

## Variable use of Heritage Cantonese classifiers

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Classifiers, morphemes that categorize nouns by semantic category, are a robust grammatical feature of Cantonese. Classifiers specialize to noun classes and have no English parallel (except rarely used partitives, *e.g.* “murder of crows”). They are governed by a range of complex factors. These facts make them an ideal candidate for investigating language contact phenomena. While acquisition of Cantonese classifiers in L1 and balanced bilingual contexts is documented through experimental studies (*cf.* Loke & Harrison 1986, Mak 1991), the study of classifier use in spontaneous speech is less developed, as is exploration of classifiers in the heritage language context, where there is imbalance in use, status, attitudes and institutional support of the two languages (but *cf.* Wei & Li 2001; Chan & Nagy 2015). We compare classifier usage in Heritage and Homeland Cantonese to test claims that heritage languages are uniform in how they simplify the source language (*cf.* Polinsky 2008).

Conversational Cantonese data from transcribed sociolinguistic interviews are used to determine patterns of classifier use. 50 tokens \* 17 speakers are coded for 7 linguistic factors. Speakers are coded for sex, age, ethnic orientation and speaker group (*Gen1* speakers are long-term residents in Toronto who grew up in Hong Kong; *Gen2* speakers grew up in Toronto and have *Gen1* parents; *homeland* speakers were born and still live in Hong Kong). Logistic regression models are constructed to show the effect of each factor on the choice of classifier, showing which patterns differ significantly between speaker groups.

In spite of heritage speakers' widespread claims that *go3* is overgeneralizing within their speech community, as a way of compensating for lack of knowledge of more specific classifiers due to restricted input, we find no significant difference in the rate of *go3* use between Homeland, Gen1 and Gen2 speakers of Cantonese. Grammatical number of the noun was the most significant factor in predicting the canonicity of classifier choice for both heritage generations and the homeland speakers, with plural and mass nouns decidedly more likely to be modified by the canonical classifier than singulars. While we find differences in significance of some factors (NP syntax, status as borrowed word, abstractness) across generations, the overall rate and accuracy of *go3* use is similar across all generations, and there is no pattern that can be interpreted as simplification from the *homeland* through *Gen1* and increasingly to *Gen2* speakers. These results contrast with Wei & Lee's (2001) study of *Gen2* British Cantonese speakers, where their patterns were interpreted as showing limited acquisition of classifiers “in an L2 environment” without direct comparison to non-heritage speaker data. Thus, the overgeneralization effect may not be an artifact of the “decline” of the heritage language or attrition of heritage speakers, but rather an ongoing change in the Cantonese language itself. This conforms to the trend of “non-decline” in grammatical complexity for heritage language speakers when tested via corpus-based rather than experimental approaches (Nagy 2015).

### References

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Classifiers, morphemes that categorize Cantonese nouns semantically, have no English parallel and are governed by complex factors, making them ideal for investigating language contact phenomena. Conversational Cantonese data from 17 sociolinguistic interviews are analysed to compare *Gen1* (long-term residents in Toronto who grew up in Hong Kong), *Gen2* (grew up in Toronto and have *Gen1* parents) and *homeland* speakers (born and living in Hong Kong) to test claims that heritage languages are uniform in how they simplify their grammar (*cf.* Polinsky 2008). In spite of heritage speakers' claims that they overgeneralize *go3*, to compensate for lack of lexical knowledge due to restricted input, we find *go3* use is similar across groups. No patterns can be interpreted as simplification from the *homeland* through *Gen1* and increasingly to *Gen2* speakers. This conforms to the trend of "non-decline" in grammatical complexity for heritage languages when tested via corpus-based *vs.* experimental approaches (Nagy 2015).