

## One item to ten items in written and spoken Mandarin

This paper reports on the phonological fusion of numerals from one to ten with the measure word *ge* ‘item’ in colloquial Peking Mandarin—the phenomenon of a “shorter phonological shape standing for a longer grammatical form” (Chao 1968: 571). These fusions are equivalents of a corresponding numeral and *ge* ‘item’ in the written language. For instance, the expression *yí* ‘a specimen of’ is equivalent to the expression *yí ge* ‘one item’, whereas *sā* is equivalent to *sān ge* ‘three items’. These fusions are described as attested in a corpus of spoken Peking Mandarin of ca. 18,000 sentences collected by the author in 2000-2002.

Based on the frequency of occurrence and use in the corpus, the fused forms fall into the following three groups:

(1) expressions *liǎ* ‘two items’ and *sā* ‘three items’ that are fully lexicalized, as reflected in the following:

- (a) *liǎ* and *sā* have character transcriptions, 俩 and 仨 respectively;
- (b) they are included in most standard dictionaries of Chinese;
- (c) similar to the corresponding original forms *liǎng ge* ‘two items’ and *sān ge* ‘three items’, *liǎ* and *sā* can freely occur as attributive and nominal phrases;
- (d) speakers tend to stick either to the fused or the original forms predominantly.

(2) fusions from *sì* ‘four items’ to *shí* ‘ten items’ that are used marginally. Normally, they are used as weakened counterparts of a combination of a numeral with *ge* ‘item’. This is to say that on the first mention of persons or things talked about the original form (a combination of a numeral and *ge*) is used to specify their number. On further mentions of these persons or things, the fused form is used. Characteristics of the fused forms:

- (a) they have no character transcriptions;
- (b) they are not included in dictionaries;
- (c) they occur only as attributive phrases.

3) the fusion *yí* ‘a specimen of’ which is currently in the process of lexicalization. This expression occurs as frequently as *liǎ* (180 and 181 respective occurrences in the corpus). The fusion *yí*:

- (a) does not yet have a character transcription, although one based on the character transcriptions for *liǎ* and *sā* has been proposed;
- (b) is not included in dictionaries, but attracts ever-increasing attention in reference literature (Dù 1993, Liú 2003, Wiedenhof 1995, Zhōu 1998);
- (c) is increasingly used not only as an attributive, but also as a nominal phrase.

To those informants who use both the fused and the original forms, these forms convey different structural and discourse meanings. The fused form is usually a weakened equivalent of the original form, which occurs on the second or further mentions of the persons or things designated by the form. The fused form is moreover more likely to be used attributively. The original form is used on the first mention of the persons or things talked about and can function both as an attributive and a nominal phrase. This division of labor between the original and the fused forms supports the functionalist assumption that frequency leads to structural change.

### References

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