

Classifier variation and change in Toronto Heritage Cantonese

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With over 166,000 Cantonese speakers, Toronto is an important place to examine ongoing changes in Cantonese. The Heritage Language Variation and Change in Toronto Project (HLVC, Nagy *et al.* 2011) aims to distinguish if and how heritage languages, including Cantonese, change over the course of several generations by comparing samples of 1st (born in Hong Kong, immigrated as adults), 2nd (children of first generation, born in Toronto) and 3rd generation speakers (children of second generation). This paper focuses on classifier use. Classifiers in Cantonese are similar to partitives in English, as in “a *school* of fish” (Wei & Lee 2001). In homeland (Hong Kong, in our study) Cantonese, classifiers are required in specific NPs, whether the head is a bare noun or modified (Yip & Matthews 2000:39-40).

Members of the Toronto Cantonese community report that classifier use is decreasing. In fact, our data shows no overall drop in rate of classifier use (90% in Gen 1, 92% in each of Gen 2 and Gen 3, N = 1,074), but rather a re-deployment of the classifier system to distinguish modified from unmodified nouns, rather than specific from generic. This can be seen by comparing the rate of use of classifiers in specific NPs across the 3 generations. Note the mismatch between +/-modified and +/- specific in row 4 of Table 1 (where prescriptively we expect classifier usage). While prescriptive grammar requires a classifier for specific NPs, even if the noun is bare, we find a drop from 10% classifier use in this category in Gen 1 to 0% in both Gen 2 and 3.

	Modification	Specificity	NP type	% with classifiers	Total (N=146)
1	modified	specific	demonstrative	81	21
2			number/quantifier	100	32
3			possessive	95	19
4	unmodified	generic	specific	5	37
5			generic	6	33

An illustrative example of this pattern in our corpus is:

je1+hai6 yau5 si4 yam5 dak1 taai3 do1 Ø cha6
 particle have time drink partitive too much tea
Sometimes I drink too much tea. (Speaker C2F27A, 15:29)

(Note: The Ø-symbol indicates the prescriptive location of the "missing" classifier *bui2* 'cup'.)

To best understand language change, we look at conversational speech, rather than relying on grammaticality judgments or elicitation tasks. Team members conducted sociolinguistic interviews (Labov 1984) with 40 speakers representing the three generations of Cantonese speakers in Toronto. The data above come from six of the 12 speakers that we will examine: one male and one female from each generation. Interviews are transcribed and each NP is coded for the presence or absence of a classifier, and for the type of NP (see table). Our final multivariate analysis (which will certainly be completed before the conference) will include additional linguistic variables (e.g., classifier type, number, animacy) to establish relationships between these variables. Independent social variables include: responses to specific Ethnic Orientation questions, speech rate, sex and generation. With the small pilot sample, this is not yet possible. This paper shows one way that the Cantonese language has evolved across three generations of speakers in Toronto. Along with analyses of other variables in the HLVC project, across a range of languages, this contributes to a better understanding of the behavior of heritage languages with differing degrees of Ethnolinguistic Vitality.

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