number ? Noun , like English ( i.e. " five horses " ) , and the less common Noun ? Number ( " horses five " ) , both of which are attested in the oracle bone scripts of Pre @-@ Archaic Chinese ( circa 1400 BCE to 1000 BCE ) . The first constructions resembling classifier constructions were Noun ? Number ? Noun constructions , which were also extant in Pre @-@ Archaic Chinese but less common than Number ? Noun . In these constructions , sometimes the first and second nouns were identical ( N1 ? Number ? N1 , as in " horses five horses " ) and other times the second noun was different , but semantically related ( N1 ? Number ? N2 ) . According to some historical linguists , the N2 in these constructions can be considered an early form of count @-@ classifier and has even been called an " echo classifier " ; this speculation is not universally agreed on , though . Although true count @-@ classifiers had not appeared yet , mass @-@ classifiers were common in this time , with constructions such as " wine ? six ? y?u " ( the word ? y?u represented a wine container ) meaning " six y?u of wine " . Examples such as this suggest that mass @-@ classifiers predate count @-@ classifiers by several centuries , although they did not appear in the same word order as they do today .

It is from this type of structure that count @-@ classifiers may have arisen , originally replacing the second noun ( in structures where there was a noun rather than a mass @-@ classifier ) to yield Noun ? Number ? Classifier . That is to say , constructions like " horses five horses " may have been replaced by ones like " horses five CL " , possibly for stylistic reasons such as avoiding repetition . Another reason for the appearance of count @-@ classifiers may have been to avoid confusion or ambiguity that could have arisen from counting items using only mass @-@ classifiers ? i.e. to clarify when one is referring to a single item and when one is referring to a measure of items .

Historians agree that at some point in history the order of words in this construction shifted , putting the noun at the end rather than beginning , like in the present @-@ day construction Number ? Classifier ? Noun . According to historical linguist Alain Peyraube , the earliest occurrences of this construction ( albeit with mass @-@ classifiers , rather than count @-@ classifiers ) appear in the late portion of Old Chinese ( 500 BCE to 200 BCE ) . At this time , the Number ? Mass @-@ classifier portion of the Noun ? Number ? Mass @-@ classifier construction was sometimes shifted in front of the noun . Peyraube speculates that this may have occurred because it was gradually reanalyzed as a modifier ( like an adjective ) for the head noun , as opposed to a simple repetition as it originally was . Since Chinese generally places modifiers before modified , as does English , the shift may have been prompted by this reanalysis . By the early part of the Common Era , the nouns appearing in " classifier position " were beginning to lose their meaning and become true classifiers . Estimates of when classifiers underwent the most development vary : Wang Li claims their period of major development was during the Han Dynasty ( 206 BCE ? 220 CE ) , whereas Liu

Shiru estimates that it was the Southern and Northern Dynasties period ( 420 ? 589 CE ) , and Peyraube chooses the Tang Dynasty ( 618 ? 907 CE ) . Regardless of when they developed , Wang Lianqing claims that they did not become grammatically mandatory until sometime around the 11th century .

Classifier systems in many nearby languages and language groups ( such as Vietnamese and the Tai languages ) are very similar to the Chinese classifier system in both grammatical structure and the parameters along which some objects are grouped together . Thus , there has been some debate over which language family first developed classifiers and which ones then borrowed them ? or whether classifier systems were native to all these languages and developed more through repeated language contact throughout history .

= = = Classifier words = = =

Most modern count @-@ classifiers are derived from words that originally were free @-@ standing nouns in older varieties of Chinese , and have since been grammaticalized to become bound morphemes . In other words , count @-@ classifiers tend to come from words that once had specific meaning but lost it ( a process known as semantic bleaching ) . Many , however , still have related forms that work as nouns all by themselves , such as the classifier ? ( ? ) dài for long , ribbon @-@ like objects : the modern word ?? dàizi means " ribbon " . In fact , the majority of classifiers can also be used as other parts of speech , such as nouns . Mass @-@ classifiers , on the other hand , are more transparent in meaning than count @-@ classifiers ; while the latter have some historical meaning , the former are still full @-@ fledged nouns . For example , ? ( b?i , cup ) , is both a classifier as in ??? ( yì b?i chá , " a cup of tea " ) and the word for a cup as in ?? ( jìb?i , " wine glass " ) .

It was not always the case that every noun required a count @-@ classifier . In many historical varieties of Chinese , use of classifiers was not mandatory , and classifiers are rare in writings that have survived . Some nouns acquired classifiers earlier than others ; some of the first documented uses of classifiers were for inventorying items , both in mercantile business and in storytelling . Thus , the first nouns to have count @-@ classifiers paired with them may have been nouns that represent " culturally valued " items such as horses , scrolls , and intellectuals . The special status of such items is still apparent today : many of the classifiers that can only be paired with one or two nouns , such as ? p? for horses and ? sh?u for songs or poems , are the classifiers for these same " valued " items . Such classifiers make up as much as one @-@ third of the commonly used classifiers today .

Classifiers did not gain official recognition as a lexical category ( part of speech ) until the 20th century . The earliest modern text to discuss classifiers and their use was Ma Jianzhong 's 1898 Ma 's Basic Principles for Writing Clearly ( ????? ) . From then until the 1940s , linguists such as Ma , Wang Li , and Li Jinxi treated classifiers as just a type of noun that " expresses a quantity " . Lü Shuxiang was the first to treat them as a separate category , calling them " unit words " ( ??? d?nwèicí ) in his 1940s Outline of Chinese Grammar ( ?????? ) and finally " measure words " ( ?? liàngcí ) in Grammar Studies ( ????? ) . He made this separation based on the fact that classifiers were semantically bleached , and that they can be used directly with a number , whereas true nouns need to have a measure word added before they can be used with a number . After this time , other names were also proposed for classifiers : Gao Mingkai called them " noun helper words " ( ??? zhùmíngcí ) , Lu Wangdao " counting markers " ( ?? jìbì?o ) , and Japanese linguist Miyawaki Kennosuke called them " accompanying words " ( ??? péibàncí ) . In the Draft Plan for a System of Teaching Chinese Grammar ( ????????? ) adopted by the People 's Republic of China in 1954 , Lü 's " measure words " ( ?? liàngcí ) was adopted as the official name for classifiers in China . This remains the most common term in use today .

= = = General classifiers = = =

Historically , ? gè was not always the general classifier . Some believe it was originally a noun



referring to bamboo stalks , and gradually expanded in use to become a classifier for many things with " vertical , individual , [ or ] upright qualit [ ies ] " , eventually becoming a general classifier because it was used so frequently with common nouns . The classifier gè is actually associated with three different homophonous characters : 个 , 箇 ( used today as the traditional @-@ character equivalent of 个 ) , and 箇 . Historical linguist Lianqing Wang has argued that these characters actually originated from different words , and that only 个 had the original meaning of " bamboo stalk " . 个 , she claims , was used as a general classifier early on , and may have been derived from the orthographically similar 箇 jiè , one of the earliest general classifiers . 个 later merged with 箇 because they were similar in pronunciation and meaning ( both used as general classifiers ) . Likewise , she claims that 箇 was also a separate word ( with a meaning having to do with " partiality " or " being a single part " ) , and merged with 个 for the same reasons as 个 did ; she also argues that 个 was " created " , as early as the Han Dynasty , to supersede 个 .

Nor was 个 the only general classifier in the history of Chinese . The aforementioned 箇 jiè was being used as a general classifier before the Qin Dynasty ( 221 BCE ) ; it was originally a noun referring to individual items out of a string of connected shells or clothes , and eventually came to be used as a classifier for " individual " objects ( as opposed to pairs or groups of objects ) before becoming a general classifier . Another general classifier was 枚 méi , which originally referred to small twigs . Since twigs were used for counting items , 枚 became a counter word : any items , including people , could be counted as " one 枚 , two 枚 " , etc . 枚 was the most common classifier in use during the Southern and Northern Dynasties period ( 420 ? 589 CE ) , but today is no longer a general classifier , and is only used rarely , as a specialized classifier for items such as pins and badges . Kathleen Ahrens has claimed that 只 ( zhī in Mandarin and jia in Taiwanese ) , the classifier for animals in Mandarin , is another general classifier in Taiwanese and may be becoming one in the Mandarin spoken in Taiwan .

= = = Variety = = =

Northern dialects tend to have fewer classifiers than southern ones . 个 ( ge ) is the only classifier found in the Dungan language . All nouns could have just one classifier in some dialects , such as Shanghainese , Standard Mandarin Shanxi dialect , Shandong dialects . Some dialects such as Northern Min , certain Xiang dialects , Hakka Chinese , and some Yue Chinese use 人 for the noun referring to people , rather than 个 ( ge ) .