

## THE INTERACTION BETWEEN NUMBER AND PERSON IN CHINESE

Certain linguistic phenomena cannot be explained by syntax and/or semantics alone. They require taking into account of pragmatic elements such as speech acts, discourse structure, deixis, etc. The plural suffix *-men* in Mandarin Chinese is a case in point.

*-Men* occurs with both personal pronouns and nouns. However, while it is regularly added to pronouns, it appears only occasionally - though not randomly - with nouns. In fact, most of the time nouns remain unmarked, the context providing the necessary information. The occurrence of *-men* after nouns is highly constrained : 1) **humanness** (in principle, nouns denote human beings) ; 2) **incompatibility with counting** (*\*san ge haizimen* as opposed to *san ge haizi* ‘three children’); 3) **definiteness** (N-*men* is definite, it involves a second mention of previously posited entities, *haizimen* ‘the children’); 4) **modal value** (the use of *-men* brings out a special connotation of affective proximity or empathy).

To sum up, it is a necessary condition for *-men* to occur that the number of entities be greater than ( $n > 1$ ), but this is not sufficient. Unlike the plural in Indo-European languages, *-men* is not governed solely by considerations of number, but also by something else. Clarifying the conditions of the use of *-men* with nouns has been a major unsolved problem in Chinese linguistics for almost a hundred years, because this optional use cannot be captured in terms of syntactic, semantic or any other mechanical rules. It is discourse-motivated and depends on pragmatic factors.

In narrative contexts (with  $n > 1$ ), *-men* is not obligatory after nouns, the speaker is free to use it or not. However, his choice is not neutral. If he elects to use it, this entails a subtle difference of meaning. The presence of *-men* invariably induces a modal value, qualified as empathy. Compare :

- |                               |     |                               |
|-------------------------------|-----|-------------------------------|
| (1) <i>Kongzi he dizi</i>     | and | (2) <i>Kongzi he dizimen</i>  |
| <Confucius-and-disciple>      |     | <Confucius-and-disciple+MEN>  |
| ‘Confucius and his disciples’ |     | ‘Confucius and his disciples’ |

There is an affective proximity between Confucius and his disciples in (2) that does not exist in (1). This affective proximity (empathy) is of the same nature as the one observed in direct address between the speaker and the persons spoken to, cf. *Taitaimen !* <lady+MEN> ‘(Dear) ladies !’. It is as though a personal relation of the ‘speaker-addressee’ type were [fictitiously] created on the plane of the third persons. This is due to a shift of point of view. The disciples are considered, not from the speaker’s (narrator’s) point of view, but from that of Confucius, who becomes the deictic center.

*-Men* is obligatory with personal pronouns as soon as  $n > 1$ , because they contain something that is indispensable for the occurrence of the suffix, namely a link to a subject-origin. Indeed, the referential values of personal pronouns are defined relative to the speaker. Nouns do not in themselves make any reference to a subject-origin, hence they do not automatically take *-men* when  $n > 1$ . In order for a noun to be suffixed, it has to be constructed in the context as a personal pronoun. The evidence of this is that in allocution, where N is equivalent to a qualified *you*, the suffixation becomes compulsory granted that  $n > 1$ . For example : *Xianshengmen !* ‘Gentlemen !’

We are now in a position to unify the nominal and pronominal *-men*. What actually triggers the occurrence of *-men* is the **conjunction** of number and person. Grammatical person consists in locating entities within a subjective space centered on a subject-origin, it is basically a topology. Benveniste (1966) has shown in general linguistics that the so-called plural of personal pronouns does not amount to an addition or multiplication of elements but to an amplification of persons. In other words, it is a collective. Thus, *we* does not correspond

to several *I*'s, but to *I* plus other people, assembled by and around the speaker, i.e. the speaker's group. Personal pronouns define positions with respect to the speaker, through identification (first person), differentiation (second person) and disconnection (third person) respectively. We have seen above that this personal component is inherent in pronouns, but not in nouns. Therefore, unlike the latter, the former take *-men* as soon as there is more than one entity involved.

In narrative contexts (by definition detached from the situation of utterance), where nouns are not reducible to classical pronouns, *-men* is facultative despite  $n > 1$ . Resorting to it means grouping individuals relative to a narrative character, who is not only the locator but also the spatial point from which they are viewed. There is a shift of perspective. The speaker/narrator takes the point of view of a protagonist and thereby constructs an **internal narrative point of view**. Examples (1) and (2) thus illustrate the contrast between **external** and **internal** viewpoints.

In conclusion, *-men* marks in all cases a subjective grouping relative to a subject-origin, either the speaker/narrator or a protagonist whose point of view the narrator provisionally adopts. That's why *-men* should be called **personal collective**, in the sense we talk of **personal** pronouns. This analysis accounts for all the remarkable properties of the plural suffix *-men* in Mandarin Chinese.

The study of the plural suffix *-men* in Chinese has important implications for linguistic theory, both our conception of grammatical person and typology (grammaticalization of the **nominal** versus **pronominal** plural across languages).

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