

Use of Heritage Cantonese and Korean classifiers in Toronto

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Classifiers, morphemes that categorize nouns by semantic category, are a robust grammatical feature of Cantonese and Korean. Classifiers specialize to noun classes and so have no English parallel (except rarely used partitives, e.g. “murder of crows”). They are governed by a range of complex factors. These facts make them an ideal candidate for investigating language contact phenomena. While acquisition of Cantonese classifiers in L1 and balanced bilingual contexts is documented through experimental studies (cf. Loke & Harrison 1986, Mak 1991), the study of classifier use in spontaneous speech is less developed, as is exploration of classifiers in the heritage language context, where there is imbalance in use, status, attitudes and institutional support of the two languages (but cf. Wei & Li 2001; Nagy, Chung & Tong 2012; Chan & Nagy 2015). We compare classifier usage in Heritage Cantonese and Korean to test claims that heritage languages are uniform in how they simplify the source language (cf. Polinsky 2008). Although classifiers are used differently in Korean and Cantonese, we can compare patterns of inter-generational change and, particularly, overgeneralization. In addition to the traditional exploration of classifier selection according to Noun being modified, we unify our analyses by locating classifiers in our corpus and checking whether or not they accompany a noun; in Korean this context is restricted to quantified NPs, while in Cantonese the context is broader.

Conversational Cantonese and Korean data from transcribed sociolinguistic interviews are used to determine patterns of classifier use. 50 tokens × 16 speakers of each language are coded for 7 linguistic factors. Speakers are coded for sex, age, ethnic orientation and speaker group (*Gen1* speakers are long-term residents in Toronto who grew up in Hong Kong/Seoul; *Gen2* speakers grew up in Toronto and have *Gen1* parents; *Homeland* speakers were born and live in Hong Kong/Seoul). Logistic regression models are constructed to show the effect of each factor on the choice of classifier, showing which patterns differ significantly between speaker groups.

In spite of heritage speakers’ widespread claims that *go3* is overgeneralizing within their speech community, as a way of compensating for lack of knowledge of more specific classifiers due to restricted input, we find no significant difference in the rate of *go3* use between Homeland, Gen1 and Gen2 speakers of Cantonese. This contrasts with Wei & Lee’s (2001) study of Gen2 British Cantonese speakers, where they interpreted their data as showing limited acquisition of classifiers “in an L2 environment” without direct comparison to non-heritage speaker data.

References:

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