Classifiers and Unaccusative Verbs in Cantonese
Charles Lam
Linguistics Program, Purdue University

Observations

Some Cantonese classifiers double as unaccusative verbs:

1. Nominal / Classifier use:
   - denotes shape and posture of objects (Table 1)
   - takes mass or plural objects
   (1) jat1 deoi1 syu1 / naa1
   one Clf-pile book / mud
   ‘a pile of books / mud’

2. Verbal use:
   - They denote stative predicates: (2) & (3) unbounded in time
   - They undergo causative alternation (2)–(4) (Schäfer, 2009)
   (2) Peter deoi1 'is piling the books on the floor.'
   (not ‘Peter is piling the books on the floor.’)
   (3) Peter deoi1 [zen2 / gan2] jat1
   Peter V-pile Perf book at floor
   ‘Peter has piled the books on the floor.’
   (4) jat1 syu1 bei22 Peter deoi1 [zen2 / gan2]
   book PASSIVE V-pile Perf Prob
   at floor
   ‘The books are got piled (up) on the floor by Peter.’

Central Claims of the Study

- Some Cantonese classifiers double as unaccusative verbs.
- The individuating properties of such classifiers explains the cross-categorial behaviors and suggests a common syntax-semantics analysis.

Hypothesis

The denotation of these dual-use classifiers [K] allow them to occur in both classifier and verbs.

[K] = λP∀x cumulative predicates, regardless of type or syntactic category.

Cumulativity

A predicate P is cumulative iff
(i) ∀x, y[P(x) ∨ P(y)] → P[x ∪ y], and
(ii) ∃x, y[P(x) ∧ P(y) ∧ ¬x = y].

- Mass nouns like ‘water’ and atelic verbs like ‘run’
- Count nouns ‘(a) cup’ and telic verbs like ‘jump’

Table 1: Lexical Items with the Dual-Use

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Transcription Meaning</th>
<th>Analysis of NP</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>deoi1 'pile; to pile (up)'</td>
<td>QP book(y) ∩ Q_pile = [1]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pat6 'mass, mess; to lay (flat and wilted)'</td>
<td>λP∀y.count(book(y) ∩ Q_pile)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>daap6 'stack; to stack (up)'</td>
<td>K_eq_Cliff deoi1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>taan1 'puddle; to lie (flat)'</td>
<td>λP∀y.cum(book(y) → count1(book(y) ∩ Q_pile))</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dung6 'tall/standing upright object; to stand'</td>
<td>λP∀y.cum(book(y) → count1(book(y) ∩ Q_pile))</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Analysis of NP

- Classifiers turn uncountable substances into countable units (Rothstein, 2010)
- Most nouns undergo this individuation process (exceptions: nin4 ‘year’, lat6 ‘3’ week’)

- Some Cantonese classifiers double as unaccusative verbs.
- The individuating properties of such classifiers explains the cross-categorial behaviors and suggests a common syntax-semantics analysis.

Analysis of VP

- [K] selects stative (hence temporally unbounded) predicates as its complement
- For active sentences, the lexical verb further raises to fill v
- The lexical content ‘pile’ is supplied by the deoi1, similar to the nominal domain

Cross-categorial Semantics

- The common semantics shows a possibility to account for cross-categorial behaviors (e.g. dual use of morphemes across N and V in this study, or adverbial modification across V and Adj)
- K selects stative (hence temporally unbounded) predicates as its complement
- Most nouns undergo this individuation process (exceptions: nin4 ‘year’, lat6 ‘3’ week’)

Semantics motivates Syntax

- Semantics of [K] motivates the dual use, which syntax cannot explain.
- The semantic properties of ‘individuation’ explains the distribution of predicates (e.g. NPs ‘year’ or ‘week’ do not appear in this structure; VPs)

References


Implications

- Novel observation of the dual use of classifiers
- This approach reduces the need for category-specific semantics
- Cumulativity or boundedness shows how homomorphic syntactic structure can be grounded on semantic selection.

Concluding Remarks

- This approach reduces the need for category-specific semantics
- Cumulativity or boundedness shows how homomorphic syntactic structure can be grounded on semantic selection.

Charles Lam
http://web.ics.purdue.edu/~lam10


charleslam@purdue.edu
http://web.ics.purdue.edu/~lam10

Classifiers and Unaccusative Verbs in Cantonese
Charles Lam
Linguistics Program, Purdue University