

The distribution of modification markers in the East Asian languages

oral or poster, pdf.

Foley (1980) proposes the following hierarchy of boundedness of modifiers (> means that the modifier is bound to its head noun ‘more strongly than’):

(1) Articles > Deictics > Interrogatives > Quantifiers/Indefinites > Adjectives > Relative Clauses.

Based on the data of several Austronesian languages, Foley claims that if a language uses a ‘ligature’ in certain modifier category, modifier categories of weaker boundedness must use the ligature as well. In other words, the more bounded a modifier is, the less it requires a ligature. The essence of the proposal is that a ligature must cover a continuous region on the boundedness hierarchy. In what follows, we take such ligatures as kind of ‘modification markers’ (hence MMs)

The current paper proposes that the continuity of modification markers can be realized on another dimension. Some East Asian languages have MMs whose distributions are continuous along the distinction-description hierarchy (left to right, from most distinctive to most descriptive). Below we list the distributions of 5 MMs in Japanese, Mandarin and other three minority languages in China. (*stands for occurrence)

	Determiner	Numeral	Noun	Verb	Adjective
Mandarin: <i>de</i>			*	*	* ¹
Japanese: <i>no</i>	*	*	*		
Pazeh: <i>a</i>	*	*	*	*	*
Thao: <i>a</i>	*	*	*		
Lahu: <i>ve</i>			*	*	*

Previous studies commonly focus on the parallelism between *de* and *no*. The above table indicates that they are rather complementary than parallel. A detailed analysis will be provided which indicates that Mandarin *de* is a descriptive marker in nature while Japanese *no* is a distinctive marker.

Based on data from 37 languages in China which use a MM, we group MMs into two categories. One is descriptive, whose occurrence usually begins with the most descriptive modifiers, i.e. adjectives and extends to the direction of more distinctive modifiers. The other is distinctive, whose occurrence begins with the most distinctive modifiers, i.e. determiners and extends to the more descriptive modifiers.

¹ In Mandarin, adjectives of simple form can modify nouns without *de*. However, these combinations are highly restrained, except for few common adjectives such as those expressing ‘big, small, good, bad’.