A Study of Anaphoric Non-specific Object Drop in Cantonese: Classification and Derivation

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Abstract

There were numerous studies on anaphoric object drop in Chinese (see Chao 1968: 312, Li and Thompson 1981: 657, Wang 2002: 201, Matthews and Yip 2011: 973, Tang 2015: 141, among many others). By reviewing widely-discussed anaphoric object drop in Chinese, this paper points to the fact that anaphoric non-specific object drop appears not to be well-studied while this type of object drop is also characteristic of Cantonese. The aim of this paper is twofold: first to classify anaphoric non-specific object drop in Cantonese; secondly to study how it is licensed in the simplicity of its theoretical machinery, as compared with the counterparts in English. Based on type of object dropped, anaphoric non-specific object drop can be further classified into three sub-types: (A) anaphoric non-specific existential, (B) anaphoric generic and (C) anaphoric non-specific attributive. As for its derivation, anaphoric non-specific object drop can be valued from an antecedent, and it is with a referential variable. Anaphoric non-specific object drop in Cantonese is argued to be derived by NP-ellipsis, stranding a null determiner. The overall aim of this paper is, from both the syntax and semantics perspectives, to shed some lights in understanding anaphoric non-specific object drop in Cantonese.

Keywords

antecedent, Cantonese, non-specific object drop, NP-ellipsis

1. Introduction

In the most general terms, anaphoric object drop[1] means an object is dropped when there is an antecedent in the near context. There were numerous studies on anaphoric object drop in Mandarin Chinese and Cantonese (see Chao 1968: 312, Li and Thompson 1981: 657, Wang 2002: 201, Matthews and Yip 2011: 973, Tang 2015: 141, among many others). By reviewing widely-discussed anaphoric object drop in Mandarin Chinese and Cantonese, this

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[1] The terms object drop and null object will be used interchangeably in this paper.

paper points to the fact that anaphoric **specific object drop**, which means the object drop with specific reference has a definite antecedent, has been mostly studied. However, anaphoric **non-specific object drop** appears not to be focused even though this type of object drop is also characteristic of Cantonese. Hence, the aim of this paper is twofold: first to classify anaphoric non-specific object drop in Cantonese; secondly to examine how it can be licensed in the simplicity of its theoretical machinery, as compared to the counterparts in English. The overall aim of this paper is to shed some lights in understanding anaphoric non-specific object drop in Cantonese from the syntax and semantics perspectives.

2. Literature Review on Anaphoric Object Drop

Previously, there were studies revealing the existence of anaphoric object drop in several East Asian languages including Japanese (see Nakamura 1987, Takahashi 2008), Korean (see Kim 1989), Thai (see Pingkarawat 1985), Mandarin Chinese (see Li and Thompson 1981, Liu 2014) and Cantonese (see Cheung 2007, Yip and Matthews 2007, Tang 2015). Those languages allow object drop, provided that the referent is recoverable from the context. Consider (1), (2) and (3).

(1) Q: Taroo-wa doo simasita ka? (Japanese)
Taroo-top how did Q[2]
'What happened to Taroo?'
A: Sensei-ga sikarimasita.
teacher-nom scolded
'The teacher scolded [him].' Takahashi (2008: 394)

(2) Mother: Jiwon-i mamma mek-ullay? (Korean)
Jiwon-nom food eat-intend
'Do you want to eat food?'

Baby Jiwon: An mek-ullay.
(age 2;5) not eat-intend
'No, [I] don't want to eat [it].'

O'Grady, Yamashita, and Cho (2008: 65)

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[2] Abbreviations in the gloss are arranged as: CL: classifier, dem: determiner, nom: nominative case, PL: plural marker, Q: question particle, SFP: sentence final particle.

In (2), O'Grady, Yamashita, and Cho (2008) point out that the mother has used an overt direct object, setting the scenario that its referent can be identified contextually, and the subject 'I'' and the object 'food' can also be null in Korean.

(3) Q:　　Khun　　ʔàan nǎŋsɯ̌u lêm nán rɯ̌u yaŋ?　　　　　　　　　　(Thai)
　　　　　　you　　read book CL dem or　not　yet
　　　　　　'Have you read that book?'
　　A:　　Phǒm　　ʔàan　　lέεw.
　　　　　　I　　　read　　already　　　　(phǒm = masculine first person pronoun)
　　　　　　'I have already read that book.'　　　　　　　　　Promprakai, N. (p.c.)

In addition, both Mandarin Chinese and Cantonese also allow anaphoric object drop. Li and Thompson (1981: 657) have pointed out that 'a salient feature of Chinese grammar is the fact that noun phrases that are understood from context do not need to be specified.' The following examples (4) and (5) illustrate the null object in a referential context in Mandarin Chinese and Cantonese.

(4) Q:　　Zhei4-xie5 shu1 ni3　yao4 wo3 fang4 zai4 na3-li5?　　(Mandarin Chinese)
　　　　　　these-PL　book you want I　　put　at　where?
　　　　　　'Where do you want me to put these books?'
　　A:　　Gei3　　wo3.
　　　　　　give　　I
　　　　　　'Give (them) to me.'　　　　　　　　　Li and Thompson (1981: 657)

In (4) a null object with specific reference has a definite antecedent *zhe4i-xie5 shu1* 'these books', with a demonstrative *zhei4-xie5* 'these'. Yip and Matthews (2007: 135) also draw out attention to how a null object is understood in Cantonese. A null object refers to an entity which has been explicitly mentioned in the preceding discourse, such as *ni1-gin6 saam1* 'this dress' as in the example (5) below.

(5) Q:　　Lei5　　zung1-m4-zung1-ji3　　ni1-gin6 saam1 aa3?　　(Cantonese)
　　　　　　you　　like-not-like　　　　this-CL　dress SFP
　　　　　　'Do you like this dress?'
　　A:　　Ngo5　　zung1-ji3　　　aa3!
　　　　　　I　　　like　　　　　SFP
　　　　　　'(Yes,) I like [it]!'　　　　　　　　　Yip and Matthews (2007: 135)

In (5) a null object with specific reference has a definite antecedent *ni1-gin6 saam1* 'this dress'.

As seen above, many languages including Cantonese also allow anaphoric specific object drop, that is, the object drop with specific reference has a definite antecedent. However, it should be noted that the following examples (6) and (7) point to the fact that anaphoric object drop in Cantonese can be non-specific, and the antecedent is not definite. Consider (6) and (7).

(6)   a. Maa5-lei6 tai2-gin3 jat1-zek3 maau1, joek3-hon6 dou1 tai2-gin3. (Cantonese)
        Mary   see   one-CL   cat   John   also see
        'Mary saw a cat. John also saw it/one.'
      Two possible interpretations:
      b. Mary saw a cat. John also saw it. (the **same** cat)
      c. Mary saw a cat. John also saw one. (can be a **different** cat)

Here it can be specific in (6b), so that it means 'Both Mary and John saw a specific cat' (e.g. it's the one in the house), but it can also have a non-specific existential reading in (6c.): 'There is another cat such that John saw it' (see section 3 for more discussion).

(7)   a. Ngo5 zong6-gin3 jat1-go3 pang4-jau5, joek3-hon6 dou1 zong6-gin3 (Cantonese)
        I   meet   one-CL   friend,   John   also meet
        'I met a friend. John also met him or her/one'.
      Two possible interpretations:
      b. I met a friend. John also met him or her. (the **same** friend)
      c. I met a friend. John also met one. (can be a **different** friend)

In the same vein, the above (6a) and (7a) have revealed that Cantonese also allows object drop but the antecedent does not have to be definite, and in fact, does not have to be specific. In the previous studies, anaphoric non-specific object drop in Cantonese appears not to be widely studied, so this paper attempts to study and classify anaphoric non-specific object drop which can be further divided into three sub-types as shown in the following section.

3. Discussion

I now turn to examine the classification of anaphoric non-specific object drop in Cantonese, and they are distinguished by type of object dropped: (A) anaphoric non-specific existential, (B) anaphoric generic and (C) anaphoric non-specific attributive.

3.1. Types of anaphoric non-specific object drop[3]

A. Anaphoric non-specific existential

In (8a.) a null object with non-specific reference has **an indefinite antecedent** *jat1-zek3 hung4* 'one bear'.

> (8) a. Joek3-hon6 tai2-gin3 jat1-zek3 hung4 laa1, maa5-lei6 dou1 tai2-gin3. (Cantonese)
>   John   see   one-CL bear ASP Mary   also see
>   'John saw a bear. Mary also saw one.'
>   b. John saw a bear. Mary also saw *(one). (meaning 'Mary saw a bear'. It can be a
>   **different** bear.)

The plural of (8a) is:

> (9) a. Joek3-hon6 tai2-gin3 jat1-di1 hung4 laa1, maa5lei6 dou1 tai2-gin3.　(Cantonese)
>   John   see   one-PL bear ASP Mary   also see
>   'John saw some bears. Mary also saw some.'
>   b. John saw some bears. Mary also saw *(some).

This type of anaphoric non-specific existential object drop can also be found in Mandarin Chinese, for instance, consider (10).

> (10) a. Zhang1-san1 hen3-kuai4-de5 du2-wan2-le5   san1-ben3 shu1. (Mandarin Chinese)
>   Zhangsan   quickly   read-finish-ASP three-CL book
>   'Zhangsan finished reading three books quickly.'
>   b. Li3-si4 ye3 du2-wan2-le5.
>   Lisi   also read-finish-ASP
>   'Lisi also finished three books.'   Liu (2014: 125)

B. Anaphoric generic

In (11a) a null object with non-specific reference has **an indefinite antecedent** *hung4* 'bear', and it has a 'generic reading': John likes anything which belongs to the *kind* or *species* 'bear'. According to Snape and Yusa (2013: 166), genericity refers to "those generics that do not state anything about an object but about objects in general or a generalisation based on properties of individual objects".[4]

(11) a. Joek3-hon6   zung1-ji3 hung4, maa5-lei6 dou1 zung1-ji3.   (Cantonese)
        John   like   bear Mary   also like
        'John likes bears. Mary also likes them.'
      b. John likes bears. Mary also likes *(them).

Simply put, genericity refers to the property of an object that denotes a "kind", not an individual (e.g. animal kinds: bears) whereas non-specificity refers to the property of an object that can be argued to be an individual (e.g. one non-specific bear in a jungle) (see Krifka, Pelletier, Carlson, Meulen, Link, and Gennaro 1995, Snape and Yusa 2013). In addition, the following Cantonese example (12) extracted from other previous study (Matthews and Yip 2011) can also reveal the occurrence of this type of anaphoric generic object drop. Consider (12).

(12) a. Leih5 jung1-mh4-jung1-yi3 sihk6 Chiuh4-jau1 choi3 a3?   (Cantonese)
        you   like-not-like   eat   Chiu-chow   food SFP
        'Do you like Chiu Chow food?'
      b. Gang2-haih6   jung1-yi3 lai3!
        of-course   like   SFP
        "Yes, of course I do."   Matthews and Yip (2011: 97)[5]

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4   It should be noted that there are differences between the notions of "genericity" and "non-specificity". Following Krifka, Pelletier, Carlson, Meulen, Link, and Gennaro (1995), Snape and Yusa (2013) use the following examples to illustrate the notion of genericity.
    (i)   Dinosaurs are extinct.
    (ii)   #A dinosaur is extinct.
    Snape and Yusa (2013: 166) argue that the subject argument in (i) must denote a kind since only a kind, not an individual (a non-specific), can be extinct. In (ii), the indefinite subject "a dinosaur" cannot be used as a kind-referring term because it is incompatible with a kind predicate such as be *extinct*.
5   This example is an original version from Matthews and Yip (2011: 97), only with tone numbers added in this paper.

C. Anaphoric non-specific attributive

In (13a) a null object with non-specific reference is non-specific in a different sense, and I will call this the 'attributive reading of NP'. It is non-existential; it does not mean that there is a car, and he or she wants it.[6] It might be called a non-referential reading, but in a sense it is still referential.

> (13) a. Joek3-hon6 jiu3　jat1-gaa2 san1 ce1, maa5-lei6 dou1 jiu3.　　　　(Cantonese)
> 　　　　John　　　want one-CL　new car Mary　　also want
> 　　　　'John wants a new car. Mary also wants one.
> 　　　b. John wants a new car. Mary also wants *(one).

It should be also noted that Jiang, Pan and Zou (1997) study the extent to which NPs can be interpreted and they also draw our attention to the differences between generic and attributive readings of NPs. They (1996: 8) clearly explain that "an attributive NP denotes a number of properties such that whichever entity that satisfies them can be identified with the N. However, a generic NP denotes a natural property, and it is not the case that the language user can make use of the set denoted by N' to derive an entity from it. That is, generics denote properties and are not reducible to single entities". Put simply, a generic NP differs from an attributive NP in the sense that the latter only possesses some property, but the property is not necessarily the natural property of the NP (see Jiang, Pan and Zou 1997). This type of anaphoric non-specific attributive object drop can also be found in Mandarin Chinese. Consider (14).

> (14) a. Yue1-han4 xiang3 ti4 ta1 nu3-er2　qing3 yi2-wei4 gang1-qin2 jia1-jiao4. Dan4,
> 　　　　John　　　want　for his daughter hire　one-CL　piano　　tutor　　but
> 　　　　ta1 hai2-mei2 zhao3-dao4.
> 　　　　he not-yet　　find-arrive　　　　　　　　　　　　　(Mandarin Chinese)
> 　　　　'John wants to hire a piano tutor for his daughter, but he has not found a piano tutor.'
> 　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　Liu (2014: 163)[7]

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[6]　Thanks to one reviewer's comment on pointing out the fact that the object drop should also be referred to as an indefinite in the intensional context created by the attitude verb "want". Admittedly, the semantic properties of verbs do play a significant role when interpreting a dropped object (see Huang 2000, Anaphora, chapter 3).

[7]　This example is an original version from Liu (2014: 163), only with tone numbers added in this paper.

As shown above, three types of anaphoric non-specific object drop are common in Cantonese, and they are distinguished by type of object dropped.

3.2. Featural composition of a null argument

Under the Minimalist framework (Chomsky 1995, 2001), Rizzi (1986) argues that when derivation, Agr has valued phi-features, while *pro* has unvalued ones. He explains that Agr takes place between elements having valued and unvalued features, Agr enters into an Agree relationship with *pro*, valuing its phi-features. However, Holmberg (2005, 2010) argues that in the context of a feature theory like that in Chomsky[8] the phi-features of I (or T) are themselves uninterpretable (or unvalued), being assigned interpretation (or value) by agreement with the subject, so they cannot specify the value of the subject. Instead, Holmberg argues that the null subject pronoun has features just like an overt pronoun. Specifically, using data including Finnish in his analysis, Holmberg (2005: 548) explicitly argue that "following the Chomskyan approach to agreement, the null pronoun has interpretable phi-features and assigns values to the inherently unvalued features of Agr. In other words, the null subject pronoun identifies Agr (i.e. the finite verb or auxiliary agrees with the null pronoun), not vice versa". Following Holmberg (2005, 2010),[9] I firstly examine a featural composition of a null argument, applicable to a null subject or a null object argument. I assume that all null arguments in Cantonese (discourse pro-drop language) have the same featural composition: [uD, N], consisting of just an unvalued D-feature and an N-feature.

As for the derivation of object drop, the null arguments have an unvalued D-feature which needs to be assigned a value in the course of the derivation, and a nominal feature which means they can occur in all positions where nominal constituents are found. I explain that [uD] in Cantonese can be valued from an antecedent, but it is with a referential index $[D_i$ N] or a referential variable $[D_x$ N]. A specific interpretation is the result when [uD] is valued by a referential index, whereas a non-specific interpretation is the result when it is valued by a referential variable. In both cases the N of null [uD, N] is recovered by virtue of the overt noun of the antecedent. The valuation can be depicted as in (15), where DP needs to be in a local relation to the null pronoun.

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[8]   Under that Minimalist framework, the distinctive differences between interpretable and uninterpretable features and the relations between valuedness of features and interpretability are very important (see Pesetsky and Torrego 2007 for details).

[9]   Holmberg (2005: 559) argues that discourse pro-drop languages (no subject-verb agreement) have no unvalued phi-features in I/T. See Holmberg (2005) for further discussions on phi-features in I/T in null subject languages (e.g. Italian and Finnish) and discourse pro-drop languages (e.g. Japanese and Cantonese).

(15) DP_i ... $[uD, N] \rightarrow DP_i$ ... $[D_i, N]$

It should be noted that the reason of adopting the above derivation of object drop is, based on core generative theories of feature values and interpretability, to account for subtle differences when interpreting non-specific object drop, particularly in the simplicity of theoretical machinery.[10]

3.3. The derivation of anaphoric non-specific object drop in Cantonese: NP-ellipsis with a null determiner stranding

Jackendoff (1971) described a rule which he called N'-deletion. In the more current framework of the DP-hypothesis (Abney 1987), the rule can be redefined as NP-deletion, deleting the complement of D under certain conditions. NP-deletion can be the cases that strand a genitive,[11] demonstrative and numeral, as in (16), (17) and (18) as below, but cannot strand an indefinite or definite article as in (19) and (20).

(16) I have read Peter's book, but I haven't read [$_{DP}$ David's [$_{NP}$ ~~book~~]]. (genitive)

(17) [scene: the speaker points to the book which he or she hasn't read yet]
I have read this book, but I haven't read [$_{DP}$ that [$_{NP}$ ~~book~~]]. (demonstrative)

(18) I bought three books, but Mary only bought [$_{DP}$ two [$_{NP}$ ~~books~~]]. (numeral)

(19) *I have edited a book, but I haven't written [$_{DP}$ a [$_{NP}$ ~~book~~]]. (indefinite article)

(20) *I have seen a book, but I haven't had a chance to read [$_{DP}$ the [$_{NP}$ ~~book~~]]. (definite article)

In the case of (19), the reason why it is ungrammatical may be morphological: A head which is stranded by deleting its complement has to be morphologically 'strong', capable of

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10　One reviewer suggested reviewing two recent studies related to object drop in Mandarin Chinese (MC) though this paper focuses on Cantonese. First, Cheng (2013) proposes a new theory of Argument Ellipsis (AE), where the licensing condition on AE is tied to the absence of DP. Specifically, he claimed that previous literature shows that the existence of DP in MC is not supported (Cheng 2013: ch3). Another study is about Liu's (2014) proposed modular theory of radical pro drop, focusing on both null subjects and objects in MC. He claims that many 'argumentless' sentences in MC are due to the fact that it is large-scale syntactic mechanisms such as TP-ellipsis and VP-ellipsis (Liu 2014: ch3). It should be also noted that the above two suggested studies have different assumptions and focused data when compared with this paper. Cheng (2013) claims that MC has no DP structure which is still controversial, and Liu (2014) and Cheng (2013) cover different argument ellipsis (e.g. subject NP, object NP, etc.) in MC data whereas this paper focuses on anaphoric non-specific object drop in Cantonese.

11　There are different types of determiners, including article, demonstrative, numeral and genitive (see Stowell 1991 for details).

standing alone. The indefinite article *a* is morphologically light, hence cannot be stranded. The corresponding strong form is *one*, which can be stranded by NP-deletion.

(21) I have edited a book, but I haven't written [$_{DP}$ one [$_{NP}$ ~~book~~]].

The definite article *the* is also morphologically light, and apparently does not have a morphologically strong counterpart.

As for discourse pro-drop languages like Japanese and Cantonese, Hoji (1998) and Tomioka (2003) argue those languages have bare, D-less NP arguments. If NP-ellipsis is applied in such a language, the result is a null argument. Hoji further explains that a bare nominal in Japanese such as *kuruma* 'car' can translate as any of 'a car', 'the car', 'cars', or 'the cars', and argues that this is because a nominal projection whose sole content is its head N can be interpreted in various ways as just indicated. Hoji (1998: 142) proposes that "the content of the N head of the null argument is supplied by the context of discourse. If the N head that is supplied by the context is a Name, then it can participate in a coreference relation with another Name". In addition, the supplied N head can be kuruma 'car' and it can function on a par with an indefinite in English. He points out that the null argument in Japanese behaves either like a definite or an indefinite. Tomioka (2003) agrees in part with Hoji's approach to null arguments in Japanese. Tomioka argues that Japanese lacks obligatory marking of definiteness and plurality on NPs, and therefore bare NP arguments get a variety of interpretations. His main claim is null pronouns in discourse pro-drop languages are the result of NP-ellipsis without determiner stranding.

For Cantonese, it is controversial whether overtly article-less arguments are bare NPs or DPs with a null article. In either case, if NP-ellipsis applies, the result will be a null argument (see Tang 2011[12]). In a language like English that has overt determiners, these will be stranded by NP-deletion. For instance, in the case of (24a.), the null object will be a deleted NP *hung4* 'bear', where I assume that there is a null [uD]: [$_{DP}$ [$_{D'}$ uD [$_{NP}$ Ø]]]. In English, a DP cannot get an index without a pronounced form, specifically a pronounced D whereas in Cantonese, a DP can have an index without a pronounced D (i.e. [uD] gets a value from an antecedent).

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[12]   Tang (2011: 111) states that "the empty nominal head in Cantonese NP ellipsis has a bare structure, i.e. a bare NP….containing a null NP plus a null referential head that determines the referential properties" (see Tang 2011 for details).

(22) Referential index (specific interpretation)

　　a. Joek3-hon6 tai2-gin3 jat1-zek3 hung4 laa1, maa5-lei6 dou1 tai2-gin3 e. (Cantonese)

　　　John　　　see　　one-CL　beari　ASP　Mary　　also　see　[D$_i$ N]

　　　'John saw a bear. Mary also saw it.'　　　　　　　　(e = empty category)

　　Referential variable (non-specific interpretation)

　　b. Joek3-hon6 tai2-gin3 jat1-zek3 hung4 laa1, maa5-lei6 dou1 tai2-gin3 e. (Cantonese)

　　　John　　　see　　one-CL　bear　ASP　Mary　　also see　[D$_x$ N]

　　　'John saw a bear. Mary also saw one.'　　　　　　　(e = empty category)

As discussed in section 3.2., I assume that [uD] in Cantonese can be valued from an antecedent, but it is with a referential index [D$_i$ N] (pronoun 'it') or a referential variable [D$_x$ N] (pronoun 'one'). A specific interpretation is the result when [uD] is valued by a referential index, whereas a non-specific interpretation is the result when it is valued by a referential variable. In both cases the N of null [uD, N] is recovered by virtue of the overt noun of the antecedent. English cannot have an unvalued null D on the object in these contexts. Instead, English has an overt D, a definite pronoun in the specific case (e.g. *it*), and an indefinite determiner *one* in the indefinite case. In the cases of non-specific object drop in Cantonese, they are derived by NP-ellipsis, stranding a null D.

4. Conclusion

In this paper, I have attempted to draw out attention to the type of anaphoric non-specific object drop in Cantonese which can be further divided into three sub-types: (A) anaphoric non-specific existential, (B) anaphoric generic and (C) anaphoric non-specific attributive. As for the derivation of anaphoric non-specific object drop, I have explained that the null arguments in Cantonese have the same featural composition: [uD, N], and the anaphoric non-specific object drop can be valued from an antecedent, and it is with a referential variable [D$_x$ N]. Anaphoric non-specific object drop in Cantonese is argued to be derived by NP-ellipsis, stranding a null D. Lastly, it is hoped that this paper can make a contribution to our understanding of anaphoric non-specific object drop in Cantonese, particularly in the simplicity of its theoretical machinery.

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粵語中"不定指賓語"省略的研究：分類與推導

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提要

回顧有關漢語的賓語省略研究（Chao 1968: 312, Li and Thompson 1981: 657, Wang 2002: 201, Matthews and Yip 2011: 973, Tang 2015: 141 等），發現"不定指賓語"省略也是粵語的特性，但是這類的研究沒有得到很多學者的關注。本文主要有兩個研究目的：（一）將粵語中"不定指賓語"省略的現象分類及（二）用英語句子作比較，探究以一些精簡的句法理論作支持這現象。還有，本文是從語法和語義兩個角度對這"不定指賓語"省略作一些闡釋的工作，值此對這語文現象有更多的瞭解。

關鍵詞

先行語，粵語，不定指賓語省略，名詞短語省略

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