Plurality and definiteness in Chengdu Chinese

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The authors identify a plural marker -ɕie in Chengdu Chinese that can apply to both count and mass nouns, encoding plurality as well as definiteness. This post-nominal -ɕie differs from the pre-nominal ɕie, as the latter is purely plural but not inherently definite. Our analysis shows that the pre-nominal ɕie functions as a quantifier, which occupies the [Spec, NumP] position, whereas the suffixal -ɕie, by virtue of being a plural marker, is base-generated in the Num$^0$ position and move to D$^0$ to encode both plurality and definiteness. Moreover, the two ɕies can co-occur in one and the same nominal phrase, exhibiting the double definiteness effect.

The syntactic analysis of ɕie in Chengdu Chinese, coupled with the study of di in Cantonese, has theoretical impacts on nominal phrase structures, in particular, on “plurality” and “definiteness”. First, plural markers in classifier languages contrast with those in number languages, as the former, but not the latter, defies numerical modification. Second, definiteness can be expressed by a non-D element, which may check its [+DEF] feature either by undergoing an upward movement to D (or [Spec, DP]) or by agreeing with the [+DEF] feature of a demonstrative. Third, the DP-NP distinction is strongly supported by our account of Chengdu Chinese.

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