

SOCIO-SEMANTIC ASPECTS OF HUMAN MEASURE WORDS IN CANTONESE

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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.

¹ The author is grateful to Prof. Ron Scollon for his valuable comments and assistance in the preparation of this paper.

² The information about Cantonese speakers is based on Ramsey (1987) pp.87, 98-99, and on NAATI 1987 Candidates' Manual p.30.

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 *jék*, is grammatical.³

- (1) a. $\begin{matrix} \sqcup & \circ & \sqcup \\ ?Yau & yat & ma. \\ \text{have} & \text{one} & \text{horse} \\ \text{There is a horse.} \end{matrix}$

- b. $\begin{matrix} \sqcup & \circ & \bar{\quad} & \sqcup \\ Yau & yat & jék & ma. \end{matrix}$

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

- (2) $\begin{matrix} \circ & \circ & \sqcup & \bar{\quad} \\ saam & sam & leung & yi \\ \text{three} & \text{heart} & \text{two} & \text{will} \\ \text{a very undecided person} \end{matrix}$

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) $\begin{matrix} \backslash & \bar{\quad} & / & \circ & \backslash & \bar{\quad} \\ Yan & hai & ho & chung & ming & ge. \\ \text{person} & \text{is} & \text{very} & \text{clever} & \text{bright} & \text{MOD} \\ \text{Human beings are very intelligent.} \end{matrix}$

- (4) $\begin{matrix} / & \bar{\quad} & \sqcup & \bar{\quad} & \bar{\quad} & \bar{\quad} & \bar{\quad} \\ Gau & hai & yau & yung & ge & dung & mat. \\ \text{dog} & \text{be} & \text{have} & \text{use} & \text{MOD} & \text{moving} & \text{thing} \\ \text{Dogs are useful animals.} \end{matrix}$

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) $\begin{matrix} \circ & \bar{\quad} & \circ & \backslash & \bar{\quad} & \backslash \\ yat & goh & chung & ming & ge & yan \\ \text{one} & \text{MEA} & \text{clever} & \text{bright} & \text{MOD} & \text{person} \\ \text{a clever person} \end{matrix}$

- (6) $\begin{matrix} \circ & \bar{\quad} & \sqcup & \bar{\quad} & \bar{\quad} & / \\ yat & jék & yau & yung & ge & gau \\ \text{one} & \text{MEA} & \text{have} & \text{use} & \text{MOD} & \text{dog} \\ \text{a useful dog} \end{matrix}$

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:

human beings	animals	birds	fishes	insects
$\bar{g}oh$	$\bar{j}ek$	$\bar{j}ek$	$t\grave{i}u$	$\bar{j}ek$
$w\acute{a}i$	$t\grave{i}u^*$		$d\acute{a}u^*$	$t\grave{i}u$
$t\grave{i}u$	$p\acute{a}t^*$			
$d\acute{a}u$				
$\bar{j}ek$				

* = 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, $w\acute{a}i$ is a measure word for human beings only, whereas $\bar{j}ek$ 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 $\bar{j}ek$ is used to modify any creatures that have legs, so the following expressions are used:

(7) $\overset{\circ}{y}at$ $\bar{j}ek$ $\acute{g}au$
 one MEA dog
 a dog

(8) $\overset{\circ}{y}at$ $\bar{j}ek$ $\overset{\circ}{y}ing$
 one MEA eagle
 an eagle

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

(9) $\overset{\circ}{y}at$ $\bar{j}ek$ $\overset{\circ}{j}i\text{-}\overset{\circ}{j}ue$
 one MEA spider
 a spider

- (10) $\overset{\circ}{y}at$ $\bar{j}ek$ $\bar{g}aat\text{-}j\acute{a}at$
 one MEA cockroach
 a cockroach

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 $\bar{j}ek$ is used.

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

- (11) $\overset{\circ}{y}at$ $\bar{t}iu$ $y\acute{u}e$
 one MEA fish
 a fish

- (12) $\overset{\circ}{y}at$ $\bar{t}iu$ $ch\grave{u}ng$
 one MEA worm
 a worm

- (13) $\overset{\circ}{y}at$ $\bar{t}iu$ $s\grave{e}$
 one MEA snake
 a snake

As in the case of cockroaches, crawling is a prominent attribute of worms and snakes, but the measure word $\bar{j}ek$ 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) $\overset{\circ}{y}at$ $\bar{t}iu$ $king$ $y\grave{u}e$
 one MEA whale fish
 a whale

Although whales are biologically classified as mammals, they are modified by $\bar{t}iu$ (which is the measure word for fish), and not $\bar{j}ek$ (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 $\bar{t}iu$. 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) $\bar{y}i$ $\bar{t}iao$ $g\acute{o}u$
 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.

$\overset{\circ}{P}at$ 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.

We can see the use of *pāt* to modify a horse in (16).

- (16) *yāt* *pāt* *mā*
 one MEA horse
 a horse

However, when this measure is used in the spoken form in Hong Kong, it is normally used in a specific context, that of horseracing commentaries. When used in writing, it is a slightly more formal word and more of a literary style than *yāt jék mā*.

The measure *dāu* has a use similar to *tiù* and modifies fishes only. It is less often used than *tiù* and is a dialectal variation.

3.2 MEASURE WORDS FOR HUMANS

As we turn to the measures used for human beings, we notice in them an intertwining of semantic, pragmatic and social roles. The most neutral measure is *goh*, which is used to refer to a human person, regardless of the person's sex, age,

occupation or any other attributes. Examples (17–19) show that *goh* is not sex specific, and (18)–(21) show that it does not make age distinctions.

- (17) *yāt* *goh* *yān*
 one MEA person
 a person

- (18) *yāt* *goh* *naam* *yān*
 one MEA male person
 a man

- (19) *yāt* *goh* *nui* *yān*
 one MEA female person
 a woman

- (20) *yāt* *goh* *naam* *jai*
 one MEA male small
 a boy

- (21) *yāt* *goh* *nui* *jai*
 one MEA female small
 a girl

The word *jai* literally means 'son' but in Cantonese it means 'small' when it functions as a diminutive suffix and is similar to '-let' in English words such as 'streamlet' and 'booklet'.

Examples (22)–(24) show that *goh* is used for people engaged in different jobs or with different educational backgrounds and social statuses.

- (22) *yāt* *goh* *gung* *yān*
 one MEA work person
 a worker

- (23) $\overset{\circ}{y}at$ $\bar{g}oh$ $\bar{h}aau$ $\acute{j}eung$
 one MEA school senior
 a school principal
- (24) $\overset{\circ}{y}at$ $\bar{g}oh$ $\acute{j}ung$ $\lrcorner lei$
 one MEA general manage
 a prime minister

Examples (25)–(27) demonstrate that $\bar{g}oh$ can be used to modify people with different outward appearances (beauty, tallness, etc.), inner qualities (intelligence, egoism, materialism, etc.) or other attributes.

- (25) $\overset{\circ}{y}at$ $\bar{g}oh$ $\bar{l}eng$ $\acute{n}ui$
 one MEA beautiful girl
 a beautiful girl
- (26) $\overset{\circ}{y}at$ $\bar{g}oh$ $\overset{\circ}{g}o$ $\acute{l}o$
 one MEA tall chap
 a tall chap
- (27) $\overset{\circ}{y}at$ $\bar{g}oh$ $\bar{s}ai$ $\bar{g}aai$ $\acute{j}ai$
 one MEA life boundary son
 a son of the world, a man or boy full of worldly wisdom

We have seen how $\bar{g}oh$ has the most unrestrictive register and is the most widely used measure word for human individuals.

By contrast, $\acute{w}ai$, which is also used for individual persons, has a far more restricted register. It usually indicates the speaker's courtesy and respect for the referent. The noun that it modifies is usually one that deserves or demands respect, as in (28)–(31).

- (28) $\overset{\circ}{y}at$ $\acute{w}ai$ $\bar{n}aam$ $\bar{s}i$
 one MEA male high.status
 a gentleman
- (29) $\overset{\circ}{y}at$ $\acute{w}ai$ $\lrcorner nui$ $\bar{s}i$
 one MEA female high.status
 a lady
- (30) $\overset{\circ}{y}at$ $\acute{w}ai$ $\bar{j}ing$ $\acute{f}oo$ $\overset{\circ}{g}woon$ $\grave{y}uen$
 one MEA political office official member
 a government official
- (31) $\overset{\circ}{y}at$ $\acute{w}ai$ $\lrcorner lo$ $\grave{y}an$ $\overset{\circ}{g}a$
 one MEA old person family
 an elderly person

In (28) and (29) $\acute{w}ai$ is used because it is an appropriate word to match 'gentleman' and 'lady', which are polite forms of address and reference, whereas in (30) a government

official demands respect by virtue of his official position and in (31) an elderly person deserves respect by virtue of his age.

However, in colloquial Cantonese, it is more common to use *gōh* in place of *wái* for the above examples. When *wái* is used, it carries with it a certain degree of formality and sheds light on the tone of the speaker and his relationship to the referent and to the hearer. A restaurant waiter will probably say to a customer:

- (32) *Gei* *doh* *wái*?
 how many MEA
 A table for how many people?

By using the measure word *wái*, the waiter is conscious of and intends to make others conscious of the refined and respectful language that he is using. The use of *gōh* instead of *wái* in this situation would sound a bit rude. But the same waiter would not sound rude if he says the following to his workmate:

- (33) *Hai* *gōh* *dō* *yau* *saam* *gōh* *haak*.
 in that place have three MEA customer
 There are three customers over there.

It should also be noted that *gōh* and *wái* are sometimes interchangeable but not always. It would be acceptable to use *gōh* for a lady, as in (34), the reason being that *gōh* is a neutral and general word.

- (34) *yat* *gōh* *nui* *si*
 one MEA female high.status
 a lady

However, it would be odd to say

- (35) ? *yāt* *wái* *nui* *yan*
 one MEA female person
 a woman

The measure *wái* is a more appropriate measure word for a lady and so is *gōh* for a woman. Moreover, *wái* definitely cannot be used to modify a beggar, thief or rascal, the outcasts of society, given the chasm between the scornful attitude that society normally shows towards these classes of people and the respect and courtesy that *wái* entails. Thus the distinctive uses of *gōh* and *wái* indicate the important pragmatic and social roles which Cantonese measure words play. This is similar to Craig's (1986:270) observation that Jacaltec noun classifiers vary "in accordance to the speaker's relationship to and attitude toward the person being talked about".

3.3 SOME SHIFTING MEASURE WORDS

In sharp contrast to the use of *wái*, *tiù* is never used in public speech because the language is considered vulgar. The measure *tiù* is a common measure word for both objects as in (36), and living creatures that are long in shape, as in examples (11)–(13) above.

- (36) $\overset{\circ}{y}at$ $t\grave{i}u$ $p\grave{e}i$ $da\acute{a}i$
 one MEA leather belt
 a leather belt

The semantic shift in $t\grave{i}u$ needs to be studied in the particular social and cultural contexts of Hong Kong. The 1970s was a time of rapid economic and technological development in the colony. As a result of such development, television became an increasingly important part of ordinary people's lives. The influence of this mass medium was manifested in various areas of society, notably in the language use of the speech community. This background provided much motivation for the extension or crossover of categories. Since there was a trend towards using authentic language in dramatisation, vulgar language was used in stories depicting triad⁴ or criminal activities. Real or imagined language that a triad member was expected to use was imitated on television and radio. It was in this situation that phrases such as the following were first used:

- (37) Yau $t\grave{i}u$ $y\acute{a}u$.
 have MEA bloke
 There is a bloke.

- (38) yat $t\grave{i}u$ $y\acute{a}u$
 one MEA bloke
 a bloke

Example (38) can also be used as an adverbial phrase, meaning 'alone', or 'all by myself/himself', and so on.

The original purpose of using $t\grave{i}u$ was to express the speaker's strong emotion of anger, hatred or contempt for the referent by dehumanising him, by using a measure word that normally modifies non-human creatures and objects.

Over a period of ten years, the sense of $t\grave{i}u$ has gradually broadened to carry another connotation, that of people living illicitly as husband and wife, or their promiscuous behaviour. Because of this change in sense, two measure words are given another important role: they determine the meaning of the sentence, as shown in the following examples:

- (39) Kui $y\acute{a}u$ $t\grave{i}u$ $n\acute{u}i$.
 3SG have MEA daughter
 He has a de facto wife.

- (40) Kui $y\acute{a}u$ $g\bar{o}h$ $n\acute{u}i$.
 3SG have MEA daughter
 He/She has a daughter.

- (41) Kui $y\acute{a}u$ $t\grave{i}u$ $ja\acute{i}$.
 3SG have MEA son
 She has a de facto husband.

⁴ Triad societies are illegal organisations of gangsters. Their members are involved in a wide range of criminal activities but sadly many of the stories depicting notorious triad figures are given a positive and heroic interpretation in TV series and films.

- (42) $\overset{\curvearrowright}{Kui}$ $\overset{\curvearrowright}{yau}$ \overline{goh} $\overset{\curvearrowright}{jai}$.
 3SG have MEA son
 He/She has a son.

So far I have analysed three clearly divergent senses of the word $\overset{\curvearrowright}{tiu}$: the first sense is based on human perception of the shape of the referent, the second is largely dominated by the speaker's attitude, and the third demonstrates social relationships. In fact, $\overset{\curvearrowright}{tiu}$ also provides information about the speaker's social background.

The 1980s saw an increasing acceptance of the second sense of $\overset{\curvearrowright}{tiu}$ (i.e. the sense of examples (37) and (38) into everyday use by people other than real triad members and criminals or dramatis personae). Now more and more members of the working class and people at the lower end of the social ladder have incorporated this word into their speech. Even a large number of male speakers who have a higher social status seem to find it particularly expressive. They tend to use it occasionally in private conversations with close friends in order to express their intense feelings, or indicate their masculinity in using strong language or just as a gesture of solidarity with other male speakers. Female speakers seldom use this word because it is overtly stigmatised language, although it may enjoy covert prestige among the groups of people mentioned above. The measure used in the third sense, that of de facto relations and promiscuous behaviour, was and still is considered a much coarser term. So when the word $\overset{\curvearrowright}{tiu}$ is used to describe human persons, it generally reflects the low social class and personal qualities of the speaker; however, there is one exception, which will be discussed in the following paragraph.

The measure $\overset{\curvearrowright}{tiu}$ modifies only a few nouns that refer to humans. The nouns $\overset{\curvearrowright}{yau}$, 'bloke', $\overset{\curvearrowright}{nui}$, 'daughter, female', and $\overset{\curvearrowright}{jai}$ 'son' as given in (37), (39) and (41) are the most common nouns that it qualifies. It is also used for the noun \overline{hon} , which means 'man' with its associations of manliness, physical strength, truthfulness, bravery, and so on. When $\overset{\curvearrowright}{tiu}$ is used to modify \overline{hon} , the vulgarity pertaining to the measure word is immediately eliminated. For example, phrases such as in (43) and (44) are idiomatic expressions which were first used in literary writing and are considered refined language.

- (43) $\overset{\circ}{yat}$ $\overset{\curvearrowright}{tiu}$ $\overset{\curvearrowright}{ho}$ \overline{hon}
 one MEA good man
 a true man

- (44) $\overset{\circ}{yat}$ $\overset{\curvearrowright}{tiu}$ \overline{daai} \overline{hon}
 one MEA big man
 a physically strong man

The measure $\overset{\circ}{dau}$ is another measure word which modifies $\overset{\curvearrowright}{yau}$ (bloke). It has the same register as $\overset{\curvearrowright}{tiu}$ but it is less often used. Again the speaker uses the word to dehumanise the referent of the utterance because $\overset{\circ}{dau}$ is normally the container measure for rice. A common vernacular expression is

- (45) $\overset{\circ}{yat}$ $\overset{\circ}{dau}$ \overline{faan}
 one MEA rice
 a large bowl [or any container of a similar function] of rice

In Cantonese, a very stupid person is called *fāan-tung* ('rice-barrel'), who does not know how to do anything but eat (rice). Therefore by using *dau*, a measure word specific to rice and applying it to a person, the speaker shows his contempt for the referent.

At this point, we may be tempted to draw the conclusion that if a speaker uses a measure word which is normally used to modify an animal such as *tü*, or an inanimate object, such as *dau*, to modify a person, he is displaying a negative attitude towards the referent. In fact, we cannot make such generalisations, as I will illustrate with another measure, *jék*.

The measure *jék* is an interesting individual measure for human beings. Normally it is used for animals, birds and insects. (See examples (7)–(10).) Sometimes Cantonese speakers use *jék* to compare a human being and an animal, as in

- (46) *Yau jék daai-jék lo.*
 have MEA big-sized man
 There is a physically strong man.

The focus is on the referent's physical size and the measure word relates his size to a large animal size. The sense is not derogatory. Sentence (47) shows another meaning:

- (47) *Kui jō do yat jék ye gam.*
 3SG works until one MEA creature like
 He/she is so busy with his/her work that he/she is just like a non-human creature.

The sentence probably has the same meaning as 'He works like a dog.' The measure word *jék* suggests the speaker's sympathy with the referent. Example (48) shows yet another meaning:

- (48) *Nei jék ye a!*
 you MEA creature INT
 You little devil!

This is a term of gentle rebuke which indicates the intimate relationship between the speaker and the referent. When *jék* is contrasted with *tü*, we find that describing a person as an animal does not necessarily entail a contemptuous attitude.

4. CONCLUSION

It can be seen that Cantonese measure words serve a variety of functions, from the simple semantic role of classifying human and non-human creatures according to their physical sizes and shapes to the more complex functions of expressing pragmatic roles and social interactions. We find that there is a much higher level of subtlety and flexibility in the use of measure words for human beings than for non-human creatures. This is probably true of measure words in other languages as well because human attributes are perceived as far more complex than those of non-human creatures, and there is far more fluidity in human relationships than in the relationship between humans and their environment. The users of a human language are constantly exploring ways of expressing these ever-changing relationships.

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