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Two Contrastive Meanings of Cantonese “dou1”

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Cantonese “dou1” shares some commonalities with Mandarin “dou1”. For example, both can be used to denote universal quantification and express emphatic mood. Yet the two “dou1” also differ in many aspects, which have been discussed by some scholars (such as 蔡建华(1996)). In this paper, I will point out a distinctive feature of Cantonese “dou1” that is not shared by Mandarin “dou1” and is little mentioned in the literature, i.e. Cantonese “dou1” can be used to convey two contrastive meanings when used with different intonations or different sentence-final particles (SFPs). More specifically, Cantonese “dou1” can sometimes be used to convey an emphatic meaning and plays a role similar to “even”, as exemplified by the following sentence:

keoi5 sing4sou3 dou1 sik1 laa1, gaa1sou3 gang3gaa1 m4 sai2 gong2.

3s multiplication dou1 know SFP addition more not need say
He / She can even do multiplication, not to mention addition.

Sometimes it can be used to convey an attenuating meaning and plays a role similar to “at least”, as exemplified by the following sentence:

keoi5 gaa1sou3 dou1 sik1 ge2, sing4sou3 zau6 naan4 gong2 laa3.

3s addition dou1 know SFP multiplication then hard say SFP
It's hard to say whether he / she can do multiplication. But at least he / she can do addition.

Interestingly, the aforesaid phenomenon can also be found in some other languages. For example, according to Giannakidou (2007) and Crnič (2011), “esto” in Greek and “magari” in Slovene can play the roles of “even” and “at least” in different contexts. I think this peculiarity can be accounted for by using the Scalar Model Theory (SMT) developed by Fillmore *et al* (1988), Kay (1990), etc. According to SMT, “even” and “at least” are two scalar operators (SOs) denoting different levels of informativeness: “even” is an emphatic SO denoting extremely high (but not necessarily the highest) level of informativeness, whereas “at least” is an attenuating SO denoting extremely low (but not the lowest) level of informativeness.

Despite this contrast, according to the analyses of Kay (1990, 1997), Sawada (2003) and Nakanishi and Rullmann (2009), “even” and “at least” in fact share some similar features. First, the felicitous use of both items is subject to the following

condition:

The informativenss of TP > The informativenss of CP

where TP (text proposition) refers to the proposition containing “even” or “at least” and CP (context proposition) refers to another proposition that is in contrast to TP in the context. Second, both “even” and “at least” can generate scalar entailments (i.e. inferences from a highly informative proposition to a lowly informative proposition) and scalar implicatures (i.e. inferences from a lowly informative proposition to the negation of a highly informative proposition). It is precisely due to these commonalities between “even” and “at least” that some languages (including Cantonese) use the same word to convey the contrastive meanings of these two lexical items.

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