1. INTRODUCTION

Measure words are an interesting phenomenon which reveals a great deal about the cognitive organisation of the world of the people who use them. (Craig 1986; Lakoff 1986; Dixon 1986). Some languages have highly developed classifier or measure-word systems, which have been studied by a number of scholars. (See, for example, Adams 1986, 1989 in Austroasiatic, Becker 1975 in Burmese, Juntanamalaga 1988 in Thai and Denny 1979 in Japanese.) Some of those who use measure words make up a quarter of the world’s population. Here I am referring to the speakers of Chinese. However, although much enthusiasm has been evinced in the study of Chinese, most of the research on the properties and uses of measures has been carried out on Mandarin only. (See, for example, Chao 1968, DeFrancis 1984, Erbaugh 1986, Ramsey 1987 and Norman 1988). What I propose to do in this paper is to examine some measure words for humans in the dialect of Hong Kong Cantonese with regard to their semantic properties and pragmatic, social and functional roles, as well as their relationship to the nature of categorisation in a given culture.¹

I have chosen Hong Kong Cantonese for this study for two reasons: First, as stated above, comparatively little research has been done on measure words in Cantonese, which is the native language of about five per cent of the Chinese-speaking population. It is the principal Chinese dialect used in Hong Kong, and many overseas Chinese in Australia, the U.S.A., Canada, the U.K., Singapore, Malaysia and Vietnam are also native speakers of Cantonese.²

The second and a more important reason is that, given its political, social and economic structure, Hong Kong is a predominantly Chinese society open to Western influences in thinking, technology and other areas. This sociocultural uniqueness of Hong Kong offers interesting opportunities to study semantic shifts and motivation for the extension of categories.

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2. OVERVIEW

Measure words are an important syntactic as well as semantic feature in Cantonese. A numeral cannot directly modify a noun except in idioms, proverbs or literary writing. Therefore example (1a) is ungrammatical while (1b), with the measure jek, is grammatical.³

(1) a. $\overline{\text{Yau yat ma.}}$
    have one horse
    There is a horse.

b. $\overline{\text{Yau yat jek ma.}}$

However, it is perfectly acceptable to use an idiom which does not have the classifier, as in (2).

(2) saâm sam leung yi
    three heart two will
    a very undecided person

Another thing which is worth noting is that when Cantonese speakers refer to a noun at the generic level, they do not use any measure words. For example:

(3) Yan hai ho chung ming ge.
    person is very clever bright MOD
    Human beings are very intelligent.

(4) Gau hai yau yung ge dung mat.
    dog be have use MOD moving thing
    Dogs are useful animals.

In (3) and (4), we find that reference to human beings or animals as a species does not require measure words. However, if the referents are individual entities of a species as in (5) and (6), measure words (MEA) are required.

(5) yat goh chung ming ge yan
    one MEA clever bright MOD person
    a clever person

(6) yat jek yau yung ge gau
    one MEA have use MOD dog
    a useful dog

³ The phonetic symbols and tone marks used in this paper are adapted from Lam and Po’s (1988) Functional Cantonese Book One, pp.vii–xi for their simplicity, clarity and visual appeal. Although there are 9 tones in Cantonese, only 6 basic tones on a scale of 5 pitch levels are represented here. The remaining 3 tones are the so-called ‘entering tones’ which are not unique tones because their musical values are identical to the upper level, upper going and lower going tones respectively (S.L.Wong 1995:106).
3. CANTONESE ANIMATE MEASURE WORDS

Measures not only carry syntactic significance; they also possess interesting semantic features, the discussion of which will be based on the individual measures illustrated in the following figure:

\[
\begin{array}{cccc}
\text{human beings} & \text{animals} & \text{birds} & \text{fishes} & \text{insects} \\
\text{goh} & \text{hek} & \text{hek} & \text{tiu} & \text{hek} \\
\text{wai} & \text{tiu}* & \text{dau}* & \text{tiu} \\
\text{tiu} & \text{par}* \\
\text{dau} & \\
\text{hek} & \\
\end{array}
\]

* = specific use

FIGURE 1: MEASURE WORDS FOR ANIMATE BEINGS IN CANTONESE

The figure shows five categories of living creatures: human beings, animals, birds, fishes and insects. The data have been selected to show the complexity of the system of Cantonese measure words. Some measure words are unique to a particular category, while others are applicable to more than one category; for example, \text{wai} is a measure word for human beings only, whereas \text{hek} can be used to modify animals, birds, insects and even human beings in particular contexts. I propose to begin with the fairly simple semantic elements pertaining to measures used for non-human living creatures and then proceed to the more sophisticated use of measures for human beings.

3.1 MEASURES FOR NON-HUMAN BEINGS

One of the basic principles of categorisation in Cantonese measure words (as in many other noun classifiers) is the human cognitive representation of the shape, size, and attributes of the creature or object to be modified.

The measure \text{hek} is used to modify any creatures that have legs, so the following expressions are used:

(7) \begin{align*}
yat & \text{hek} & \text{gau} \\
\text{one} & \text{MEA} & \text{dog} \\
a & \text{dog} \\
\end{align*}

(8) \begin{align*}
yat & \text{hek} & \text{ying} \\
\text{one} & \text{MEA} & \text{eagle} \\
an & \text{eagle} \\
\end{align*}

Insects that are seen more often to crawl on the ground with legs are modified by \text{hek} too, as in (9) and (10).

(9) \begin{align*}
yat & \text{hek} & \text{jii-jue} \\
\text{one} & \text{MEA} & \text{spider} \\
a & \text{spider} \\
\end{align*}
Even though cockroaches have wings and are able to fly, their crawling with legs is seen by the human eye to be a more prominent attribute. Therefore \(\text{jek}\) is used.

The measure \(\text{tiu}\) is used to modify creatures that are long in shape and have no legs, as in (11)–(13).

(11) \(\text{yat tiu yue}\)
one MEA fish
a fish

(12) \(\text{yat tiu Chung}\)
one MEA worm
a worm

(13) \(\text{yat tiu se}\)
one MEA snake
a snake

As in the case of cockroaches, crawling is a prominent attribute of worms and snakes, but the measure word \(\text{jek}\) is not used because the latter do not crawl with legs.

Another interesting example which shows the importance of shape in determining measure words for non-human creatures is:

(14) \(\text{yat tiu king yue}\)
one MEA whale fish
a whale

Although whales are biologically classified as mammals, they are modified by \(\text{tiu}\) (which is the measure word for fish), and not \(\text{jek}\) (which is the measure word for mammals) because the shape of whales is seen to be fish-like.

Now let us look at those measure words marked with specific use.

In Cantonese, ‘dog’ would be the only animal modified by \(\text{tiu}\). Even so the measure is rarely used in the spoken form of Cantonese. It is sometimes used in writing, which shows the influence from Mandarin as in (15).

(15) \(\text{yi tiao gou}\)
one MEA dog
a dog

Example (15) is a common expression in the northern dialects of China. It should be pointed out that Cantonese speakers write in Mandarin although they pronounce the written words in a totally different way from Mandarin speakers.

\(\text{yat}\) is another measure word which has very restrictive use. It modifies horses, cloth and waterfall only. The semantic link between these three objects is probably the rolling motion of racing horses, heavy rolls of cloth being unfolded and running waterfalls.