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On Yí ‘One Item’, Liǎ ‘Two Items’, and Sā ‘Three Items’

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Abstract: In this article, I examine the expression yí ‘one item’, as compared to the expressions liǎ ‘two items’, and sā ‘three items’ in Peking Mandarin. I discuss the character transcriptions of these expressions, give an overview of their previous treatments, and compare the current usage of yí with that of liǎ and sā. Based on the differences between these expressions, I conclude that while liǎ and sā are words (viz. independent carriers of the meanings ‘two items’ and ‘three items’), the meaning ‘one item’ is represented in Peking Mandarin both by the expression yí ‘one item’ and by the expression yige ‘an item’.

0. This article comments on the expression yí ‘one item, a specimen of’ (e.g. wǒmen nàr yǒu yì hòu huāyuān ‘we have a back garden there’) as compared to the expressions liǎ ‘two items’ (e.g. nèi liǎ háizi shì dǎjià ‘those two children had a fight’), and sā ‘three items’ (e.g. wǒ sā duō yuè méi liù niào ‘I haven’t taken my birds out for a stroll for over three months’).

All expressions are described as attested in a corpus of spoken Peking Mandarin that I collected in 2000-2001. The corpus consists of informal and unplanned conversations with 42 native speakers of Peking Mandarin of various age groups. I have tried to record informants who were not exposed to university education and whose language, as a consequence, retained those features that distinguish it from the official educational model, Standard Mandarin. The conversations range in length from 30 minutes to one hour, they are transcribed into the Hányǔ Pīnyīn system of transcription and are saved as computer texts. In its written form, the corpus comprises 17,844 sentences (for further details on the corpus, see Chirkova 2003: 6-11).

Despite the high frequency of its use, the expression yí ‘one item, a specimen of’ has so far been only sketchily described in reference literature (Dù 1993, Wiedenho 1995, Zhōu 1998). This expression is an equivalent in informal speech of the phrase yige ‘one item’ or its weakened form yige ‘an item’. In the same way, the expressions liǎ ‘two items’ and sā ‘three items’ are generally considered equivalents of liàngge ‘two items’ and sānge ‘three items’ respectively. In this article, I discuss the character transcriptions of these expressions (§1), give
an overview of their previous treatments (§2), and compare the current usage of
the expression *yí* in the corpus with that of *liǎ* and *sā* (§3).

1. *Yí, liǎ, sā*: character transcriptions

The expressions *yí*, *liǎ* and *sā* are typical for an informal style of speech, and
are rarely written. Until recently these words did not have well established char-
acter renderings. For example, in Chao’s article1 ‘A note on *liǎ* (俩), *sā*, etc.’
(1936), only the word *liǎ* has a written form, 俩, and the expression *sā* is given
in transcription. In fact, as noted by Chao (1936: 33), the character rendering for
liǎ, 俩, pronounced as *liǎng* and defined as 伎俩 *jǐliàng* ‘skill, craft’ in the
Jíyùn [Collected rhymes] dictionary, is not semantically related to the
word *liǎ* ‘two items’, which only happens to be written with the same character.
Since the publication of Chao’s article, *sā* also acquired a written form, viz. 仨.
Currently, most dictionaries of Peking Mandarin (cf. Chén et al. 1997, Xú 1996)
and even some general dictionaries of Mandarin usage (e.g. Guō 2000) list both
words, *liǎ* and *sā*, with their character transcriptions.2

The expression *yí* is currently left without a written form and is usually not
included in reference books on Chinese or on Peking Mandarin. Based on the
character renderings for *liǎ* and *sā*, which are combinations of the ‘single stand-
ing man’ (dānlírén) radical with the numerals *liǎng* ‘two’ and *sān* ‘three’ respec-
tively, Wiedenhof (1995: 66, n. 15) proposes a Chinese character spelling for the
expression *yí*, viz. 一, which consists of the ‘single standing man’ radical and the
character for the numeral *yī* ‘one’.

2. Previous treatments

Etymologically, the three expressions *yí*, *liǎ* and *sā* are all fusions of the nu-
merals *yī* ‘one’, *liǎng* ‘two’, and *sān* ‘three’, respectively, with the measure word
ge ‘item’. All numerals from *yī* ‘one’ to *shí* ‘ten’ in Peking Mandarin can form
such fusions with the measure word *ge*, as described by Chao (1936, 1968:
570-571) and more recently by Zhōu (1998: 137). Chao (1968: 571) notes that

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1 In quotations from Chao (1936, 1968), the original transcriptions have as a rule been converted into Hányǔ
Pīnyīn. Chao’s transcriptions from his (1936) work have been retained in §2 as more adequately reflecting
the phonetic details of the change from the expression *liǎngge* to the expression *liǔ* and from the expression
*sāngge* to the expression *sā*.
2 For *liǔ* see Chén et al. (1997: 226), Guō (2000: 780), Xú (1996: 246); for *sā* see Guō (2000: 1074), Xú (1996:
345).
such fusions are possible because the intervocalic \( g \) in the measure word \( ge \) easily weakens into a sonorant \([\gamma]\) and then disappears, producing such expressions as \( si'e \) instead of \( si'ge \) and \( wu'e \) for \( wu'ge \).

Chao (1936: 37-38) offers the following phonetic details on the change of the expressions \( liangge \) and \( sange \) to the forms \( lia \) and \( sa \). First, he notes (1936: 37, original transcriptions) that in northern and central Chinese dialects, nasal endings are ‘more of the nature of the second element of a diphthong than a stable final consonant.’ Therefore, the weak -ng in \( liang^3 \) readily becomes only a nasalizing factor of the preceding vowel, resulting in the form \( lia^3 \). The \( n \) in \( san^1-ko^4 \) ‘three items’, on the other hand, easily becomes velarized into -ng, and then reduces, as is the case with \( liang^3 \), to the nasalizing factor of the preceding vowel \( a \), i.e. \( sa^1 \). Second, the intervocalic \( k \) \([\j]\) of the measure word \( ko^4 \) ‘item’ weakens into \([\gamma]\) and disappears, with the effect of \( liang^3-ko^4 \) and \( san^1-ko^4 \) becoming the forms \( lia^3-\varnothing \) and \( sa^1-\varnothing \). Finally, Chao points out that because neither \( lia^3-\varnothing \) nor \( sa^1-\varnothing \) are naturally stable sounds in the dialect, they fall into the slots of the nearest phonologically possible syllables, namely \( lia^3 \) and \( sa^1 \).

Chao also states that in a similar fusion of the numeral \( pa^1 \) ‘eight’ with the measure word \( ko^4 \) ‘item’, the ending -\( \varnothing \) is likewise easily dropped. He states (p. 37) that he had never heard a clear case of \( pa^{1(2)}-ko^4 > pa^{1(2)}-\varnothing \) ‘eight items’ and that this form is realized either as the intermediate weak form \( pa^{1(2)}-g\varnothing \) or simply as a somewhat lengthened \( pa(\cdot)\). The reason for the instability and the eventual dropping of -\( \varnothing \), in Chao’s explanation, is the aversion to a hiatus between a low and a mid vowel, as is also the case with the forms \( lia^3 \) and \( sa^1 \). In his Grammar (1968) he recapitulates this conclusion, pointing out (p. 571) that:

[w]ith the low vowel \( a \) in \( liang, san \) and \( ba \), the dropping of the final consonant leaves only a lengthened \( a \) with a centralized vocalic ending, and since such a low diphthong fits badly the rest of the phonological system, it falls into the familiar slot of a simple \( a \), thus resulting in the paradoxical form of a shorter phonological shape representing a longer grammatical form.

All other fusions of numerals with the measure word \( ge \) ‘item’, namely \( i^2-\varnothing \) ‘one item’, \( ssu^2-\varnothing \) ‘four items’, \( wu^5-\varnothing \) ‘five items’, \( liu^4-\varnothing \) ‘six items’, \( chi^1(2)-\varnothing \) ‘seven items’, \( chiu^3-\varnothing \) ‘nine items’, and \( shih^2-\varnothing \) ‘ten items’, are reported by Chao to retain a schwa.
In his *Běijīng kòuyǔ yǔfá* Zhōu (1998: 137) gives a somewhat different list of the fusions of numerals with the measure word *ge*. Note also that Zhōu makes no reference to Chao’s works. Chao’s and Zhōu’s lists are compared in Table 1 with dissimilar forms printed in boldface:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>‘one item’</td>
<td><em>yī’e</em></td>
<td><em>yí</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘two items’</td>
<td><em>liǎ</em></td>
<td><em>liá</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘three items’</td>
<td><em>sā</em></td>
<td><em>sā</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘four items’</td>
<td><em>sì’e</em></td>
<td><em>sè/sí’e</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘five items’</td>
<td><em>wū’e</em></td>
<td><em>wū’e</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘six items’</td>
<td><em>liù’e</em></td>
<td><em>liù’e</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘seven items’</td>
<td><em>qī’e/qí’e</em></td>
<td><em>qí’e</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘eight items’</td>
<td><em>bā’e/bá’e</em> or <em>bā’e</em></td>
<td><em>bá’e</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘nine items’</td>
<td><em>jiū’e</em></td>
<td><em>jiù’e</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘ten items’</td>
<td><em>shí’e</em></td>
<td><em>shí’e</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1—Chao’s (1936, 1968) and Zhōu’s (1998) lists of fusions of numerals with *ge*

The expression ‘one item’, claimed to have a schwa by Chao, i.e. *yī’e*, is described as having no schwa by Zhōu, viz. *yí*. The expressions ‘seven items’ and ‘eight items’ are reported by Chao to exist in the first, *qī’e* and *bā’e*, and in the second tone, *qí’e* and *bá’e*. Zhōu gives them only in the second tone, *qí’e* and *bá’e*. Moreover, the expression *bā’e/bá’e* ‘eight items’, which according to Chao can either retain or drop the schwa, is said to retain a schwa by Zhōu.

Generally, the numeral *yī* ‘one’ changes its original first tone to the second tone, *yí*, when followed by a syllable in the fourth tone, as in *yí kuài* ‘one piece’. The underlying fourth tone of the measure word *ge* can likewise lead to the change of the original first tone in *yī* ‘one’ to the second tone, *yí*. The numerals *qī* ‘seven’ and *bā* ‘eight’ can also follow this tone sandhi, as pointed out by Chao in his *Grammar* (1968: 571). However, Chao also states that this tone sandhi is present ‘in the speech of a slight majority of the speakers.’ (ibid.). Hence, Chao’s account of the fusions ‘seven items’ and ‘eight items’ as *qī/e/qí’e* and *bā/e/bá’e* appears to reflect this phenomenon.

In my corpus, fusions of numerals above three with the measure word *ge* are infrequent. Numerals above two, and accordingly their combinations with the
measure word *ge*, occur on a much smaller scale than the numerals *yī* ‘one’ (or its weakened counterpart *yī* ‘one’) and *liǎng* ‘two’, as well as their collocations with *ge*. The expression *yī* ‘one item’ is often used to introduce a new specific entity in discourse. Similar to the indefinite article *a/an* in English, it can serve to narrow down the reference of the following noun to a single member of a class. The expression *liǎng* ‘two items’ is used when speaking about couples of people and pairs of objects. Compare the frequency of occurrence in the corpus of fusions of the numerals from one to ten with the measure word *ge*:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fusion</th>
<th>Total in the corpus</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>yī</em> ‘one item’</td>
<td>180</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>liǎ</em> ‘two items’</td>
<td>181</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>sā</em> ‘three items’</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>sì</em> ‘four items’</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>wǔ</em> ‘five items’</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>liù</em> ‘six items’</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>qí</em> ‘seven items’</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>bá</em> ‘eight items’</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>jiǔ</em> ‘nine items’</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>shí</em> ‘ten times’</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2—Frequency of fusions of numerals from one to ten with the measure word *ge*

Interestingly, the fusion *yī* and the fusions from *sì* ‘four items’ to *shí* ‘ten items’ are realized as their corresponding numerals, which are, moreover, often lengthened. See, for instance, the expression *wǔ* ‘five items’ in the next example, which is realized as the lengthened numeral *wǔ* ‘five’. None of the fusions in the table bears any trace of an audible schwa. The fusions *qí* ‘seven items’ and *bá* ‘eight items’ are pronounced in the second tone. Given that in both cases they are followed by words in the fourth tone, i.e. *qí bǎi* ‘seven prayers’ and *bá dá xuéyuàn* ‘eight big institutes’, my data leave open the possibility that some speakers of Peking Mandarin use the fusions *qī* and *bā* in the first tone, as attested by Chao.

Consider the following sentence with the forms *wǔ* ‘five items’ and *qí* ‘seven items’. Here, the informant tells a story about the Kāngxī Emperor (1662-1723). In this story, a Muslim minister of the Emperor tells him how many times Mus-
lims have to pray during the day. First he uses the expression *wǔ ge bài* ‘five
prayers’ with the measure word *ge* in front of the noun *bài* ‘prayer’ and then
continues with the expression *wǔ bài*, with the measure word *ge* incorporated into
the fusion *wǔ ‘five items’*.\(^3\)

(1) Zhèi ge bài... zhèi wǔ ge bài dōu shi
this item prayer this five item prayer all be
shì jiè shang tōngyī de, dōu shi nèi ge
world up unify SUB all be that item
diār. Shuō yǒu de shí shi wǔ bài, yǒu
place speak exist SUB time be five.item prayer exist
de shíhou shí qǐ bài, shuō yǒu de
SUB time be seven.item prayer speak exist SUB
shíhour jiu shì wǒ yīnwei máng, méi gōngfur
time just be 1S because busy not.exist free.time
lǐ bài, dàn wǒ gěi ta būshang.
pray but 1S give 3 make.up.for

‘This prayer... these five prayers are the same in the whole world, all of
them take place there. So he said, sometimes I pray five times and some-
times seven times, and he also said, sometimes I don’t have time to pray
because I am busy, but I will make up for it.’

As shown in Table 2, the expression *yì* is used as often as the expression *liǎ* ‘two items’ in the corpus. Despite its high frequency in the spoken language, this
form is studied much less than the expressions *liǎ* ‘two items’ and *sā* ‘three
items’. To my knowledge, *yì* has so far been attested only by Dù (1993: 142),
to this usage, described the expression *yì* as appearing invariably in the second
tone. Further, he identified it with the numeral — *yī*/*yi* ‘one’. Thus, he reported
that the numeral *yī* can be directly followed by a nominal phrase (which con-
struction he names the ‘*yī + noun’ pattern, ‘→+名’ 格式 ‘*yī + ming’ géshi)
On Yí ‘One Item’, Liǎ ‘Two Items’, and Sā ‘Three Items’

without an intervening measure word. In reality, the invariable appearance of the expression yī in the second tone suggests that this expression is a fusion of the numeral yī/yì ‘one/a’ and the measure word ge. The underlying fourth tone of this measure word, gè, has led to the second tone of yī, as noted by Wiedenhof (1995: 66). Hence, the expression yī, pronounced clearly without a schwa by my informants, is a fusion of the numeral yī/yì and the measure word ge rather than the numeral yī/yì ‘one/a’ occurring with a nominal phrase without a measure word. In the corpus, this expression appears in the second tone, yī, and in the neutral tone, yī, in rapid speech. I consider all instances of the use of yī or yì followed by a nominal expression without an intervening measure word in the corpus as examples of such a fusion.

As already noted, of all fusions of a numeral with the measure word ge, only the forms liǎ and sā have been well documented. Chao, who comments on them in his aforementioned article ‘A note on liǎ (俩), sā, etc.’ (1936) and in his Grammar (1968), outlines the limitations of their use (1936: 34-36, 1968: 570-571). He also addresses the common misconception that the expression liǎ ‘two items’ written with the ‘single standing man’ radical, 俩, has a special reference to persons, whereas in fact it can be used both for persons and things (1936: 33, 1968: 570). He concludes (1936: 36) that ‘liǎ and sā are the equivalent, in informal style, of liǎng and sān, respectively, plus a numerary adjunct for individual objects or persons.’ He notes that other fusions of numerals with ge are possible, but does not comment on them in detail.

Let us now proceed to an overview of the usage of the expression yī in the corpus as compared to that of liǎ and sā. The two following features of fusions of numerals with the measure word ge have to be borne in mind for the comparison. First, in Mandarin, a combination of a numeral with a measure word can serve as a nominal or an attributive phrase. For instance, in the next sentence, the expression liǎng ‘two items’ written with the ‘single standing man’ radical, 俩, has a special reference to persons, whereas in fact it can be used both for persons and things (1936: 33, 1968: 570). He concludes (1936: 36) that ‘liǎ and sā are the equivalent, in informal style, of liǎng and sān, respectively, plus a numerary adjunct for individual objects or persons.’ He notes that other fusions of numerals with ge are possible, but does not comment on them in detail.

(2) Liǎng ge ming bú tài hǎo de.
   two item fate not too good SUB

   ‘For both of them, life was tough.’

The term attributive phrase refers to words or expressions that serve to modify nominal heads. Consider example (3), in which the expression sānge ‘three
items’ is used as an attributive and modifies the noun qí ‘banner’. The informant talks about the administrative system of the Eight Banners, Bā Qí zhìdù 八旗制度, during the Qing dynasty (1644-1911):

(3) Zhèi sān ge qí shì huángdì qǐnzi zhāngguǎn.
this three item banner be emperor personally administer

‘These three banners were administered personally by the Emperor.’

Given that the fusions yī, liǎ, and sā are equivalents of their formal counterparts yīge or yīge, liǎngge, and sānge, these fusions can likewise serve as nominal and attributive phrases. Consider, for instance, the following examples, in which the expression liǎ serves as a nominal phrase, in sentence (4), and as an attributive phrase in sentence (5).

(4) Nǐ... nínmen liǎ suishu kēnèng dōu chàbuduō
2S 2P two.item age possible all similar
gānshang nèi shijīan le.
catch.up that time PF

‘You… you two should be of almost the same age, so you witnessed these happenings.’

In example (5), the informant speaks about the time when Peking was occupied by the Japanese. He recalls that then one could exchange eggs for clothes with the Japanese. Note that the word dàbáiguǒ is the Chinese approximation of the Japanese word tamago 卵 ‘egg’:

(5) Shuō, tā nàr yǒu yīshang a, ná liǎ
speak 3 there exist clothes ah take two.item
jīdàn, dàbáiguǒ, huàn liǎ yīshang, huàn diār
egg tamago exchange two.item clothes exchange a.little
tā de dòngxi.
3 SUB thing

‘He said, they have clothes there, take two eggs, tamago, to exchange for two items of clothing, to exchange for a little bit of their stuff.’
Second, another feature of the fusions of numerals with the measure word ge important for this analysis is that such fusions are weakened forms of their respective equivalents. As noted by Chao (1968: 567), a stressed combination of the numeral 一 and a measure word, in this case yíge, differs from an unstressed combination of yi with a measure word, yige, somewhat as English one differs from a and an, which are also derived from a weakened one. In a similar manner, the stressed form of liàng ‘two’ followed by a measure word, liàngge in this case, means ‘(exactly) two’, while the weakened form liang followed by a measure word in its full tone or in the neutral tone means ‘a couple of, a few’ (Chao 1968: 570). Chao also states that the weakened form of yi ‘a’ followed by a measure word and the weakened form of liang ‘two, a couple’ followed by a measure word occur only after verbs. In the next section, I will demonstrate that the expression sā ‘three items’ is often used as a weakened form of sānge ‘(exactly) three’.

3. Yi ‘one item’ as compared to liă ‘two items’ and sā ‘three items’

3.1. The first notable feature of yi as compared to the expression liă and sā, is that while yige or yige occur much more often than their informal counterpart yi, the expressions liàngge and sānge occur less frequently than their informal equivalents liă and sā. Consider the following table:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Expression</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>yi ‘one item, a specimen of’</td>
<td>180</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>yige/yige ‘one item’/‘an item’</td>
<td>1112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>liă ‘two items’</td>
<td>181</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>liàngge ‘two items’</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sā ‘three items’</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sānge ‘three items’</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3—Number of occurrences of yi versus yige, liă versus liàngge, and sā versus sānge

Note that the expression sā is not frequently used in the corpus and occurs in only ten out of a total of 52 recording sessions. I counted the number of occurrences of sānge ‘three items’ only in those 10 sessions which have the form sā. The expressions yi ‘one item’, yige/yige ‘one item’/‘an item’, and liă ‘two items’ and liàngge ‘two items’ have been calculated for all 52 sessions.
The high frequency of yíge and yige in the corpus reflects the wide range of their use. The stressed expression yíge normally appears as a nominal phrase and in stressed negation, yige (yé/dōu) méi yǒu ‘there is not a single one’. The weakened form yige ‘an item’ is usually used attributively.

The expression yí can replace both the stressed yíge and the unstressed yige, as examples (6) through (8) show. In the next sentence, in which the expression yí ‘one item’ is used as a nominal phrase, the informant describes two temples in the outskirts of Peking:

(6) Yí jiào Tánzhèsi, yí ge jiào Jiètáisi.

‘One is called Tánzhè Temple and the other is called Jiètái Temple.’

In example (7), the expression yí is used in the negation méi yǒu yíge ‘there is not a single one’. The informant answers my question whether Manchu women had the habit of foot-binding.

(7) Bù, suǒyǒu de, nǐ kàn nèi ge... duì, tāmen qí méi gēn zhe zhàngfu qù yóuliè, qù... qù... qù dàzhǎng shéme de, suǒyì suǒyǒu de Mánzūrén, Qírén jiu děngyú shì méi yǒu yí ge qí mǎ de... méi yǒu... bú shì, shéme méi yǒu yí ge exist one item ride horse SUB not.exist exist not be what not.exist  yǒu yí qí mǎ de... méi yǒu yí ge exist one item ride horse SUB not.exist exist not be what not.exist  guǒ jiào de, méi yǒu. bind feet SUB not.exist exist
‘No, all... you see eh... right, they went on horses to hunt with their husbands, to... to... to fight and to do other stuff, therefore none of the Manchus, that’s to say none of the Banner people rode horses... rode..., no, what am I saying, had her feet bound, none of them.’

In the next example, the expression yí substitutes the stressed yíge in the vivid reduplication yíge dòng yí dòng de meaning ‘one trench after the other’. The informant recalls that at some point during the time of the Kuomintang (1911-1949), the city of Peking was surrounded by trenches.

(8) Jiu Guómíndāng de shìhour, jìng shì gě wā de just Kuomintang SUB time all be give dig SUB

ya yí ge dòng yí dòng de, shí a, cáng PH one item hole one.item hole SUB be ah hide

dāng bīng de shī serve.as soldier SUB use

‘So, at the time of the Kuomintang, they were digging all over trench after trench, right?, to serve as trenches for soldiers.’

Such instances where the expression yí substitutes the stressed yíge are rare in the corpus. The use of yí/yī instead of the weakened yíge ‘an item’ as an attributive after verbs, on the other hand, is far more frequent. Note also that Dù (1993) mentions only attributive usages of the expression yí ‘one item, a specimen of’. In most cases in the corpus, informants tend to use yíge ‘an item’ on the first mention of a person or thing talked about and the form yí/yī on the second mention of this person or thing. Consider the following examples:

(9) Dào niánye zài yí ge zhū. Zài arrive year.night slaughter one item pig slaughter

yí zhū hǎohǎor de chī diār. one.item pig good.good SUB eat a.little

‘On the New Year’s eve, it was customary to slaughter one pig. They slaughtered a pig to eat one’s fill for once.’
(10) Gēi nǐ shuō yí ge gùshi ba, shuō yí gùshi
give 2S speak one item story SUG speak one.item story
    bu shuō le, tài lèi le.
not speak PF too be.tired PF

‘I’ll tell you a story, tell a story and that will be it, I’m too tired.’

Opposite examples, namely the use of the expression yí/yì ‘one item’/‘an
item’ on the first mention of a person or thing and the use of the expression yige
‘an item’ on the second mention of this person and thing, are also attested in the
corpus, but they are far less frequent.

3.2. As discussed in the preceding sections, yí occurs in the corpus mostly as an
attributive expression. By comparison, the expressions liǎ and sā are used as
nominal phrases much more often than yí. Consider the following table:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>yí ‘one item’</th>
<th>liǎ ‘two items’</th>
<th>sā ‘three items’</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of occurrences</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>as nominal phrases</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total in the corpus</td>
<td>180</td>
<td>181</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4—Frequency of yí, liǎ, and sā as nominal phrases

The high frequency of the use of liǎ ‘two items’ as a nominal phrase is due to its
frequent occurrence in the meaning ‘the two/both [of us, you, them]’, e.g. nǐmen
liǎ ‘you two’ in example (4).

It is interesting that the addition of liǎ is equally possible after singular and
plural (with ǐ men) forms of personal pronouns. For instance, in the following
sentence, the informant uses the expression liǎ with the third person pronoun tā,
which can be used in Peking Mandarin both when referring to a singular person
or object or to numerous persons or objects, and with the singular second person
pronoun nǐ. In this example, the informant talks about two young Muslims who
killed each other in a fight.

(11) Tā liǎ mái yīkuàr le, shuō nǐ liǎ āi
    3 two.item bury together PF speak 2S two.item be.near.to
zhe ba.
DUR SUG

‘The two of them were buried together, as people said: “Rest side by side, the two of you.”’

An example of the use of liǎ ‘two items’ with the plural second person pronoun nimen is given in sentence (4).

3.3. Most informants use both the original forms (yi/ge/yige, liǎngge, sānge) and the fused forms (yi, liǎ, sā) in their speech. Some stick to either original forms or fused forms. For instance, a few young informants use only the expressions yige and yige and do not use their fused form yi. Several older informants use the expression sā, and do not use its original form sānge. The following observations refer to those speakers who use both forms. In the case of yige ‘one item’ or yige ‘an item’ versus yi ‘one item, a specimen of’, the original form is used in the majority of cases. In the case of liǎ and sā, on the other hand, informants usually choose to use either the fused form predominantly, or the original form predominantly. In other words, when informants prefer the expression liǎ ‘two items’ or sā ‘three items’, they would use the expression liǎngge ‘two items’ or sānge ‘three items’ only in a few cases, and vice versa. For example, one of my informants (58 years old) has a strong preference for the fused form liǎ ‘two items’. In the six sessions that I recorded with this informant, he used liǎ 42 times and liǎngge 2 times.

The original and the fused forms convey different structural and discourse meanings. The fused forms are normally used as weakened counterparts of the original forms. For example, similar to yige versus yi (discussed in §3.1), when both sānge ‘three items’ and sā ‘three items’ appear in the speech of one and the same informant, the former appears on the first mention of the thing or person talked about, whereas the latter appears on further mentions of this thing or person. Consider the following sentence, in which the informant speaks about traditional burials in old Peking. He notes that a certain ritual could only be performed if the deceased had three sons: bǐxū děi yǒu sānge èrzi ‘he must have three sons’. Four sentences later, still speaking about the same ritual, he uses the form sā instead of the form sānge:

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4 I owe this remark and the related generalization in §4 to an anonymous reviewer of the JCLTA.
(12) Zhè dēngyú sā érzi cái dǎdào zhèi tiáojiàn.
    ‘This means that only with three sons you can meet this requirement.’

The same tendency, viz. to use fusions of numerals with ge as weakened forms of actual combinations of numerals with the measure word ge is equally characteristic to all other fusions. Consider, for instance, the use of the expression wǔ ‘five items’ after the expression wū ‘five items’ in example (1).

3.4. In his Grammar (1968: 570), Chao states that there is a common misconception that the word liǎ, written with the ‘single standing man’ radical, 倘, has special reference to persons, even though liǎ is grammatically equivalent to its counterpart liàngge, and can be used both for persons and for things. In my corpus, yī, liǎ, and să confirm this conclusion and can indeed be used both for animate and inanimate objects, for instance, yī nǚ de ‘a woman’ versus yī dà tīng ‘a big hall’, liǎ shēnxiān ‘two immortals’ versus liǎ yuè ‘two months’, să érzi ‘three sons’ versus să dìr ‘three places’. However, my informants tend to use the expressions yī and să mainly for inanimate objects, whereas the expression liǎ ‘two items’ is used mostly when referring to people (119 instances of 181 occurrences of liǎ), which fact argues for a shift in the use of this form from Chao’s times.

4. Conclusion

The expression yī ‘one item, a specimen of’ in Peking Mandarin is realized as the numeral yī ‘one’ in the second tone (yī) or in the neutral tone (yi), without any audible schwa. Other fusions of numerals with the measure word ge are likewise realized in the corpus as their corresponding numerals, which are often lengthened. Therefore, these fusions exemplify the phenomenon of a ‘shorter phonological shape standing for a longer grammatical form.’

The differences that exist between the form yī and the forms liǎ and să outlined in the preceding sections may be explained along the lines of Chao’s analysis of the form pā12(2) ‘eight items’. I propose that, given the phonetic instability of the form yī’e ‘one item’ (this form is not a naturally stable sound in Peking Mandarin and falls into the slot of yī), the expression ‘one item, a specimen of’ is sometimes realized as yī (mostly as an attributive phrase) and at other times as yige (both as a nominal and as an attributive phrase). The expressions yī and yige serve as variants of each other in this meaning, i.e. ‘one item, a specimen of’.

This analysis accounts for the disproportions of the use of yi as compared to that of yige and yige.

Moreover, the preference of informants to use either the expressions liangge and sange or their fused forms lia and sa clearly indicates that the latter are words on their own, which is to say that they are independent carriers of the meanings ‘two items’ and ‘three items’ respectively. The meaning ‘one item’, on the other hand, is represented by two variants: the expressions yi ‘one item, a specimen of’ and yige ‘an item’.

To those informants who use both the fused and the original forms, these forms convey different structural and discourse meanings. The fused form is usually a weakened equivalent of the original form, which occurs on the second or further mentions of the persons or things designated by the form. The fused form is moreover more likely to be used attributively. The original form is used on the first mention of the persons or things talked about and can function both as an attributive and a nominal phrase.

References


**Abbreviations**

1, 2, 3 first, second, third person personal pronouns
DUR durative aspect expressed by the particle zhe
P plural
PF perfective aspect expressed by the particle le
PH pause for the hearer expressed by the particle a or its variant ya
S singular
SUB subordination expressed by the particle de
SUG suggestion expressed by the particle ba