

Classifiers and Unaccusative Verbs in Cantonese

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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 / nai4
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)
- Passivization (4) indicates that *K* is below little-*v*.

(2) di1 syu1 deoi1 {zo2 / *gan2} hoeng2 dei6haa2
Clf_{plural} book V-pile Perf Prog at floor
'The books pile (up) on the floor.'

(3) Peter deoi1 {zo2 / *gan2} di1 syu1 hoeng2 dei6haa2
Peter V-pile Perf Prog Clf_{plural} book at floor
'Peter has piled the books on the floor.' (not 'Peter is piling the books on the floor.')

(4) di1 syu1 bei2 Peter deoi1 {zo2 / *gan2}
Clf_{plural} book PASSIVE Peter V-pile Perf Prog
hoeng2 dei6haa2
at floor
'The books are/get piled (up) on the floor by Peter.'

Hypothesis

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

$$[\mathbf{K}] = \lambda P \lambda y. cum(P) \rightarrow count_k(P(y) \cap Q)$$

Cumulativity

(5) A predicate *P* is cumulative iff
(i) $\forall x, y [P(x) \wedge P(y) \rightarrow P(x \oplus y)]$, and
(ii) $\exists x, y [P(x) \wedge P(y) \wedge \neg x = y]$ (Krifka, 1998)

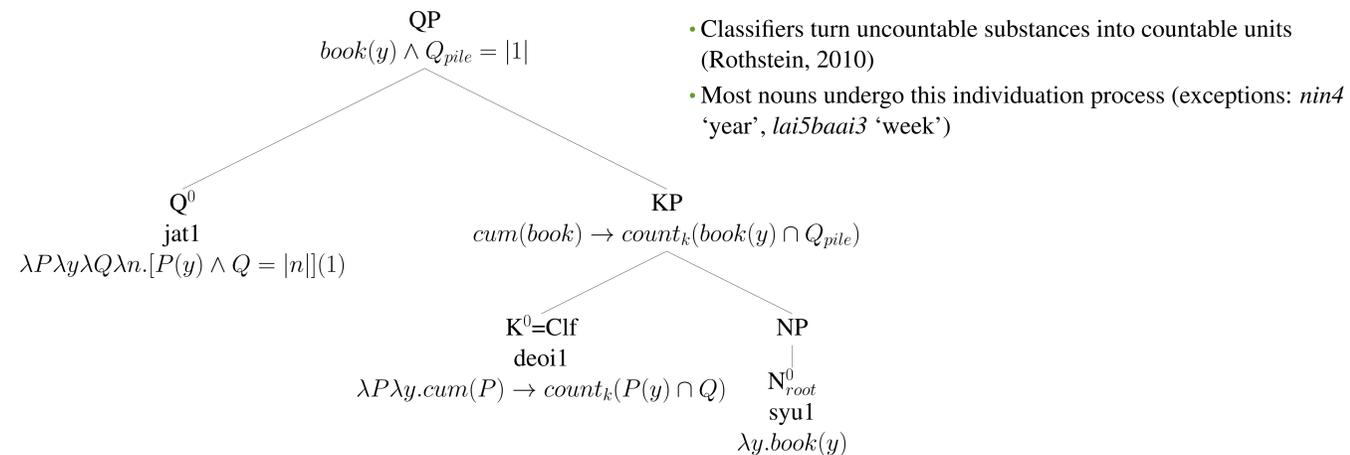
✓ Mass nouns like 'water' and atelic verbs like 'run'

✗ Count nouns '(a) cup' and telic verbs like 'jump'

Table 1: Lexical Items with the Dual-Use

Transcription	Meaning
deoi1	'pile; to pile (up)'
pat6	'mass, mess; to lay (flat and wilted)'
daap6	'stack; to stack (up)'
taan1	'puddle; to lie (flat)'
dung6	'tall/standing upright object; to stand'

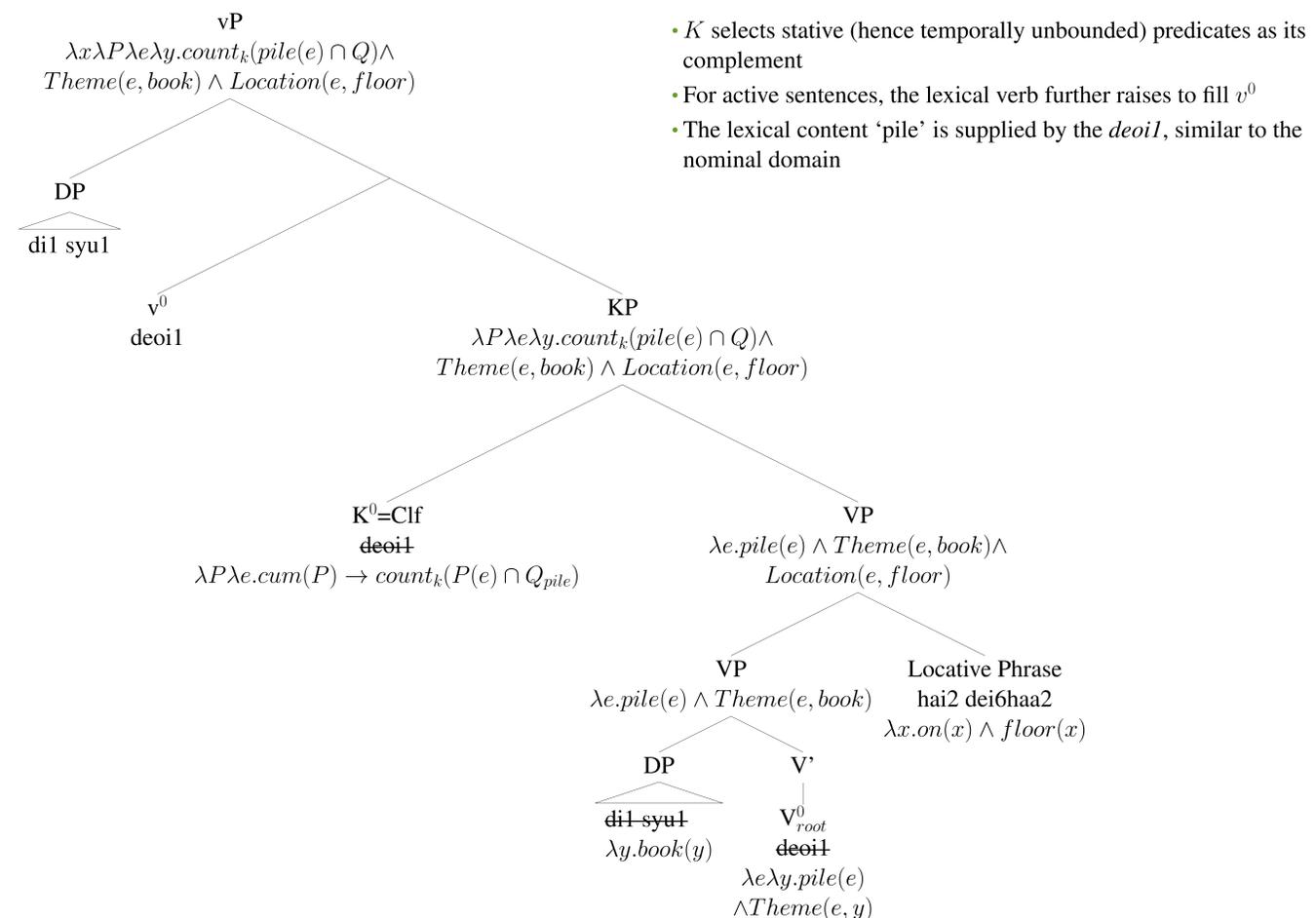
Analysis of NP



Central Claims of the Study

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

Analysis of VP



Implications

Cross-categorical Semantics

- The common semantics shows a possibility to account for cross-categorical behaviors (e.g. dual use of morphemes across N and V in this study, or adverbial modification across V and Adj)
- *K* takes cumulative predicates, regardless of type or syntactic category.
- Accounts for more data with the same semantic functions

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)

Concluding Remarks

- 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.

References

- Krifka, M. (1998). The origins of telicity. *Events and grammar*, 197–235.
- Rothstein, S. (2010). Counting and the mass/count distinction. *Journal of Semantics*, 27(3), 343–397.
- Schäfer, F. (2009). The causative alternation. *Language and Linguistics Compass*, 3(2), 641–681.



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