

The Acquisition of Cantonese Container Classifiers by native Cantonese children

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Cantonese is a numeral classifier language in which the use of classifiers has to accord with the noun referent. In this paper, we focus on how children acquire the container classifiers in Cantonese and their developmental patterns across various age groups, ranging from age 2 to 9. Chu and Wong (2007) proposed a hierarchy to explain the categorization and the co-occurrence conditions of container classifiers in Cantonese based on a semantic analysis of the container classifiers with adult Cantonese speakers. The proposed hierarchy is based on matching the shape, material, flexibility and size features of the items and the container classifiers in Cantonese. Shapes and dimensions are perceived first for the decision on the choice of classifiers. After this processing, if the item could not be classified into a particular category and assigned a suitable classifier, it needs to be processed through the next hierarchy. There is a mapping for the features of each classifier and the packaging material of the item. If the features of the classifier and the item match with each other, that particular classifier will be chosen by the speaker and used with that particular item. If a suitable mapping cannot be found, the process continues down the hierarchy. If a one-to-one mapping could not be established after processing through the last level - size (i.e. there are still more than one classifier suitable for the item), then each individual may have a different choice of classifiers.

Through a cross-sectional elicitation experiment, we would like to see whether the developmental pattern of container classifiers in Cantonese children would follow this hierarchy. Thirty five children who are native speakers of Cantonese participated in an object-counting task. Twelve food or drink items with different shapes, material, flexibility and size were used to elicit different target classifiers (e.g. *hap6*, *zeon1*, *zi1*, *gun3*, *baau1*, *tung4*, *paai4*). In the experiment, the children were first shown a real object for identification. Upon correct naming of the object by the children, they were asked to count the quantity of this item on a sheet of paper showing various items. The response to the question obligatorily requires the children to use the classifier construction Number-Classifier or Number-Classifier-Noun. If the children only give a numeric response without the use of classifiers, they were prompted to answer the question in full sentence.

The results show that there is a general trend for younger children to omit the container classifier when they have not fully acquired the need for an obligatory use of it. For older children, they tend to use the general classifier *go3* to replace the more appropriate classifier

in obligatory contexts. The classifiers with features higher in the hierarchy were acquired earlier with little inappropriate and overgeneralization usage than those with more features in lower level of the hierarchy. The error patterns of each classifier would be discussed to support our findings.

Reference

Chu, Patrick Chun Kau & Fay Wong. (2007). *A Semantic Study of Container Classifiers in Cantonese*. Poster presentation at the 12th International Conference on the Processing of East Asia Related Languages (PEARL 2007), National Cheng Kung University, Tainan, Taiwan, December 28-29.