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CLASSIFIERS IN WEINING AHMAO:
A FULLY INFLECTUAL SYSTEM IN AN ISOLATING LANGUAGE

ABSTRACT

Isolating or analytic languages are known for their scarcity of word forms and for their under-specification of grammatical categories (indeterminateness). Isolating languages in East and Southeast Asian languages involve classifiers – a word category used with numerals and, depending on the language, with functions like Number, Definiteness, Modification (marker of relative clause) or Contrast (cf. Thai). Similar to other parts of speech in these languages, the classifier generally constitutes a one-form word category with occasional sandhi-derivations. Weining Ahmao, a Miao language spoken in SW China, follows this general morphological pattern, but has developed a highly uncommon system of classifiers. Each of its ca. 50 classifiers can be declined in 12 forms expressing a complex cluster of meanings which can be broken down into 3-4 parameters: Number [Singular, Plural], Definiteness [Definite, Indefinite] and Size/Importance [Augmentative, Medial, Diminutive]. Moreover, gender register is attached to the parameter of Size/Importance. A classifier in the Augmentative form conveys a vague idea of greatness and is typically employed by men; that in the Medial form is size-neutral and typically used with women; the Diminutive version of a classifier attaches an idea of size reduction and correlates with speakers of lower social status, typically children. Concerning the sound structure of these inflections, a good part of the Ahmao classifiers follow the outline given in the subsequent chart (the Augmentative Definite Singular form is being taken as underlying):

Gender Register	Size/ Importance	Singular		Plural	
↓	↓	Definite	Indefinite	Definite	Indefinite
Male	Augmentative	CVT	C*VT	$ti^{55}a^{11}CV^{11}$	$di^{31}a^{11}C*V^{11}$
Female	Medial	Cai^{55}	$C*ai^{213}$	$tiai^{55}a^{11}CV^{11}$	$diai^{213}a^{11}C*V^{11}$
Children	Diminutive	Ca^{53}	$C*a^{35}$	$tia^{55}a^{11}CV^{11}$	$dia^{55}a^{11}C*V^{11}$

Remarks: 1) C means "consonant" (simple, double, affricated, etc.)
2) V means "vowel" (simple, double)
3) T means "tone" using numbers 1-5 to indicate the pitch contours
4) * means "suprasegmental phenomenon" (e.g. aspiration, but possibly also an absence of sound change)

Historically, this system is derived from the merger of earlier classifier versions with the two adjectives or prefixes $a^{55}ȵie^{53}$ 'female' and $ŋa^{11}$ 'small'. Some weak tendencies of similar mergers can be observed in other Miao languages, although none of the other Miao classifier systems seems to exhibit inflectional features (as far as we know).