Cantonese Reduplicative Classifiers as Quantifying Determiners

Linguistics Seminars

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Abstract

Two central claims have been proposed to account for the meaning of prenominal reduplicative classifiers (henceforth prenominal “CL + CL”) in Chinese: (i) with the obligatory presence of dou/dou1 ‘all’, prenominal “CL + CL” is a distributive quantifier, considered to be on a par with English “every/each” or Mandarin mei ‘every’ (see e.g. Cheng 2009, N. Zhang 2013 and Zhang & Tang 2013, 2018); and (ii) prenominal “CL + CL” conveys a plural reading of “many” (see e.g. Steinidl 2010). Questions related to the semantics of classifier reduplication and how the distributive reading and the “many” reading are derived have not yet been fully answered. In this talk, I will further discuss the semantics of prenominal classifier reduplication, focusing on Cantonese. The analysis I propose draws heavily on ideas introduced by Hoeksema (1983), Westerstähl (1984), Partee (2004) and others on quantifying determiners like “many” and “few”, and ideas introduced in the cover theory proposed by Schwarzschild (1996), Brisson (1998, 2003), and others for plurals. I will argue that prenominal reduplicative classifier, be it the distributive “CL + CL” or the “many” “CL + CL”, is a quantifying determiner, which is ambiguous between a quantifier type and a modifier type. While the “quantifier-type” [CL + CL] gives the strong proportional reading, the “modifier-type” [CL + CL], being ambiguous between adjectives and determiners, would give the weak cardinal reading or the [CL + CL_{[1]}{1}] reading. If the proposed semantics of prenominal reduplicative classifier holds, it would imply that Chinese may have determiners, which is at least true in Cantonese.

Speaker

Peppina Po-lun Lee is Associate Professor in the Department of Linguistics and Translation at City University of Hong Kong. Specializing in theoretical linguistics, her research interests cover semantics, syntax-semantics interface, and Chinese and Cantonese linguistics. She has published papers and books on various topics, including Cantonese particles, negation, eventuality and quantification. Her recent projects include classifier reduplication and focus particles in Cantonese and Mandarin.