

Cantonese Established Deviance

Numeral classifier languages worldwide generally associate non-partitive classifiers with nouns based on tangible traits like shape and texture or perceived ones like animacy and function. This is generally the case for Cantonese and Chinese as a whole, but at times its speakers deviate from expected classifier-noun pairings based on these characteristic types, opting instead for classifiers which signify traits incongruous to those of the nouns with which they are associated in such deviations. This consistent, rule-based system of deviant classifier use is called established deviance.

As this study will demonstrate, established deviance is most frequently used to imply or express speaker and cultural attitudes towards a given entity. Common cases involve the animal classifier 隻 zek3 being applied disparagingly to human nouns, for example. In certain cases, established deviance also causes noun referent disambiguation or swapping which hinges solely upon classifier selection. A classic example of this is 個仔 go3 zai2 and 條仔 tiu4 zai2 referring to one's son and one's boyfriend respectively, with the referent alternating strictly via classifier deviation.

This project builds upon earlier descriptions of deviant classifier use in Malaysian Cantonese by drawing upon further examples from the Hong Kong dialect. The findings of the resulting trans-regional study are then used as the basis for identification of the semantic subcategories of both established and spontaneous classifier deviance, as well as a description of their relationships with various discourse functions like euphemism, metaphorical extension and denigration. This discussion is intended to describe the structure, roles and diachronic implications of the classifier deviance mechanisms at work in everyday Cantonese language use.