

GE-insertion as a Syntactic Variable in Hongkong Cantonese

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1. Introduction

Of all Cantonese particles, 嘅 *ge3*¹ clearly has the widest range of uses. This is acknowledged by many linguists: for example, Cheung (1972) states that it has the most functions while Luke and Nancarrow (1993) also observe that it is 'the most frequently occurring grammatical unit in Cantonese'. This particle can be used in numerous ways. It can

- i. indicate possession : 1. 我 嘅 車
ngo5 ge3 che1
My PT car
My car
- ii. indicate modification : 2. 厚 嘅 書
hau5 ge3 syu1
thick PT book
thick book
- iii. occur at the end of a sentence : 3. 佢 好 有 自 發 性 嘅
keoi5 hou2 jau5 zi6 faat3 sing3 ge3
He very have initiation PT
He is very initiative.

As noted by Cheung (1972:91), 嘅 *ge3* can also be inserted between the classifier and the head noun provided that the former is a 'measure' or a noun-derived classifier, as in (4):

¹ The romanisation system for Cantonese in this study is the one devised by the Linguistic Society of Hong Kong.

4. 一斤 嘅 豬 肉
 jat1 gan1 ge3 zyul juk6
 one catty GE pig meat
 one catty of pork

On the contrary, according to Cheung, the insertion is not possible if the classifier is, in his term, ‘a determinative measure’, as in (5):

5. * 一條 嘅 魚
 jat1 tiu4 ge3 jyu2
 one CL GE fish
 a fish

To facilitate the understanding of this distinction in Cantonese, a typology of classifiers in Cantonese is shown in Figure 1, which is based largely on Matthews and Yip (1994):

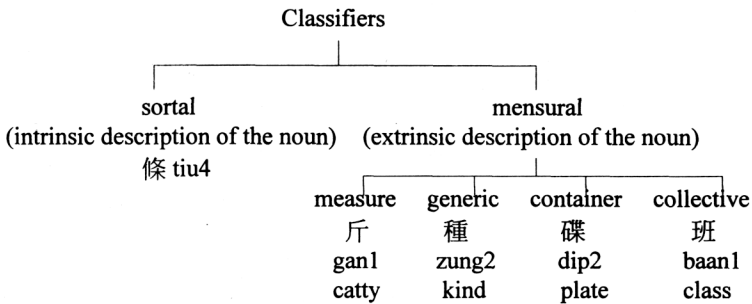


Figure 1

The insertion of the particle 嘅 *ge3* between the classifier and the head noun is mentioned by Luke and Nancarrow (1993) and Matthews & Yip (1994:90). What is notably different from Cheung’s observation is that they talk about 嘅 *ge3* with classifiers like 個 *go3* and 種 *zung2*. Sentences like the following are also found in my data :

6. 呢 四 首 嘅 民 謠
 ne1 sei3 sau2 ge3 man4 jiu4
 this four CL GE folk song
 these four folk songs

Out of intuition, hesitation or the desire of keeping the turn might be one of the stimulants of the insertion, as in (7) :

7. 呢 個 嘅 ... 記 事 簿 電 腦
 ne1 go3 ge3 ... gei3 si6 bou2 din6 nou3
 this CL GE notebook computer
 this ... notebook computer

Besides 嘅 *ge3*, other particles like *ah3*, *eh3* or a combination of them can be used.²

While the above consideration is conceivable, two questions are still open : Why is there often no pause between GE and the head noun, as in example 6? Moreover, why is 嘅 *ge3*, not other particles or sounds, selected for the non-hesitant version? In view of the above brief analyses and an apparent change in the type of classifier compatible with 嘅 *ge3*, these questions really justify an investigation of the particle in terms of its grammatical properties and certain linguistic concepts. For the sake of clarity in my discussion, the particle between the classifier and the head noun is referred to as GE as in example 6 and other occurrences of the particle as PT, as in example 1.

² There might also be some relationship between GE-insertion and 'code-mixing'. As shown in the following examples, the speakers switch to an English head noun after the inserted particle *ge3* and sometimes a pause :

8. 一 張 嘅 ... CD
 jat1 zoeng1 ge3 ... CD
 one CL GE ... CD
 a ... compact disc

9. 嗰 啲 嘅 ... proper names
 go2 di1 ge3 ... proper names
 that CL GE ... proper names
 those ... proper names

In this paper, the issues concerning GE-insertion will be addressed below mainly through the discussion of its status. Before that, I will outline the hypotheses and methodology of the study.

2. Summary of Hypotheses

Based on my intuition as a native speaker of Cantonese and reading of some related literature, I have formulated some hypotheses about the status of GE-insertion which can be divided into three main areas : syntactic, stylistic and sociolinguistic.

2.1 *Hypotheses on Syntactic Aspects of GE-insertion*

Syntactically, some kind of relationship between the particle and the other constituents of the noun phrase is likely to exist:

Hypothesis 1 : As quoted before (Cheung 1972:91), measure classifiers or noun-derived ones can take 嘅 *ge3*. Then, mensural classifiers like 類 *lei6* (kind) and 盒 *hap2* (box), with their homophonous nominal counterparts, will have a tendency to be more compatible with GE-insertion than classifiers like 個 *go2* or 條 *tiu4*.

Hypothesis 2 : The insertion of GE between the classifier and a polysyllabic head noun such as 朱古力 *zyu1 gu1 lik1* (chocolate) is more likely to be accepted than that between the classifier and a monosyllabic head noun.