

THE POST-VERBAL PRONOUN KEOI IN CHILD CANTONESE: A CORPUS-BASED STUDY

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the acquisition of the third person pronoun *keoi5* 佢 with inanimate referents in post-verbal position (henceforth, KEOI) in Hong Kong Cantonese. Following a linguistic analysis of KEOI vis-à-vis its equivalents *it* in English and *tā* 它 in Mandarin Chinese, we conducted a corpus-based study on the use of KEOI in 9 Cantonese-English bilingual children (1;03–4;06) and 3 Cantonese monolingual children (1;10–2;09) in naturalistic settings. Results show that Cantonese-speaking children mainly used KEOI as a canonical object of verbal predicates expressing irrealis bounded disposal events, indicating their early sensitivity to the aspectual properties of KEOI-clauses. While monolingual children were consistently adult-like in using KEOI, bilingual children produced unbounded KEOI-clauses unattested in their monolingual peers and the adults. They also used higher rates of realis KEOI-clauses and demonstrated interchangeable use between KEOI and *it* in code-mixed utterances. Our findings lend support to the proposal that KEOI marks bounded disposals with irrealis results or states. Input and language experience are shown to influence the acquisition of KEOI-clauses, with cross-linguistic influence of

Acknowledgments We are grateful to the anonymous reviewers for their valuable comments and suggestions. We would like to thank Qiuyun Cai for her help with checking parts of the data. We have benefited from fruitful discussion with Stephen Matthews, Ziyin Mai, and Szeto Pui Yiu and would like to thank them for their insightful feedback.

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English likely induced by the interplay among ambiguity of input in Cantonese, extensive exposure to English and regular processing of the English pronouns.

KEYWORDS

Cantonese pronoun *keoi5* First language acquisition Cross-linguistic influence Boundedness Irrealis

1. INTRODUCTION

This study looks into the use of the post-verbal third person pronoun *keoi5* 佢 ‘him/ her/ it’ in Hong Kong Cantonese. Very few studies (except Man 1998, Gan 2011, Huang 2011, Lin and Li 2019) have investigated the properties of *keoi5* and little is known about the acquisition of *keoi5* in children. The present study is the first to focus on child first language (L1) acquisition of *keoi5* in Cantonese. It investigates the unique properties of post-verbal *keoi5* in Hong Kong Cantonese vis-à-vis its translation equivalents *it* in English and *tā* 它 ‘it’ in Mandarin Chinese. Based on the linguistic analysis, we examine the use of post-verbal *keoi5* in child Cantonese through a corpus study of naturalistic data from Cantonese monolingual children and simultaneous Cantonese-English bilingual children. We then discuss the learnability problem (i.e., how children construct their grammar from the input) and cross-linguistic influence in bilingual acquisition.

When *keoi5* is used as a referential pronoun, it usually refers to animate nouns in Cantonese and its use for inanimate reference is found primarily in object, rather than subject, position (Matthews and Yip 2011). In the present study, we will focus on the use of *keoi5* in post-verbal positions, examining its use as a third person pronoun with inanimate referents. This is the locus where *keoi5* differs most significantly from the English corresponding form *it* and the Mandarin Chinese counterpart *tā*. In particular, the use of post-verbal *keoi5* with inanimate referents requires bounded predicates (see section 2.2), whereas *keoi5* with animate referents, the English pronoun *it* and the Mandarin Chinese pronoun *tā* are not subject to such requirement, be they in subject or object position. In the rest of the paper, we will use *KEOI* to refer to the use of *keoi5* as a post-verbal third

粤语动后人称代词“佢” ——基于儿童语料库的习得研究

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摘要

本文研究儿童对香港粤语里位于动词后方、指代无生命事物的人称代词“佢”的习得。我们分析了粤语代词“佢”的句法分布及“佢”字句的体貌特点，将“佢”与英语代词“it”和普通话代词“它”进行对比，并通过儿童语料库观察9名粤-英双语儿童(1;03至4;06岁)及3名粤语单语儿童(1;10至2;09岁)在自然语言环境中对“佢”的使用情况。研究发现粤语儿童在习得初期对“佢”字句的体貌特点敏感，代词“佢”主要用作动词谓语句的常规宾语，这些句子通常表达“有界(bounded)”“未然(irrealis)”的处置事件(disposal events)。粤语单语儿童对“佢”字句的使用与成人语法一致，粤-英双语儿童则产出单语儿童和成人都不使用的“佢”字句，他们使用“佢”字句表达“已然(realistic)”事件的频率更高，且出现“佢”和英语代词“it”互用的语码混杂现象。我们的研究结果支持把粤语“佢”字句分析为表达“有界”“未然”事件的处置结构，并显示输入和语言经验会影响“佢”字句的习得。英语对粤-英双语儿童“佢”字句的习得产生了跨语言影响，可能是粤语“佢”字句存在输入歧义以及双语儿童广泛接触英语和频繁加工英语代词等因素相互作用的结果。

关键词

粤语代词“佢” 一语习得 跨语言影响 有界性 未然