

Syntactic variation and constructionalization:
The case of *Modifier-yige-Noun* in Taiwan Mandarin

The novel use of the Numeral-Classifier *yi-ge* one-CL ‘one’ in Mandarin spoken discourse has been paid much attention in several studies (e.g., Li 2000b, Big 2002, Tao 2002, Chen 2003). Liu (2006, 2010) argues that *yige* has grammaticalized as an INDEFINITE ARTICLE in Taiwan Mandarin. Since the appearance of *yige* is not obligatory and can be simultaneously determined by several factors, Hsu (to appear), adopting variationist method, finds that the factor of modified noun patterns imposes the greatest effect for the appearance of *yige* and argues that there are two types of modified noun constructions of *yige*, [*yige-Modifier-Noun*] vs. [*Modifier-yige-Noun*], in spoken Taiwan Mandarin, as in (1a-b). However, we also notice that the variant [*Modifier-yige-Noun*] captures several unconventional uses, such as plural or possessive use, as in (1c), that is already beyond the typical characteristics of numeral classifier ought to be, reflecting the general observed stage in the process of grammaticalization (Heine, 1997).

- (1). a. *zhè shì yíge hěn jiǎndān de dàolǐ.* (A293; A327; B02:239)
this be one/a DEG easy DE principle ‘This is *yige* very easy principle’
b. *bǎ xīwàng dōu tóuzhù zài àiqíng shàng, zhè zhēn shì wéixiǎn de yíge dǔzhǔ*
Ba hope also focus in love above this really dangerous a gambling.
‘If one uses his all hopes to focus on love, it is really dangerous *yige* gambling.’
c. *zài zhè me jìngzhēng de shídài, rén jiù shì yào jīngguò hěn duō zhòng de yíge cìjī, nǐ cái huì...cái huì yǒu suǒ dùnwù a.*
‘...in such competitive times, people should go though many kinds of *yige* stimulation. That’s the only way...the only way you will get some insight.”

This study builds on Hsu’s fundamental study (to appear) by exploring what factor underlines the syntactic variation (*yige-Modifier-Noun* v.s. *Modifier-yige-Noun*) to see in what way does the unconventional pattern [*Modifier-yige-Noun*] emerge with a synchronic point of view. By doing so, we examine lexical (types of noun/verb and lexical frequency), pragmatic referential (referring/non-referring), syntactic (compliment/adjunct nominals), discourse-pragmatic (topicality) and speech stylistic (formal vs. informal) analyses of the syntactic variation of *yige*. Using the variationist method, we operationalize and test hypotheses via quantitative analysis of variation between the first-mentioned but unfamiliar *yige*-marked modified referents in post-verbal position or complements. We hypothesize that the variant [*Modifier-yige-Noun*] favors the factors of formal speech style, mass nouns, nominalized nouns, compliment nominals, non-referring use and topic non-persistence can contribute the application of [*Modifier-yige-Noun*] and the factor of speech style plays the most important role for the constructionalization of *yige*, an implication that the so-called the “new” grammatical pattern (in the sense of Bybee, 2006) may first emerge in certain discourse contexts in Taiwan Mandarin.

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Data description

Based on the synchronic point of view, all the data analyzed for our study come from naturally occurring conversations and are extracted from two parts. With the consideration of formal styles, the first part of the data come from the TV talk shows and TV interviews, such as *Shen Chunhua* Live shows (沈春華 Live Show), *xinwen wa wa wa* (新聞挖挖哇) and *101 Gao Feng Hui* (101 高峰會), because these settings are on the public and interviewers and interviewees are not familiar with each other, which lasted 5.8 hours on average. With the consideration of informal styles, the second part is taken from recordings of sociolinguistic interviews (Labov, 1984) with 13 native speakers of Taiwan Mandarin¹⁷, made in 2009 in Hsin Chu City, for about 9 hours. In order to make sure the speech style as informal as possible, the interviewer and interviewee are familiar with each other. The relationships between them are friends, relatives or classmates. In addition, during the sociolinguistic interviews, the interviewer tried to find topics that interviewees would be interested in. The total of the two corpuses constitutes approximately 14 hours of recorded speech. After collecting the data, we first transcribed and then analyzed it.

Location: Taiwan (on the right side of China)

