Indefinite determiner introducing definite referent: a special use of ‘yi ‘one’ + classifier’ in Chinese

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Abstract

The indefinite determiner ‘yi ‘one’ + classifier’ is the most approximate to an indefinite article, like the English ‘a’, in Chinese. It serves all the functions characteristic of representative stages of grammaticalization from a numeral to a generalized indefinite determiner as elaborated in the literature. It is established in this paper that the Chinese indefinite determiner has developed a special use with definite expressions, serving as a backgrounding device marking entities as of low thematic importance and unlikely to receive subsequent mentions in ensuing discourse. ‘yi + classifier’ in the special use with definite expressions displays striking similarities in terms of semantic bleaching and phonological reduction with the same determiner at the advanced stage of grammaticalization characterized by uses with generics, nonspecifics and nonreferentials. An explanation is offered in terms of an implicational relation between nonreferentiality and low thematic importance which characterize the two uses of the indefinite determiner. While providing another piece of evidence in support of the claim that semantically nonreferentials and entities of low thematic importance tend to be encoded in terms of same linguistic devices in language, findings in this paper have shown how an indefinite determiner can undergo a higher degree of grammaticalization than has been reported in the literature—it expands its scope to mark not only indefinite but also definite expressions as semantically nonreferential and/or thematically unimportant.

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Following are the abbreviations used in this paper. For a detailed explanation of the terms, cf. Li and Thompson (1981). BA: preverbal object marker (ba); CL: classifier; CRS: current relevant state (le); CSC: complex stative construction (de); DE: nominalizer (de); DUR: durative aspect marker (zhe); PFV: perfective aspect marker (le); PM: passive marker (gei); SFP: sentence-final particle.

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1. Introduction

yi is the numeral for ‘one’ in Chinese. When it is used with a common noun, it is mandatory to have a sortal classifier inserted between the numeral and the noun, as is normally the case with all numerals and determiners, like demonstratives, in Chinese when they are used with common nouns. Characteristic of what are known as classifier languages, like Chinese, Vietnamese and many other Southeastern Asian languages, a sortal classifier, in the words of Lyons (1977: 463), “is one which individualizes whatever it refers to in terms of the kind of entity that it is”. For a detailed discussion of the use of classifiers in Chinese and other languages, see Erbaugh (1986), Hopper (1986), Sun (1988), inter alia. Following are two examples:

(1) Qianmian turan tiao chulai yi zhi laohu.
front suddenly jump out one CL tiger
‘Suddenly a tiger jumped out in front of us.’

(2) Ta mai le yi zhuang fangzi.
he buy PFV one CL house
‘He bought a house.’

The numeral ‘one’ is the most common source from which indefinite articles in languages are derived, as is extensively attested in the literature (cf. Givón, 1981; Wright & Givón, 1987; Heine, 1997). It is proposed in Heine (1997) that there are five stages in the process of grammaticalization through which the numeral ‘one’ has developed into a fully grammaticalized marker of indefiniteness. The five stages are characterized respectively by the use of ‘one’ as a numeral, by its presentative use, and by its uses to introduce expressions of nonidentifiable specific reference, expressions of nonidentifiable nonspecific reference, and nonreferential expressions like a nominal predicative in ascriptive use. They are illustrated by the English indefinite article a in the following sentences respectively:

(3) a. NUMERAL
   I need an hour and a half.

b. PRESENTATIVE USE
   A man came up the front stairway.

c. NONIDENTIFIABLE SPECIFIC REFERENCE
   He bought a house last year.

d. NONIDENTIFIABLE NONSPECIFIC REFERENCE
   He wants to buy a house in this area; any house will do.

e. NONREFERENTIAL USE
   He is a good chef.
It is not always easy to establish for a particular language whether the numeral has undergone the full process of grammaticalization on its way to a bona fide indefinite article. Criteria used for the purpose include the semantic bleaching of its original meaning, phonological reduction, and morphological autonomy, which converge to indicate how far the numeral has gone along the path of grammaticalization marked by the five stages. Although there is a lack of consensus as to whether there is a bona fide indefinite article in Chinese, linguists of various theoretical backgrounds seem to agree that ‘yi + classifier’ is the most approximate to an indefinite article in Chinese. As an indefinite marker, ‘yi + classifier’ is employed for all the five uses of the indefinite article in English as illustrated in (3). They are illustrated in the following examples respectively:

(4) a. NUMERAL
  Zhe jian shi bu nan ban, wo zhi yao yi ge zhongtou
  this CL thing not hard do I only need one CL hour
  jiu gou le.
  then enough CRS
  ‘This is not hard. I only need one hour for it.’

b. PRESENTATIVE USE
  Yi jia feiji cong women tou shang fei le guoqu.
  one CL airplane from we head above fly PFV go
  ‘An airplane flew over us.’

c. NONIDENTIFIABLE SPECIFIC REFERENCE
  Ta qunian mai le (yi) zhuang fangzi.
  he last:year buy PFV one CL house
  ‘He bought a house last year.’

d. NONIDENTIFIABLE NONSPECIFIC REFERENCE
  Ta xiang mai (yi) zhuang fangzi, shenme fangzi dou xing.
  he want buy one CL house any house all do
  ‘He wants to buy a house; any house will do.’

e. NONREFERENTIAL USE
  Ta shi (yi) ge maimairen.
  he be one CL businessman
  ‘He is a businessman.’

The further ‘yi + classifier’ goes down the continuum of grammaticalization, the greater is its phonological reduction. yi is often omitted when ‘yi + classifier’ is used with nonidentifiable or nonreferential expressions, as shown in the above examples, leaving as it were the classifier alone to play the role of indefinite marker. With
nonreferential expressions, it is much more natural to leave out *yi* in the expression. Regardless of whether *yi* is present or not, a countable noun introduced by the indefinite marker, as illustrated in (4a–d), is always understood as of singular reference. I will return to this point later in the paper.

The Chinese indefinite determiner displays a higher degree of morphological autonomy than the English indefinite article in that it has both pronominal and adjectival uses, as in the following example:

(5) Lao Li xiang mai (*yi*) zhuang fangzi, Lao Zhang ye xiang mai *yi* zhuang.
    Lao Li want buy one CL house Lao Zhang also want buy one CL
    ‘Lao Li wants to buy a house, and Lao Zhang wants to buy one too.’

In other words, ‘*yi*+classifier’ in the sentence serves the functions of both ‘one’ and ‘a’ in English.

2. *yi*+classifier used with definite referents

The indefinite determiner in Chinese has a special use that has not been reported for indefinite articles or the numeral ‘one’ in other languages. It was first observed in Lü (1990 [1944], 1990 [1948]) that ‘*yi*+classifier’ can be used, normally with *yi* omitted, with expressions of definite reference. Let us consider the following example taken from Lü (1990[1944]: 164):

(6) Zhi zhe yi ju, ba (*yi*) ge Jiang Ping hu le yitiao.
    Only this one utterance BA one CL Jiang Ping scare PFV jump
    ‘Just this one utterance gave Jiang Ping a fright.’

where ‘*yi*+classifier’ introduces a definite referent by the name of Jiang Ping.

It is to be noted that the use of ‘*yi*+classifier’ with definite expressions in the above sentence is not to be confused with its use in the following sentence:

(7) You (*yi*) ge Jiang Ping xiang yao jian ni.
    have one CL Jiang Ping think want see you
    ‘There is a certain Jiang Ping who wants to see you.’

In (7) ‘*yi*+classifier’ introduces a referent that the speaker takes to be non-identifiable to the addressee. It is used in exactly the same way as the English indefinite article in front of a proper name, meaning ‘a certain’, as illustrated by the English translation of the sentence. On the other hand, the proper name ‘Jiang Ping’ after the indefinite determiner ‘*yi*+ge’ in (6) must refer to a person that is uniquely identifiable by that name to the addressee in the context of utterance. The sentence would be infelicitous if the addressee is not supposed to know who Jiang Ping is. In other words, the indefinite determiner ‘*yi*+classifier’ in (6) is used to introduce a definite expression of uniquely identifiable reference to the addressee.
Definite referents introduced by the indefinite determiner ‘yi + classifier’ as illustrated in (6) fall into two major categories. They are either proper names, or kinship terms that are very similar in use to proper names in Chinese, or common nouns in the specific position of preverbal object introduced by the object marker ba. Below are more examples of the first category ((8) is adapted from Lü 1990 [1994]: 159–164):

(8) Dangxia xia de \((yi)\) ge Zhang San mudengkoudai.
\[\text{instantly scare CSC one CL Zhang San dumbstruck}\]
‘Zhang San was instantly struck dumb with fear.’

(9) Ta bei pengyou ba \((yi)\) ge taitai gei pian zou le.
\[\text{he BEI friend BA one CL wife PP cheat away CRS}\]
‘he was cheated by his friend out of his wife’ or
‘He suffered from his friend cheating his wife away from him.’

(10) Ta qiannian si le \((yi)\) die, qunian you si le \((yi)\) niang.
\[\text{he year:before:last die PFV CL father last:year again die PFV CL mother}\]
‘His father died the year before last, and his mother died last year.’

‘Zhang San’ (8) is a proper name with unique reference known to the addressee. The identifiable unique reference of the nominals of ‘taitai’ ‘wife’ in (9) and ‘die’ ‘father’ and ‘niang’ ‘mother’ in (10) is inferable from the meaning of the kinship terms in the context of utterance. ‘taitai’, ‘die’ and ‘niang’ share an important feature with proper names in Chinese in that they all commonly serve both the vocative function as well as the Referential function, which are taken as features characteristic of proper names (Lyons, 1977: 216). All of the nominals introduced by ‘yi + classifier’ in the above sentences are definite expressions, and retain their interpretation of uniquely identifiable reference in spite of the presence of the indefinite determiner in front of them. When translated into a language like English, the indefinite determiner needs to be dropped.

‘yi + classifier’ is also used with nominal expressions which are interpreted as of definite reference due to their position after ba in sentences. As discussed in detail in Chen (ms), lexical encodings of NPs with regard to the interpretation of identifiability fall into three groups in Chinese, definite, indefinite, and indeterminate. While definite and indefinite NPs are interpreted as of identifiable and nonidentifiable reference respectively no matter what grammatical role they assume in the sentence, the interpretation of indeterminate NPs, such as a bare NP, usually depend on their position in sentences. There is a very strong tendency for a bare NP as the preverbal ba object to be interpreted as of uniquely identifiable reference. Consider (11)

(11) Ta ba pibao diu le.
\[\text{he BA bag lose CRS}\]
‘He lost his/the bag.’
where the bare NP ‘pibao’ is typically interpreted as of definite reference. The sentence would normally be infelicitous if the referent is nonidentifiable to the addressee in the context of utterance.

Now, consider the following sentence where ‘pibao’ serves as the _ba_ object, and is at the same time preceded by the indefinite determiner ‘yi+classifier’:

(12) Ta ba (yi) ge pibao diu le.
    he BA one CL bag lose CRS

‘He lost his/the bag.’

There is a potential conflict in (12) between the function of ‘yi+classifier’ and the interpretation of ‘pibao’ with regard to identifiability. The lexical encoding of the referent in the form of bare noun, in itself, is neutral with regard to the interpretation of identifiability. On the one hand, ‘yi+classifier’, as an indefinite determiner, presumably marks the common noun introduced by it as of nonidentifiable reference, as is customarily the situation elsewhere, as illustrated in (4). On the other hand, the position of the nominal expression as the preverbal _ba_ object in the sentence shows a strong tendency to assign to the expression an interpretation of definite reference, as illustrated in (11). With reference to (12), Chao (1968:344) remarks that “the advanced position of the object, brought about by the pretransitive (_ba_), has a stronger effect than the presence of _g_ (= _ge_) or _ig_ (= _yi_ + _ge_) in deciding the definiteness of reference”. In other words, in spite of the presence of the indefinite determiner, the bare NP ‘pibao’ in (12) is to be interpreted as of definite reference.

In his seminal discussion of the uses of ‘yi+classifier’, Lü (1990[1944]) observes that the Chinese indefinite determiner indicates quantification and indefiniteness in a way similar to the indefinite article in English. At the same time, he points out that ‘yi+classifier’ is used for a wider range of functions in comparison with the indefinite article in English. The special use of ‘yi+classifier’ with definite expressions, as illustrated in the above sentences, is one that is not displayed by the indefinite article in English or other languages. The view is echoed by Chao (1968:344), who follows Lü in the characterization of ‘yi+classifier’ as an indefinite marker, and adds that “there is no reason why forms like _g_ or _ig_ in Chinese should be delimited to indefinite reference because _a_ or its equivalent in other Indo-European languages is the indefinite article.”

The description of the uses of ‘yi+classifier’ in Lü (1990[1944]) is comprehensive and highly insightful; and the interpretation by Lü, and also by Chao (1968), of the nominal expressions introduced by the indefinite determiner with respect to definite and indefinite reference as illustrated in the above examples is accurate and perceptive. There are two questions, however, that remain unanswered:

1. what is the function of the indefinite determiner ‘yi+classifier’ when it is used to introduce an expression of definite reference?
2. how is this special use of ‘yi+classifier’ related to the other uses of the indefinite determiner?

I will attempt an answer to the two questions in the remainder of this paper.
3. Function of ‘yi+classifier’ with definite referents

Let us start with the first question. As discussed above, on the one hand, we have the same indefinite determiner ‘yi+classifier’ used with indefinite referents or nonreferentials in (4) but with definite expressions in (6), (8), (9), (10) and (12); on the other hand, the definite expressions in question, namely the proper names, proper name-like kinship terms, and bare NPs in the position of the ha object, all retain their interpretation of definite reference in the context of utterance despite being apparently introduced by an indefinite determiner. What, then, is the function of ‘yi+classifier’ in these instances where it is used with definite referents? To put the question another way, what is the difference between these sentences and the corresponding ones without ‘yi+classifier’ in front of the definite expressions?

‘yi+classifier’ in the special use in these sentences, I would argue, serves as a backgrounding device which indicates that the nominal expression it modifies, which is otherwise marked as of high thematic importance, is to be taken as low in thematic importance in the context of utterance.

The concept of thematic importance used in this paper, which is borrowed from Givón (1984–1990), refers to the importance of a referent in discourse. Referents often differ in respect of their role in the development of discourse. Some play a central role, some play a relatively less important or peripheral role, and still some may only serve as props in an action or event. Referents of high thematic importance characteristically receive more mentions in the following discourse than referents of lower importance. The information status of referents in this respect is also captured in the literature in terms of concepts such as plot centrality (Clancy, 1980), salience (Du Bois, 1980), thematic subjecthood (Garrod and Sanford, 1988), newsworthiness (Chafe, 1994), foregrounding (Hopper and Thompson, 1993), protagonism (Cumming, 1995), referential importance (Givón, 1984–1990; Chafe, 1994: 88–91), main characterhood (Downing, 1996: 114), and overlaps with what is covered by notions like topicality (Givón, 1983) and thematicity (Nichols, 1985).

The pragmatic concept of thematic importance, as noted in Cummings (1995: 78) in reference to protagonism, “relates primarily to speakers’ representations” of referents in discourse. There are a variety of linguistic devices, some language specific and some language universal, that speakers may utilize to indicate to the addressee whether a referent is characteristic of such information status. A case in point is the contrast between ‘a’ and ‘this’ as an indefinite marker in spoken English. If the noun refers to an entity that is thematically important, and will probably receive more mentions later in the discourse, ‘this’ is more likely to be chosen, whereas the use of ‘a’ does not indicate such an intention on the part of the speaker, as exemplified in the following sentences:

(13) a. He was walking in the forest and saw this big bear . . . .
   b. He was walking in the forest and saw something that looked like a big bear . . .
It is more likely for this big bear in (13a) to receive more subsequent mentions in discourse than a big bear in (13b).

As discussed above, the referents of definite reference that are introduced by ‘yi + classifier’ fall into two major categories in terms of morphosyntactic encoding, which are proper names or kinship terms, and objects of the preverbal ba. It is important to note that high thematic importance in discourse of utterance has been shown to be characteristic of both types of morphosyntactic encoding.

It has been established in the literature that, among the wide range of referential choices for a particular referent in discourse, proper name is characteristically used for the speaker treats as high in thematic importance. In the experimental studies on reading and writing, Sanford et al. (1988: 48) report that an individual denoted by a proper name is “more likely to be a character of importance in a full narrative than is one denoted by a role description”, and the encoding serves as “a discourse-triggered instruction to register the individual so denoted as of special importance”. As a result, “introducing a character by means of a proper name enhances the character’s availability for continuation production, and enhances accessibility for pronominal anaphora”. A similar claim is made in Givón (1984–1990: 937) that “typically, only globally important referents are given a proper name”. Based on a preliminary examination of her collected data, Downing (1996: 115) also proposes that “it does seem likely . . . that main character status will turn out to be one of the factors promoting the use of proper names in conversational contexts.”

Similar characterization has been made of nominal expressions that serve as the ba object in Chinese. Expressions as the ba object, as those in the subject position, are typically of high thematic importance in the context of utterance, which are likely to be more frequent in the ensuing development of discourse. While the subject expression often assumes the pragmatic role of topic, the ba object is the next most likely expression in the sentence to be interpreted as a pragmatic topic in discourse. It is for this reason that the ba object is characterized as a secondary topic by some Chinese grammarians (cf. Tsao, 1990; Tomlin, 1983, 1995; van Oosten, 1986; inter alia).

When expressions in the two types of morphosyntactic encoding are preceded by the indefinite determiner ‘yi + classifier’ in Chinese, they retain the interpretation of identifiability but lose the high thematic importance normally associated with the encoding. The indefinite determiner in the special use with definite referents serves to indicate that the entity in question is of low thematic importance, thus canceling the otherwise high expectation for the expression to recur frequently in the following discourse. Consider the following examples:

(14)a. Ta na yi fan hua shuo de Zhang Zhicheng mudengkoudai.
He that one CL words say CSC Zhang Zhicheng dumbstruck

Guo le hao yihuir, Zhang Zhicheng cai maimai mingbai guolai.
Pass PFV very while Zhang Zhicheng then slowly understand over
b. Ta na yi fan hua shuo de ge Zhang Zhicheng mudengkoudai.
  Guo le hao yihuir, ?? Zhang Zhicheng cai maimai mingbai guo lai.

‘His words dumbfounded Zhang Zhicheng. After quite a while, Zhang Zhicheng slowly started to make sense of what he had said.’

(15)a. Ta ba pibao diu le, houlai you zhao dao le.
  he BA bag lose CRS later again find to CRS

b. Ta ba ge pibao diu le, ?? houlai you zhao dao le.

‘He lost his bag, but found it later.’

The two sentences in each pair differ only in whether or not the definite expression in question is preceded by ‘yi + classifier’ in the first part of the sentence. The nominal expressions in question, no matter whether introduced by ‘yi + classifier’ or not, are interpreted as of definite reference, referring to entities whose identity has been established in the context of utterance. When ensuing mentions are made of the expressions in question, (a) is much more natural than (b) in both sentences. The contrast between (a) and (b) in the minimal pairs reveals the role of ‘yi + classifier’ in the sentence, which is to mark the referent in question as less likely to recur in the following discourse than is otherwise the case.

It is to be noted that ‘yi + classifier’ in the special use illustrated here displays three distinctive features. They are all related to the bleaching out of the individuation and referentiality of the entity introduced by the indefinite determiner.

First, while it is still possible to have ‘yi’ in front of the classifier, it is much more common to omit it when the indefinite determiner is in its special use with definite expressions, leaving only the classifier in front of the noun. Second, the semantic component of quantification in ‘yi + classifier’ is greatly bleached, particularly when yi is omitted, to such an extent that, in spite of the inherent meaning of oneness in the indefinite determiner, ‘yi + classifier’ may be used to introduce plural referents, as illustrated by the following example from Lü (1990[1944]: 159):

(16) Dangxia ba ge Zhang San he Li Si xia de mudengkoudai.
  instantly BA CL Zhang San and Li Si scare CSC dumbstruck
  ‘Zhang San and Li Si were instantly struck dumb with fear.’

Third, unlike the cases involving the other uses of the indefinite determiner, the classifier is almost always ge when ‘(yi) + classifier’ is in the special use with definite referents.

As noted at the beginning of this paper, nouns in Chinese have their own special sortal classifiers, which serve the purpose of individuation and enumeration of the object denoted by the noun. The classifiers indicate, in an explicit or suggestive manner, the shape, texture, function and so on of the entities they are used with. For instance, the special sortal classifier for ‘pen’ in Chinese is zhi, literally ‘branch’,
which suggests the long slender shape of a pen; that for ‘hat’ is *ding*, literally “top”, which denotes an essential part of the object; and that for ‘table’ is *zhang* “stretched, spread”, which suggests the function of the entity. When ‘yi + classifier’ is in the special use with definite expressions, the classifier *ge* is normally used, instead of the special sortal classifiers that are customarily used with the nominal expressions elsewhere. Consider the following examples:

(17) a. Ta diu le yi fu yanjing.
   he lose PFV one CL glasses

   b. *Ta diu le yi ge yanjing.
   ‘He lost a pair of glasses.’

(18) a. ?Ta ba (yi) fu yanjing gei diu le.
   he BA one CL glasses PM lose CRS

   b. Ta ba (yi) ge yanjing gei diu le.
   he BA one CL glasses PM lose CRS

   ‘He lost his glasses.’

The special sortal classifier for glasses is *fu* ‘pair’ in Chinese, as in (17a), and *ge* is normally not allowed, as in (17b), except with children, who, generally speaking, overwhelmingly prefer *ge*, as established in Erbaugh (1986: 413). In the special use of ‘yi + classifier’ with a definite referent as in (18), however, *ge* is much preferred over *fu*. While (18a) may be acceptable to some speakers, (18b) is much more natural and idiomatic. In comparison with the other special sortal classifiers like *zhi*, *ding*, *zhang* and *fu*, *ge* is the most generalized classifier in Chinese without any special semantic characteristics.

A sortal classifier, as discussed earlier, serves to individuate the entity for which it is used. While the omission of *yi* weakens the force of quantification of the indefinite marker, the substitution of *ge* for the special sortal classifier for the particular noun further weakens the individuation of the entity introduced by the indefinite determiner. The combined effect of these features of ‘yi + classifier’ in the special use is underscored by Chao (1968: 344) when he translates (19)

(19) Ta ba ge zhangfu si le.
   he BA CL husband die CRS

as “she suffered her husband to die on her”. What underlies this rendition is that instead of being taken as an individuated entity of high thematic importance, her husband is treated as a prop in an event that has happened to her. What is being talked about in this utterance is ‘she’, not ‘her husband’. In the particular context of
utterance, it is far more likely to expect more subsequent mentions of her than of her husband.

4. Connection between the special use of ‘yi + classifier’ and the other uses of the indefinite marker

The three features characteristic of ‘yi + classifier’ in its special use with definite referents, it is revealing to note, are all displayed by ‘yi + classifier’ at the advanced stage of development as an indefinite determiner.

In the first section of this paper, I have discussed the five uses of ‘yi + classifier’ as an indefinite determiner in Chinese. The five uses, as proposed in Givón (1981) and Heine (1997), represent the stages of grammaticalization through which the numeral ‘one’ has evolved into a grammatical marker of indefiniteness. In the final stage of the process, as argued in Givón (1981: 51), each of the two more remarked semantic features of the numeral ‘one’, namely quantification and referentiality, are bleached out, leaving only the connotation/genericity of the nominal expression introduced by the indefinite marker. The most typical use of the indefinite article at the final stage of development is with a nonreferential predicative nominal as in the following sentence:

(20) John is a teacher.

The indefinite marker at the final stage is called the “generalized article” by Heine (1997: 73), which “can be expected to occur on all types of nouns, . . .no longer restricted to singular nouns but is extended to plural and mass nouns”. Based on cross-linguistic evidence, Heine (1997) observes that the bleach-out of the numberspecific features of the numeral ‘one’ at the advanced stage of grammaticalization is also likely to correlate with loss of morphological autonomy and reduction of phonological form.

Heine’s remarks accurately characterize the Chinese indefinite determiner ‘yi + classifier’ in its development as an indefinite marker. As discussed at the beginning of this paper, (4) represents the typical uses of the numeral-indefinite marker in Chinese at five representative stages of development. The likelihood of omission of yi increases as we go from (4a) through to (4d), correlating with the weakening of quantification and referentiality of ‘yi + classifier + NP’. It is observed in Lü (1990[1994]: 167) that yi in ‘yi + classifier’ is more likely to be omitted when used as a marker of nonidentifiable nonspecific reference, as in (4d), than as a marker of nonidentifiable specific reference, as in (4c). Chen (ms) further observes that it is much more natural to omit yi when ‘yi + classifier’ is used with nonreferentials as in (4e). While speakers may vary in their judgement on whether it is more natural to omit yi in particular instances representing intermediate stages of development such as (4b), (4c), and (4d) (also cf. Huang, 1987), there is general agreement that the extent of the phonological reduction of the Chinese indefinite determiner correlates perfectly with the order of its development through the five stages of grammaticalization: the less referential a nominal is, the more likely it is for yi to be omitted.
Furthermore, ‘yi + classifier’ in the numeral and the presentative use, as well as in its uses with nonidentifiable specific or nonspecific reference, is always to be interpreted as referring to a singular noun regardless of whether or not yi is omitted. When used with nonreferential nominals in sentences like (4e), however, ‘yi + classifier’ may be used to be ascriptive of plural nouns. Consider the following sentence:

(21) Tamen fuzi kanshangqu xiang (yi) ge faguoren.
They father:son look like one CL Frenchman
‘The father and the son look like Frenchmen.’

Finally, the special sortal classifiers of particular nouns are more likely to be replaced by the general classifier ge when ‘yi + classifier’ is used with nonreferentials, further weakening the individuation and referentiality of the noun. Consider the following sentences:

(22) Yi wei/ge faguoren zou le guolai.
One CL/CL French walk PFV over
‘There is a Frenchman coming over’

(23) Wo zuotian jiandao (yi) wei/ge faguoren.
I yesterday see one CL CL French
‘I met a Frenchman yesterday.’

(24) Ta kanshangqu xiang ge/*?weí faguoren.
he look like CL CL French
‘He looks like a Frenchman.’

(25) Tamen fuzi kanshangqu xiang ge/*?? wei faguoren.
they father:son look like CL CL French
‘The father and the son look like Frenchmen.’

In the presentative and the nonidentifiable specific use of ‘yi + classifier’ as in (22) and (23) respectively, both the specific sortal classifier wei for the noun, and the general classifier ge can be used. In the nonreferential use as in (24), ge is much more common than wei. The preference is even stronger when the subject is in the plural as in (25).

It is suggested in Lü (1990 [1944]: 165–166) that the use of ‘yi + classifier’ with definite expressions may have derived by analogy from the use of the indefinite determiner introducing a nonidentifiable noun. While we do not have large-scale data to prove that ‘yi + classifier’ in the special use with definite expressions has diachronically followed the use of ‘yi + classifier’ as an indefinite article for nouns with nonidentifiable reference and as what Heine (1997) calls a “generalized article” introducing a nonreferential nominal, it would be theoretically unproductive to brush aside as mere coincidence the fact that ‘yi + classifier’ in the two uses displays the same important features.
Heine (1997: 75) notes that at the advanced stage of development “the article can be expected to occur on all types of nouns, even if there may remain a number of exceptions - for instance, if the noun is marked for definiteness, or is a proper noun”. What has been established for ‘yi+classifier’ in this paper suggests that the generalized article in Chinese has extended beyond the use of nonreferentiality into another function to mark a definite expression as of low thematic importance. The plausibility of this view is based on the fact that ‘yi+classifier’ as a generalized article introducing nonreferentials and ‘yi+classifier’ introducing definite referents share important behavioral features which otherwise could not be explained. More importantly, it is also supported by the well attested connection between non-referentiality and low thematic importance that respectively characterize the two uses of ‘yi+classifier’ under discussion.

A distinction is drawn in the literature between semantic or objective referentiality and pragmatic or discourse referentiality. A semantically or objectively referential entity is defined in Payne (1997: 264) as one that “exists as a bounded, individuated entity in the message world”, whereas generics, nonspecifics, and nonreferentials are semantically nonreferential. Pragmatic referentiality, on the other hand, relates to the importance of the entity in the discourse of utterance. Pragmatically referential entities are normally semantically referential, but semantically referential entities may be pragmatically important or unimportant. When semantics and pragmatics conflict, grammar follows one or the other. Some grammatical features hinge upon the distinction between semantic referentiality and nonreferentiality. For example, whether human direct objects take the preposition a or no preposition in Spanish, as described in Payne (1997: 264), depends on whether they are semantically referential or nonreferential. More grammatical features, however, are sensitive to the distinction of entities with regard to their pragmatic referentiality or importance.

In their empirical studies of the grammatical markings of indefinite referents in Hebrew, Krio and Chinese, Wright and Givón (1987) have demonstrated that semantically referential indefinites which are pragmatically unimportant tend to receive the same encoding as semantically nonreferential indefinites, which is distinct from that for pragmatically important entities. In the words of Wright and Givón (1987: 9), “the grammar marked nominals as ‘referential’ not merely because the speaker intends them to exist in the universe of discourse, but rather because their specific, referential identity was important—it mattered—in the discourse.” With regard to those pragmatically unimportant indefinite entities, they are treated in the same way regardless of whether or not they are semantically referential. In other words, the semantic referentiality and nonreferentiality in the case with entities of low thematic importance is neutralized in terms of the formal encoding of the nominals involved.

It follows from the above reasoning that there is an implicational relation between nonreferentiality and low thematic importance which characterize the two uses of the Chinese indefinite determiner ‘yi+classifier’ under discussion in this paper:

(26) A nominal marked as semantically nonreferential is necessarily pragmatically unimportant.
The three features displayed by ‘yi + classifier’ in its use with nonreferentials reflect the semantic bleaching and phonological reduction characteristic of the indefinite determiner at the advanced stage of grammaticalization, where the individuation and numeration of indefinite nominals introduced by it have been almost completely bleached out. The indefinite determiner at the advanced stage of development, when used with a definite expression, strongly implicates that the entity is to be interpreted as pragmatically unimportant, by virtue of the fact that it is encoded in much the same way as a semantically nonreferential nominal. From the use of ‘yi + classifier’ as a numeral ‘one’ to its special use with definite referents to mark low thematic importance, its use with semantic nonreferentials as represented in (4e) is a pivotal development. At this stage, and to some extent in the previous one or two stages represented by (4d) and (4c), with the phonological reduction of yi, the general classifier ge itself apparently serves as an article, as suggested in Lü (1990[1944]: 174), or as what is called a “quasi-article” in Hopper (1986) and Hopper and Thompson (1993: 371). It paves the way for its further use with definite referents as a marker of low thematic importance in two important respects.

First, with yi almost always omitted, there is less potential semantic conflict between ‘yi+classifier’ and definite reference. Second, semantic nonreferentiality bears a close affinity to thematic low importance, which, as demonstrated in Wright and Givón (1987), is often manifested in language in terms of same grammatical encoding. It explains why the indefinite determiner ‘yi+classifier’ at the advanced stage of grammaticalization characterized by its use with nonreferentials shares important features with the determiner in the special use with definite expressions as a marker of low thematic importance.

In the cases discussed by Wright and Givón (1987), semantic referentiality or nonreferentiality of entities is neutralized in terms of grammatical encoding when they are thematically unimportant. In the case of the Chinese ‘yi+classifier’ used as a generalized indefinite article and as an indefinite determiner introducing definite expressions, both semantic referentiality and pragmatic identifiability of nominals are neutralized: the speaker treats them as entities that do not matter in the subsequent discourse, no matter whether they are semantically referential or non-referential, or pragmatically identifiable or nonidentifiable.

5. Concluding remarks

The Chinese indefinite determiner ‘yi + classifier’, in a way fairly similar to the indefinite article a in English, has developed functions characterizing each of the representative stages of grammaticalization from a numeral to a generalized indefinite determiner as elaborated in Heine (1997). More interestingly, it has been established in this paper that the Chinese indefinite determiner has developed a special use with definite expressions, serving as a backgrounding device marking the entities as of low thematic importance and unlikely to receive subsequent mentions in ensuing discourse. The indefinite determiner in the special use displays striking similarities in terms of semantic bleaching and phonological reduction with the
determiner at its advanced stage of grammaticalization characterized by uses with generics, nonspecifics and nonreferentials.

Based on the findings in this paper, I would like to make two further points of more general interest.

First, referential encoding as proper names, and syntactic encoding as the *ba* object in Chinese have been characterized in the literature as being associated with a specific function in discourse, which is to mark entities as of high thematic importance. It is evident from the discussion in this paper that the characterized function is a ‘default’ one, which can be overridden. It indicates that there are other functions coded by these linguistic devices. What these functions are and how they relate to each other are interesting topics for further investigation.

Second, the five stages of grammaticalization of the indefinite determiner in various languages all relate to the quantification and referentiality of the nominal introduced by the determiner. The special use of ‘yi + classifier’ with definite expressions has demonstrated how the indefinite determiner in Chinese has extended beyond the referential properties of the nominal, and acquired a new discourse function that is implicated by nonreferentiality featured at the advanced stage of grammaticalization of the determiner. While providing another piece of evidence in support of the claim that semantically nonreferentials and entities of low thematic importance tend to be encoded in terms of same linguistic devices in language, the findings in this paper have shown how an indefinite determiner can undergo a higher degree of grammaticalization than has been reported in the literature—it expands its scope to mark not only indefinite but also definite expressions as semantically nonreferential and/or thematically unimportant.

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