

The associative plural in Cantonese

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Here we shall be exploring the associative plural (APL) in Cantonese. The APL construction typically consists of a focal referent and an APL marker, 佢 *keoi⁵dei⁶*, denoting ‘X and X’s associate(s)’, as in 小明佢 *sui²ming⁴keoi⁵dei⁶* ‘Ming and his associate(s)’. The data are derived from corpora and internet sources. A grammaticality judgment test targeting native Cantonese speakers is conducted. There are five major facets to this project. (1) We shall explore the linguistic properties of the APL construction, which is semantically and structurally quite different from conjunctive coordination or inclusory constructions. (2) The APL marker has two forms, to wit 咁 = *dei⁶* and 佢 *keoi⁵dei⁶*. The former, however, seems odd and is rarely attested in modern Cantonese. Given that the APL marker can be either a bound form 咁 = *dei⁶* or a free pronoun 佢 *keoi⁵dei⁶*, it is analyzed as a clitic. (3) We argue that a focal referent can be a complex noun phrase, which can involve conjunctive coordination, implying that two focal referents are possible. (4) The APL construction is often used to introduce new referents to the discourse. It is also used after a topic shift, or to reintroduce referents when they have been mentioned before in a distant turn. (5) We argue that using the APL construction is associated with communicative efficiency. Even if a group of associates are covert, addressees can identify the relationship between the focal referent and the associates and potentially each referent without exhaustively listing them. High communicative efficiency is attained by reducing articulatory cost.

Keywords: Cantonese, associative plural, morphosyntax, typology, apposition, communicative efficiency

1. Introduction

In Cantonese, the associative plural (APL) construction consists of a prominent noun (called a focal referent) and an APL marker 佢 *keoi⁵dei⁶* or 咁 = *dei⁶*. The construction denotes ‘X and X’s associates’ in which X is called the focal referent (Daniel 2020). Associates can be family members, friends, or other associative

relationships. An example of an APL construction is 媽媽佢地 *maa⁴maa¹keoi⁵dei⁶* ‘mom and her associates’ (1):

- (1) 你 要 幫 媽媽 佢地
nei⁵ jiu³ bong¹ maa⁴maa¹ keoi⁵dei⁶
 2SG need help mom APL

‘You need to help your mom and your family.’

[LIHKG,¹ 2022; <https://lihkg.com/thread/2985371/page/3>]

In (1), the focal referent is 媽媽 *maa⁴maa¹* ‘mom’ which is marked by the APL marker 佢地 *keoi⁵dei⁶*.² Together they denote ‘mom and her associates (= family)’. Although there has been some discussion in the literature about APL constructions from a cross-linguistic (e.g. Corbett 2000; Moravcsik 2003) or a language-specific perspective (e.g. Cuonzo 2022), the APL construction in Cantonese has not been investigated. Some grammatical descriptions of Cantonese such as Matthews & Yip (2011: 97) and Cheung (2007: 316) mention the APL construction, but they do not explore it in any great detail. To fill this research gap, this study focuses on the APL construction in Cantonese, in particular its structural and functional properties. This study can contribute to the descriptive grammar of Cantonese, and to the discussion of the APL across languages.

Note that the APL marker (佢)哋 (*keoi⁵dei⁶*) has been grammaticalized from the 3PL pronoun 佢哋 *keoi⁵dei⁶*. Many speakers also consider the APL marker to be the 3PL pronoun. In this study, (佢)哋 (*keoi⁵dei⁶*) in its APL construction will be labeled as an “APL (marker)”, but it shall be labeled as “3PL” where necessary. Since the APL marker in the shorter form 哋 = *dei⁶* cannot function as a free 3PL pronoun without a focal referent (§5), the APL marker is semantically similar to, but structurally different from a 3PL free pronoun.

The structure of this study is as follows. §2 discusses the background of the APL. §3 illustrates the data and methods used in this study. §4 describes the general properties of the APL construction in Cantonese. §5 discusses the APL marker (佢)哋 (*keoi⁵dei⁶*). §6 examines the structural and semantic properties of the APL construction. §7 explores the functions of the APL construction; e.g., the use of the APL construction is associated with communicative efficiency. §8 concludes this study.

1. LIHKG, HKGolden and discuss.com.hk are three internet forums used in Hong Kong. They are sources for Cantonese data.

2. The APL/3PL marker *keoi⁵dei⁶* can be written as 佢地, 佢哋, 渠哋, 渠地, etc.

2. Associative plural: Background and issues

An associative plural (APL) construction consists of a focal referent and an APL marker, denoting “a set comprised of the referent of the nominal (the main member) plus one or more associated members” (Corbett 2000: 101). A “referent of nominal” (i.e. focal referent) is generally a person. It can be a proper name (Vassilieva 2005), kinship term, or common human noun. The associate(s) can be nuclear or extended family members (Daniel 2020), friends and/or habitual companions of a focal referent (Schwartz 1988: 67–68). The number of associate(s) can be one or more. Identifying an associate(s) is contextually dependent (Daniel 2020), that is, that associate(s) is mentioned in the conversation or identified by speech act participants (SAPs) based on their knowledge.

APL is argued to denote a heterogeneous set of referents, whereas an additive plural denotes a homogenous set of referents (Moravcsik 2003). An additive plural – such as the plural *-(e)s* in English – involves the operation of addition. For instance, *linguist-s* denotes ‘linguist₁+linguist₂+...+linguist_n’ in which a homogenous set of *linguists* are added together. By contrast, an APL construction such as 小明佢哋 *siu²ming⁴keoi⁵dei⁶* (Ming APL) involves the operation of association, which is to say, ‘Ming and his associate(s)’ as opposed to ‘Ming₁+Ming₂+...+Ming_n’ (Mauri & Sansò 2023).

Besides an APL marker, a simulative plural is also identified as a heterogeneous plural. A simulative plural denotes a ‘noun X and similar stuff’; e.g. ‘rock and the like’ (Mauri & Sansò 2023). Although a simulative plural is not the focus of this study, 嗰啲 *go²di¹* (DEM CLF) seems to function as a simulative plural (2):

- (2) 驚訝 人哋 興趣 係 睇書 嗰 啲
ging⁴ngaa⁵ jan⁴dei⁶ hing³ceoi³ hai⁶ tai²syu¹ go² di¹
 surprise others interest COP read DEM CLF

‘(They) are surprised that some people’s hobby is reading and the like.’

[LIHKG, 2022; <https://lihkg.com/thread/2946943/page/1>]

In (2), 嗰啲 *go²di¹* denotes a plural meaning because 啲 *di¹* is a plural classifier. 嗰啲 *go²di¹* as a simulative plural marker denotes hobbies related to reading such as listening to older songs. 嗰啲 *go²di¹* can also function similarly to an APL marker (41).

Cross-linguistically, a focal referent tends to be a proper name and kinship term but not a pronoun (Daniel 2020). This phenomenon has sparked an enduring issue: If a focal referent is the most prominent member of a group of referents, then personal pronouns should logically be able to function as focal referents because they tend to be the most prominent class of nominals (Silverstein 1976; Heine & König 2010).

One possible explanation is that plural pronouns function similar to APLs (Vassilieva 2008), therefore an APL marker is not needed. That is, 1PL is not a combination of multiple speakers; i.e., ‘we’ is not equal to ‘speaker₁+speaker₂+...+speaker_n’. Rather, it denotes ‘a speaker and associated hearer(s)’, ‘a speaker, a hearer(s) and an associated non-SAP(s)’ or ‘a speaker and associated non-SAP(s)’. Similarly, 2PL ‘you’ denotes ‘a hearer and his/her associate(s)’ as opposed to ‘hearer₁+hearer₂+...+hearer_n’. Nonetheless, this explanation is not watertight. ‘We’ can denote ‘speaker₁+speaker₂+...+speaker_n’ in certain situations; e.g., a group of children saying ‘we have finished doing homework’ together. Similarly, 2PL ‘you’ can denote ‘hearer₁+hearer₂+...+hearer_n’ when there are multiple hearers. Moreover, third person plural pronoun (3PL) usually denotes a homogeneous set of referents. That is, ‘they’ denotes a set of ‘non-SAP₁+non-SAP₂+...+non-SAP_n’ (Cysouw 2003: 69–70). Given that a person pronoun is generally more prominent than other non-pronominal nominals (Heine & König 2010), it should, in theory, be able to function as a focal referent. A satisfactory explanation as to why a pronoun is not used as a focal referent has not been provided, to my knowledge.

3. Data and method

In this study, the examples are collected from internet sources in which written Cantonese is used; e.g., LIHKG, HKGolden and discuss.com.hk online forums. Some examples are collected from Cantonese corpora including *The Hong Kong Cantonese Corpus* (Luke & Wong 2015), *PolyU Corpus of Spoken Chinese*, and *The Corpus of Mid-20th Century Hong Kong Cantonese* (Department of Linguistics and Modern Language Studies, the Education University of Hong Kong 2022). Since there is no effective standardization in written Cantonese, many characters have several written forms. To reflect the natural usages of Cantonese, the original characters in the examples are retained. When the romanization (i.e. Jyutping) is not provided in the source, the romanization of the characters is assigned based on the author’s knowledge of Cantonese and native speaker experience. Some examples are constructed in order to examine the structural and grammatical properties of the APL construction. Note that in some examples “{}” is used to express the discourse context.

The author’s native speaker intuition is minimally used, while some consultations with native speakers are conducted. Moreover, some grammatical judgment tasks are conducted via Google Forms, targeting native speakers of Cantonese, viz. 82 interviewees.

4. General properties of the APL construction in Cantonese

The associative plural (APL) construction is argued to denote a heterogeneous set of referents. The heterogeneity concerned is on a referential level (Moravcsik 2003; Overstreet & Yule 2024). Consider the following Example (3):

- (3) 啲 經理 佢哋 嚟-咗
di¹ ging¹lei⁵ keoi⁵dei⁶ lai⁴-zo²
 CLF manager 3PL come-PFV
 ‘The managers came.’

In (3), 啲經理 *di¹ging¹lei⁵* ‘managers’ consists of a plural classifier 啲 *di¹* and the noun 經理 *ging¹lei⁵* ‘manager’. When they are followed by 佢哋 *keoi⁵dei⁶*, does 佢哋 *keoi⁵dei⁶* function as an APL marker? In a strict sense of heterogeneity, each manager can be from different stores, hence they constitute a heterogeneous set of referents. In an even stricter sense of heterogeneity, each manager can be deemed a different person, hence they constitute a heterogeneous set of referents. Nonetheless, the heterogeneity with regards to APL is on the referential level; i.e., not all referents can be referred to using the same noun as the focal referent. For instance, an APL construction 小明佢哋 *siu²ming⁴keoi⁵dei⁶* (Ming APL) ‘Ming and his friends’ can denote a set of ‘Ming, Peter, Mary, et al.’ Only one referent is referred to as 小明 *siu²ming⁴* ‘Ming’ while other referents would be referred to differently. On the other hand, each member in 啲經理 *di¹ging¹lei⁵* ‘managers’ can be referred to as 經理 *ging¹lei⁵* ‘manager’, therefore it is not a set of heterogeneous referents. In other words, 佢哋 *keoi⁵dei⁶* in (3) is not an APL marker – it co-refers to 啲經理 *di¹ging¹lei⁵* ‘managers’, forming an appositive construction with ‘managers’.

The APL construction is not conjunctive coordination (i.e. denoting an ‘and’-relationship), because the minimum numbers of referents denoted by both constructions are different. Compare a case of APL construction in (4) and conjunctive coordination in (5), where the only structural difference is the existence of the coordinator 同 *tung⁴* ‘and’.

- (4) 小明 佢哋 睇-緊 戲
siu²ming⁴ keoi⁵dei⁶ tai²-gan² hei³
 Ming APL watch-PROG movie
 ‘Ming and his associate are watching a movie.’
- (5) 小明 同 佢哋 睇-緊 戲
siu²ming⁴ tung⁴ keoi⁵dei⁶ tai²-gan² hei³
 Ming and 3PL watch-PROG movie
 ‘Ming and they are watching a movie.’

In the APL construction in (4), the minimum number of referents is two; that is to say, the focal referent 小明 *siu²ming⁴* ‘Ming’ and one associate are both encoded by 佢哋 *keoi⁵dei⁶* ‘3PL/APL’. By contrast, in conjunctive coordination indicated by the coordinator 同 *tung⁴* ‘and’ in (5), the minimum number of referents is three; i.e. one person denoted by 小明 *siu²ming⁴* ‘Ming’ and at least two people denoted by 佢哋 *keoi⁵dei⁶* ‘3PL’. This implies that the APL construction is not conjunctive coordination.

The APL construction is similar to, but not identical to an inclusory construction. An inclusory construction consists of a personal non-singular pronoun (called the inclusory pronoun) and a nominal, which is one of the referents referred to by the pronoun. For instance, in Koyraboro Senni (Songhay), *ir nda ni* [lit. we with you.SG] denotes ‘I and you’ as opposed to ‘we and you’ (Haspelmath 2004: 25) – ‘you.SG’ is included in ‘we’. Similar to an inclusory construction, the APL construction consists of a focal referent that is a part of the pronoun 佢哋 *keoi⁵dei⁶* ‘APL/3PL’. According to Lichtenberk (2000), two criteria differentiate the inclusory construction from the APL construction. First of all, in languages with inclusory constructions, other personal non-singular pronouns can be inclusory pronouns. By contrast, the APL construction in Cantonese predominantly employs a 3PL rather than 1PL or 2PL as an APL marker. When a preverbal 佢哋 *keoi⁵dei⁶* ‘APL/3PL’ is replaced by 我哋 *ngo⁵dei⁶* ‘1PL’ or 你哋 *nei⁵dei⁶* ‘2PL’, 小明 *siu²ming⁴* ‘Ming’ functions as an addressee, not a focal referent (6):

- (6) 小明 我哋/你哋 而家 去 邊?
siu²ming⁴ ngo⁵dei⁶/nei⁵dei⁶ ji⁴gaa¹ heoi³ bin¹
 Ming 1PL/2PL now go where
 ‘Ming, where are we/you going to?’
- (7) 小明 佢哋 而家 去 邊?
siu²ming⁴ keoi⁵dei⁶ ji⁴gaa¹ heoi³ bin¹
 Ming APL now go where
 ‘Where are Ming and his associates going to?’

In (6), both 我哋 *ngo⁵dei⁶* ‘1PL’ and 你哋 *nei⁵dei⁶* ‘2PL’ are acceptable, following the name 小明 *siu²ming⁴* ‘Ming’. However, it is different from an APL construction because ‘Ming’ in (6) is an addressee. In other words, ‘Ming’ functions as a vocative noun: if a pause or topicalizer 呀 *aa⁴* follows ‘Ming’, the meaning of (6) does not change. By contrast, in an APL construction (7), 小明 *siu²ming⁴* ‘Ming’ is not an addressee. If a pause or topicalizer follows ‘Ming’, ‘Ming’ becomes an addressee and is no longer a referent included in 佢哋 *keoi⁵dei⁶* ‘APL/3PL’; i.e., (7) would denote ‘Ming, where are they going to?’. Moreover, when 佢哋 *keoi⁵dei⁶* ‘APL/3PL’ in a postverbal position is replaced by 我哋 *ngo⁵dei⁶* ‘1PL’ or 你哋 *nei⁵dei⁶* ‘2PL’, the example would become unnatural, or even downright ungrammatical (8):

- (8) 有 人 搵 緊 小明 *我哋/??你哋
jau⁵ jan⁴ wan²-gan² siu²ming⁴ ngo⁵dei⁶/nei⁵dei⁶
 exist person look.for-PROG Ming 1PL/2PL
 Intended: ‘Someone is looking for Ming and us/you.’

In (8), when the pronoun is 我哋 *ngo⁵dei⁶* ‘1PL’, 73 interviewees (89%) consider it unnatural. While the sentence is not parsable to some native speakers, some speakers consider it to denote ‘we are looking for Ming’. When the pronoun is 你哋 *nei⁵dei⁶* ‘2PL’, the sentence is more acceptable, but 48 interviewees (58.5%) consider it weird. Although several speakers cannot parse (8), some speakers consider the object of 搵 *wan²* ‘look for’ to be ‘Ming and his associates’. While some interviewees consider (8) to denote ‘you (PL) are looking for Ming’, others might consider 小明 *siu²ming⁴* ‘Ming’ to be a vocative noun phrase; i.e., the sentence would denote ‘Ming, someone is looking for you guys’. Given that most speakers consider (8) to be unnatural, this study focuses on 3PL as the APL marker.

Regarding the second criterion, an inclusory pronoun and a nominal in an inclusory construction usually can shift their syntactic order, given that it is a sub-type of coordination (Haspelmath 2004). By contrast, the order of a focal referent and the APL marker may not be reversed. In (9), the focal referent 小明 *siu²ming⁴* ‘Ming’ follows the APL marker 佢哋 *keoi⁵dei⁶*, unlike other APL constructions. Unsurprisingly, 68 interviewees (82.9%) deem it unnatural. Another possible reading is a possessive construction ‘their Ming’ but it is marginal:

- (9) *有 人 搵 緊 佢哋 小明
jau⁵ jan⁴ wan²-gan² keoi⁵dei⁶ siu²ming⁴
 exist person look.for-PROG APL Ming
 Intended: ‘Someone is looking for Ming and his associates.’ (APL reading)
 Or: ‘Someone is looking for their Ming.’ (possessive construction reading)

The APL construction is not conjunctive coordination or an inclusory construction. This implies that the source construction of the APL construction is neither of these constructions. According to Mauri & Sansò (2023), a third person plural pronoun can be grammaticalized into an APL marker, following path (10), (11) or (12):

- (10) proper.name and 3PL > proper.name APL
 (11) 3PL proper.name (inclusory construction with rigid order) > APL proper.name
 (12) proper.name 3PL (inclusory construction with rigid order) > proper.name APL

In path (10), the conjunctive coordination “proper.name and 3PL” is the source item for the APL construction. In paths (11) and (12), the inclusory constructions are the source constructions. The inclusory construction can have the word order

of “3PL proper.name” (11) or “proper.name 3PL” (12) which crystalizes into “APL proper.name” or “proper.name APL” respectively. Since APL construction in Cantonese is not conjunctive coordination or inclusive construction, it may not be grammaticalized from paths (10), (11) or (12).

5. (佢)哋 (*keoi⁵dei⁶*) as an APL marker

The associative plural (APL) construction consists of a focal referent and an APL marker. The APL marker 佢哋 *keoi⁵dei⁶* is a 3PL pronoun. It can occasionally be a shorter form 哋=*dei⁶* (Matthews & Yip 2011:97). 哋=*dei⁶* itself cannot stand alone without a focal referent like 陳明叔 *can⁴ming⁴suk¹* ‘Uncle Chen Ming’ (13):

- (13) *(陳明叔)=哋 嚟-咗 呀 嘛。
can⁴ming⁴suk¹=dei⁶ lai⁴-zo² aa¹ maa³
 Uncle.Chen.Ming=APL come-PFV SFP SFP
 ‘Uncle Chen Ming and his associates came.’

[Hong Kong Cantonese Corpus, 1962]

The APL marker can be analyzed as a clitic given its morphological and syntactic properties. A clitic is a morpheme that has the properties of a free word and a bound affix. The APL marker has the property of a free word because it can be a free 3PL pronoun without a focal referent when it is in the full form 佢哋 *keoi⁵dei⁶*. It also has the property of a bound affix because it must attach to a focal referent when it is in the shorter form 哋=*dei⁶* (13). Hence, following the glossing tradition, the shorter form 哋=*dei⁶* is marked with a “=”, attaching to the focal referent. 佢哋 *keoi⁵dei⁶* as a free word may not need to be attached with a “=” sign.

As an APL marker, 哋=*dei⁶* is less idiomatic and transparent than 佢哋 *keoi⁵dei⁶*. In the survey, (13) is compared with its counterpart with 哋=*dei⁶* replaced by 佢哋 *keoi⁵dei⁶*. The interviewees identify the function of 哋=*dei⁶* as an APL marker,³ and 36 interviewees (43.9%) consider it to be a 3PL pronoun. Nonetheless, 77 (93.9%) interviewees consider 佢哋 *keoi⁵dei⁶* more natural than 哋=*dei⁶*. Moreover, 57 (69.5%) interviewees deem 陳明叔=哋 *can⁴ming⁴suk¹=dei⁶* ‘Uncle Chen Ming and his associates’ unnatural. Furthermore, among interviewees who are aged between 21–30, only 3 out of 15 (20%) of them consider 哋=*dei⁶* natural. By contrast, older interviewees are more likely to accept the usage of 哋=*dei⁶*. For instance, among interviewees who are aged between 51 and

3. The interviewees have different responses implying that they can identify 哋=*dei⁶* as an APL marker, for instance, they consider it to mean ‘Uncle Chen Ming and the others’ and ‘a group including uncle Chen Ming’.

60, 11 out of 27 of them (40.7%) deem 哋=*dei*⁶ to be natural.⁴ This implies that 佢哋 *keoi*⁵*dei*⁶ is a more natural APL marker than 哋=*dei*⁶ in modern Cantonese. Moreover, 哋=*dei*⁶ may have been more popular in earlier Cantonese.

The additive plural suffix 哋 -*dei*⁶ and the APL marker 哋=*dei*⁶ can be considered two different morphemes. Consider Example (14) where 哋 -*dei*⁶ is an additive plural suffix rather than an APL marker (Cheung 2007):

- (14) 大佬-哋 平時 揀 馬 有 咩 心得?
*daai*⁶*lou*²-*dei*⁶ *ping*⁴*si*⁴ *gaan*² *maa*⁵ *jau*⁵ *me*¹ *sam*¹*dak*¹
 big.brother-PL usually choose horse have what insight
 ‘Do big brothers (2PL) have any insight into choosing a racing horse?’
 [HKGolden, 2021]⁵

Example (14) is a request from an online forum, consisting of a plural 哋 -*dei*⁶ following 大佬 *daai*⁶*lou*² ‘big brother’. 哋 -*dei*⁶ functions as an additive plural marker (e.g. the English plural -(e)s), but not as an APL marker, because 大佬-哋 *daai*⁶*lou*²-*dei*⁶ ‘big brothers’ is a respectful form for second person plural referents (i.e. addressees) which denotes an homophonous set of ‘big brother’, i.e. ‘big brother₁+big brother₂+...+big brother_n’. Moreover, the speaker targets generic users on the forum rather than a specific group of referents of which one referent is called 大佬 *daai*⁶*lou*², while other referents are referred to differently. Therefore, the additive plural 哋 -*dei*⁶ and the APL marker 哋=*dei*⁶ can be considered two different morphemes. The additive plural 哋 -*dei*⁶ is not a shortened form of 佢哋 *keoi*⁵*dei*⁶ ‘APL/3PL’ because 哋 -*dei*⁶ can refer to second-person referents (14) whereas the APL marker 佢哋 *keoi*⁵*dei*⁶ cannot (46). Moreover, 哋 -*dei*⁶ cannot appear without a noun head. Hence, the additive plural 哋 -*dei*⁶ is an affix marked by a “-” rather than by a “=” which marks a clitic. Example (14) is a piece of evidence against the claim that common nouns cannot take the plural marker 哋 -*dei*⁶ (Zhang & Tang 2014). Note that 佢哋 *keoi*⁵*dei*⁶ is not found to denote additive plural, although it is possible (see below).

The APL marker 佢(哋) *keoi*⁵(*dei*⁶) can rarely function as an additive plural marker; e.g. Example (15):

4. The number of interviewees who consider 哋=*dei*⁶ natural is as follows. They are categorized based on age groups: among those who are aged 21–30 years old, 3 out of 15 (20%); among those who are aged 30–40, 4 out of 12 interviewees (33.3%); among those who are aged 41–50, 5 out of 18 interviewees (27.8%); among those who are aged 51–60, 11 out of 27 interviewees (40.7%); among those who are aged 61–70, 2 out of 4 interviewees (50%).

5. <https://forumd.hkgolden.com/view.aspx?type=SP&message=7360019&page=33>

(15) 先生=哋 唔 嚟
sin²saang¹=dei⁶ m⁴ lai⁴

mister=APL/PL NEG come

APL reading: 'Mister and his friends are not coming'

Additive plural reading: 'The misters are not coming.'

(Cheung 2007: 316; my romanization and translation)⁶

In Example (15), 先生 *sin¹saang¹* 'mister' can refer to a specific person, i.e. being a focal referent marked by an APL marker 哋 =*dei⁶*. On the other hand, 哋 =*dei⁶* can also function as an additive plural marker, denoting 'misters'. This ambiguity is induced when the noun head can refer to a specific referent or a type of referents. Given a marked discourse context, even a proper name can denote a type. In 小明(佢)哋 *siu²ming⁴(keoi⁵)dei⁶* (Ming APL/PL), the proper name 'Ming' is naturally interpreted as a specific referent, therefore (佢)哋 (*keoi⁵)dei⁶* functions as an APL marker. The whole construction denotes 'Ming and his associates'. Nonetheless, given a meeting in which all participants are called 'Ming', the construction would denote a homogeneous set of 'Ming-s'. Since 'Ming' is a type of people in such a scenario, (佢)哋 (*keoi⁵)dei⁶* functions as an additive plural marker rather than an APL marker.

The polyfunctionality of (佢)哋 (*keoi⁵)dei⁶* being an APL and additive plural marker can also be found in Mandarin 們 *-mén*. For instance, *-mén* can be an APL marker when it follows a proper name; e.g., 張三們 *Zhāngsānmén* 'Zhang San and his friends', or occupation (校長們 *xiàozhǎngmén* 'principal and his work-mates'). 們 *-mén* can also be an additive plural marker when it follows a generic noun (孩子們 *háizimen* 'children') (Jiang 2017). However, based on the author's intuition on both Cantonese and Mandarin, 們 *-mén* is more naturally used to mark a noun head, compared to the additive plural suffix 哋 *-dei⁶* and the APL marker 哋 =*dei⁶*. Moreover, the APL marker 哋 =*dei⁶* is less acceptable and is rare. In summary, although 哋 =*dei⁶*/*-dei⁶* and 們 *-mén* can be both an APL and additive plural markers, 哋 =*dei⁶*/*-dei⁶* is only used in limited instances whereas 們 *-mén* is employed widely.

6. Structural and semantic properties of the associative plural construction

This section discusses some structural and semantic properties of the associative plural (APL) construction. A focal referent can be a proper name like 姜濤

6. This example is based on 1960s Cantonese (Cheung 2007). Although it may not reflect the usage of Modern Cantonese, it is still noteworthy.

goeng¹to⁴ ‘Keung To’ (16), a kinship term like 姑丈 *gu¹zoeng²* ‘uncle’, (17) or an occupation like 老細 *lou⁵sai³* ‘boss’ (18):

- (16) 我 承認 姜濤 佢地 的確 係好紅
ngo⁵ sing⁴ jing⁶ goeng¹to⁴ keoi⁵dei⁶ dik¹kok³ hai⁶ hou² hung⁴
 1SG admit Keung.To APL indeed COP very popular
 ‘I admit Keung To and his teammates are very popular.’
 [LIHKG, 2021; <https://lihkg.com/thread/2671365/page/2>]
- (17) 姑丈 佢哋 成家人 就去咗旅行
gu¹zoeng² keoi⁵dei⁶ sing⁴gaa¹jan⁴ zau⁶ heoi³-zo² lei⁵shang⁴
 uncle APL whole.family then go-PFV travel
 ‘Uncle (=the husband of my father’s sister) and his family went to travel.’
 [PolyU Corpus of Spoken Chinese, 2015]
- (18) 老細 佢地 話要請人
lou⁵sai³ keoi⁵dei⁶ waa⁶ jiu³ ceng² jan⁴
 boss APL say need hire people
 ‘My boss and his/her associates said that they need to hire people.’
 [LIHKG, 2024; <https://lihkg.com/thread/3722406/page/1>]

By contrast, pronouns cannot be a focal referent (19). Non-human animate (20) and inanimate (21) tend not to be a focal referent, probably because 3PL tends not to refer to non-human or inanimate entities. They may be a focal referent in a pragmatically marked context; e.g., a cat or stone can be anthropomorphized in a fairy tale, given a proper name like *Peter*. Such usage is unattested in the data collected:

- (19) *我/你/佢 佢哋
ngo⁵/nei⁵/keoi⁵ keoi⁵dei⁶
 1SG/2SG/3SG APL
 Intended: ‘I/you/(s)he and the associate(s).’
- (20) *²嗰隻貓 佢哋
go² zek³ maau¹ keoi⁵dei⁶
 DEM CLF cat APL
 Intended: ‘That cat and its associate(s).’
- (21) *²嗰舊石頭 佢哋
go² gau⁶ sek⁶tau⁴ keoi⁵dei⁶
 DEM CLF stone APL
 Intended: ‘That stone and its associate(s).’

Since the APL marker is (grammaticalized from) a 3PL pronoun, it is semantically anomalous for it to mark a first or second person pronoun. This partially explains

why pronouns are not commonly marked by an APL marker across languages (§2), given that a 3PL pronoun is a common source item for an APL marker in different languages (Mauri & Sansò 2023).

A focal referent must be definite because it is used as a cue to specify a group of referents. Hence, indefinite nouns and generic nouns cannot be focal referents; e.g., 一個人 *jat¹go³jan²* ‘a person’ (22) and 男人 *naam⁴jan²* ‘men’ (23) respectively:

- (22) *一個人 佢哋 行-緊 山
jat¹ go³ jan² keoi⁵dei⁶ hang⁴-gan² saan¹
 one CLF man APL walk-PROG mountain
 Intended: ‘A person and his/her associate(s) are hiking.’

- (23) *男人 佢哋 行-緊 山
naam⁴jan² keoi⁵dei⁶ hang⁴-gan² saan¹
 man APL walk-PROG mountain
 Intended: ‘Men and their associate(s) are hiking.’

In Cantonese, the order of elements in a noun phrase is [demonstrative numeral classifier adjective (linking.particle) noun] (modified from Matthews & Yip 2011: 104). Given the existence of the APL and plural markers, the noun phrase in Cantonese can be extended into [demonstrative numeral classifier adjective (linking.particle) noun associative.plural/plural]. Nonetheless, a focal referent tends to be a sole noun head without preceding elements; e.g. Examples (16), (17), (18). In the discussion below, we explore focal referents with more complex structures, focusing on the APL marker rather than the additive plural marker.

Starting from focal referents with less complex structures, (24) has a focal referent of [adjective noun] while (25) has [adjective linking.particle noun] as the focal referent:

- (24) 靚女 佢哋 要 凍檸茶
leng³ nei² keoi⁵dei⁶ jiu³ dung³ning²caa⁴
 pretty girl APL want ice.lemon.tea
 {an utterance from a waiter to a cook} ‘The pretty girl and her companions want ice lemon tea.’

- (25) *²聰明 嘅學生 佢哋 睇-緊 戲
cung¹ming⁴ ge³ hok⁶sang¹ keoi⁵dei⁶ tai²-gan² hei³
 clever LP student APL watch-PROG movie
 Intended: ‘The clever student and her associates are watching a movie.’

In (24), the focal referent 靚女 *leng³nei²* ‘pretty girl’ has the structure of [adjective noun]. Although a similar example is unattested, (24) is possible, based on the author’s native speaker experience. One may argue that 靚女 *leng³nei²* ‘pretty

girl' is a lexicalized item because the linking particle 嘅 *ge³* does not occur between 靚 *leng³* 'pretty' and 女 *nei²* 'girl'. By contrast, in (25), the linking particle 嘅 *ge³* occurs between the adjective 聰明 *cung¹ming⁴* 'clever' and 學生 *hok⁶sang¹* 'student'. Such an example is unnatural in some native speakers' eyes. In (26), the focal referent 個 *ex go³ex* 'the ex-partner' has the structure of [classifier noun]. This is the only example attested:

- (26) 個 *ex* 佢哋 點 分手?
go³ ex *keoi⁵dei⁶ dim² fan¹sau²*
 CLF ex.partner APL how break.up
 'How did (your boyfriend's) ex-girlfriend and your boyfriend break up?'
 [discuss.com.hk, 2018]⁷

Focal referents with a numeral and/or demonstrative are unattested. Example (22) is ungrammatical with an indefinite focal referent 一個人 *jat¹go³jan²* 'a person'. To express a focal referent with a definite meaning (e.g. 'that one person'), a demonstrative 嗰 *go²* 'that' or 呢 *ni¹* 'this' is used to precede the numeral or classifier. Nonetheless, a similar example is unattested; e.g. Example (27):

- (27) *²嗰 一 個人 佢哋 行緊 山
go² jat¹ go³ jan² keoi⁵dei⁶ hang⁴-gan² saan¹
 DEM one CLF man APL walk-PROG mountain
 Intended: 'That person and his/her associate(s) are hiking.'

嗰一個人 *go²jat¹go³jan²* 'that person' is a definite focal referent with the structure of [demonstrative numeral classifier noun]. The definite meaning is contributed by the demonstrative 嗰 *go²* 'that', but such an example is unattested. Moreover, 77 interviewees (93.9%) deem Example (27) unnatural. When the numeral has a value larger than 1, the construction would become an apposition; e.g. Example (28):

- (28) 呢 兩 個 女人 佢哋 互 戴高帽
ni¹ loeng⁵ go³ nei⁵jan² keoi⁵dei⁶ wu⁶ daai³gou¹mou²
 DEM two CLF women 3PL each.other praise
 'These two women praised each other.' [HKGolden, 2015]⁸

In (28), the NP 呢兩個女人 *ni¹loeng⁵go³nei⁵jan²* 'these two women' precedes 佢哋 *keoi⁵dei⁶* '3PL'. Since 'these two women' denotes a homogeneous set of referents, i.e. 'woman₁+woman₂', 佢哋 *keoi⁵dei⁶* is not functioning as an APL. Rather, it co-refers to the preceding NP.

7. <https://www.discuss.com.hk/viewthread.php?tid=27344791&extra=&page=4>

8. <https://md.hkgolden.com/view.aspx?message=5651607&type=SY&&page=16>

Since a numeral and/or demonstrative is not found in the structure of a focal referent, a focal referent with all the elements in an NP is unattested. A constructed Example (29) consists of a focal referent with the structure of [demonstrative numeral classifier adjective linking particle noun]; i.e. the full NP structure proposed by Matthews & Yip (2011: 104) plus the APL marker. Example (29) is considered unnatural by 73 native speakers (89%):

- (29) ²*嗰 一 個 聰明 嘅 學生 佢 哋 睇-緊 戲
go² jat¹ go³ cung¹ming⁴ ge³ hok⁶sang¹ keoi⁵dei⁶ tai²-gan² hei³
 dem one CLF clever LP student APL watch-PROG movie
 Intended: ‘That clever student and her friends are watching a movie.’

A focal referent can also be a complex noun phrase that consists of multiple noun phrases. For instance, it can be a possessive construction 我爸爸 *ngo⁵baa⁴baa¹* ‘my father’ that consists of a possessor 我 *ngo⁵* ‘1SG’ and the possessee 爸爸 *baa⁴baa¹* ‘father’ (30):

- (30) 我 爸爸 佢 哋 應該 唔 會 轉
ngo⁵baa⁴baa¹ keoi⁵dei⁶ jing¹goi¹ m⁴ wui⁵zyun³
 1SG father APL probably NEG AUX change
 ‘My father and mother probably would not change (the hospital).’
 [discuss.com.hk, 2014]⁹

When a coordination precedes an APL marker, three readings are possible based on different constituencies. Consider an artificial example of 小明同小麗佢哋 *siu²ming⁴tung⁴siu²lai⁶keoi⁵dei⁶* (Ming and Lai APL/3PL) (31):

- (31) 小明 同 小麗 佢 哋 睇-緊 戲
siu²ming⁴ tung⁴ siu²lai⁶ keoi⁵dei⁶ tai²-gan² hei³
 Ming and Lai APL/3PL watch-PROG movie
 Reading one: ‘Ming and Lai are watching a movie.’
 Reading two: ‘Ming, Lai and Lai’s associate(s) are watching a movie.’
 Reading three: ‘Ming, Lai and their associate(s) are watching a movie.’

The first reading is an appositive construction without an APL reading. It has the constituency of [[Ming and Lai] [3PL]]. An appositive construction means that ‘Ming and Lai’ and 佢哋 *keoi⁵dei⁶* ‘3PL’ are referring to the same referents. ‘Ming and Lai’ is an exhaustive list of nominals which does not imply any other associates, therefore 佢哋 *keoi⁵dei⁶* is a co-referential 3PL as opposed to an APL marker. An example of an appositive construction is (32):

9. <https://www.discuss.com.hk/viewthread.php?tid=23696340>

- (32) 爸爸 媽媽 佢地 仲 安慰 我
baa⁴baa¹ maa⁴maa¹ keoi⁵dei⁶ zung⁶ on¹wai³ ngo⁵
 dad mom 3PL even comfort 1SG
 {the speaker is studying abroad, planning to study in another country. The
 parents financially and emotionally support the speaker} ‘My dad and mom
 even comforted me.’

[LIHKG, 2021; <https://lihkg.com/thread/2415415/page/4>]

In (32), 爸爸 *baa⁴baa¹* ‘dad’ and 媽媽 *maa⁴maa¹* ‘mom’ form an NP co-referred by 佢地 *keoi⁵dei⁶* ‘3PL’. This is a case of appositive construction without other backgrounded referents because of the discourse context; i.e. the discussion is surrounding the topic of “things that you feel guilty about regarding your parents”. Moreover, in previous turns, the speaker has stated that s/he has wasted his/her parents’ money. Another factor that contributes to the appositive reading is that ‘father’ and ‘mother’ are “semantically closely associated concepts”, forming a “natural coordination” (Wälchli 2005: 1). Items forming a natural coordination may be lexicalized into a compound; e.g., *father-mother* ‘parents’ in Indian English (Wälchli 2005: 1). In other words, ‘dad’ and ‘mom’ naturally forms an NP, therefore the reading is likely to be [[dad and mom] [3PL]] or [[dad and mom] [APL]]. The former reading is preferred because of the discourse context.

The second reading is conjunctive coordination (i.e. ‘and’-relationship) combining ‘Ming’ and ‘Lai and Lai’s associates’. It has the constituency of [[Ming] and [Lai APL]]. The existence of this structure can be supported by (33) and (34):

- (33) 我 同 KC 佢哋 一 組
ngo⁵ tung⁴ KC keoi⁵dei⁶ jat¹ zou²
 1SG and KC APL one group
 ‘I am grouped with KC and his associates.’ [Sing Tao Headline, 2023]¹⁰
- (34) 你 同 老闆 佢哋 都 見-過
nei⁵ tung⁴ lou⁵baan² keoi⁵dei⁶ dou¹ gin³-gwo³
 2SG and boss APL also see-EXP
 ‘You, our boss and his/her associates have seen (this girl) before.’

[LIHKG, 2023; <https://lihkg.com/thread/3284241/page/29>]

In (33) and (34), the first coordinated elements are 我 *ngo⁵* ‘1SG’ and 你 *nei⁵* ‘2SG’ respectively. Both pronouns are semantically not compatible with the third

10. <https://www.stheadline.com/realtime-entertainment/3250073/%E7%8D%A8%E5%AE%B6%E4%B8%A8%E8%A6%AA%E7%94%9F%E4%BB%94%E7%8E%8B%E9%8B%92-KC-Nathan%E7%B5%95%E5%AF%86%E5%BF%83%E5%BA%95%E8%A9%B1-%E9%80%A0%E6%98%9F%E5%8D%81%E5%BC%B7%E7%82%BA%E8%B2%A0%E8%A9%95%E5%A4%A7%E5%B9%B3%E5%8F%8D>

person 佢哋 *keoi⁵dei⁶* ‘3PL/APL’, therefore they cannot be a part of 佢哋 *keoi⁵dei⁶*. In other words, 佢哋 *keoi⁵dei⁶* only modifies the second coordinated elements, i.e. KC (33) and 老闆 *lou⁵baan²* ‘boss’ (34), functioning as an APL marker.

The third reading is an APL construction with two focal referents ‘Ming’ and ‘Lai’. It has the constituency of [[Ming and Lai] APL]. Traditionally, the focal referent is considered to be one single definite person (Moravcsik 2003; Daniel 2020), but (35) shows that multiple focal referents are possible. In the data collected, only two examples are clear cases with multiple focal referents:

- (35) *Thanos* 係 個 星球 到 同 *iron man, dr. Strange* 佢地
Thanos hai² go³ sing³kau⁴ dou⁶ tung⁴ Iron Man Dr. Strange keoi⁵dei⁶
 Thanos LOC CLF planet place and Iron.man Dr. Strange APL
 打-完
daa²-jyun⁴
 fight-finish
 ‘Thanos fought Iron Man, Dr. Strange, and their associates on the planet.’
 [LIHKG, 2018; <https://lihkg.com/thread/662903/page/1>]

Example (35) is an example concerning a popular film. The background is as follows: *Thanos* is fighting a group of heroes led by *Ironman* and *Dr. Strange* as opposed to fighting only both of them (reading 1). *Thanos* was not fighting *Iron-man*, *Dr. Strange*, and *Dr. Strange’s associates* (reading 2), but *Iron Man*, *Dr. Strange*, and *their associates* (reading 3). Another example with multiple focal referents is (37) below.

Based on the survey, the appositive reading (i.e. reading 1) is the most prominent reading, followed by reading 3 then reading 2. For the question “你認為以上句子的主語 (subject) 有可能是誰?” ‘Who are the possible subjects in the above sentence (i.e. Example (31))?’,¹¹ 56 responses (68.3%) considered reading 1 possible (i.e. an appositive construction), followed by reading 3 (APL construction with two focal referents; 42 responses or 51.2%). Lastly, 19 responses (23.2%) considered reading two possible (i.e. an APL construction with one focal referent, preceded by another referent). The prominence of the appositive reading (i.e. reading 1) may be due to scalar implicature. That is, speakers prefer a weaker reading to a stronger reading (Levinson 1983). For instance, ‘I have read some books’ is understood as ‘reading a few books’ rather than ‘reading all the books’, although the latter reading is logically possible. Similarly, among the three readings, the appositive reading includes the least number of referents, that is, only ‘Ming’ and ‘Lai’. By contrast, readings 2 and 3 can encode a higher number of referents;

11. Interviewees could choose more than one reading, therefore the number of responses is not equal to the overall number of interviewees.

e.g., ranging from three referents (i.e., ‘Ming, Lai, and at least one associate’) to 100 referents. Therefore, the appositive reading can be deemed the pragmatically unmarked reading with the least number of referents (i.e. as the weakest reading). On the other hand, reading 3 [[Ming and Lai] APL] is preferred over reading 2 [Ming and [Lai APL]]. One possible explanation may be that the parsing of the sentence is linear. The addressees may first naturally parse [Ming and Lai] as a constituent which are subsequently attached by the APL marker. Therefore, readings 1 and 3 are preferred with [Ming and Lai] forming a constituent. In summary, the reading based on constituency is dependent on discourse context. Moreover, multiple focal referents are possible: they involve conjunctive coordination followed by the APL marker.

In some cases, the APL construction is followed by a noun phrase consisting of a numeral and a classifier (and potentially a noun head 人 *jan*² ‘person, people’). That NP co-refers to the APL construction, with the numeral indicating the number of referents denoted by the APL construction (36)–(37). The co-referring NPs are circumscribed by the brackets:

- (36) 二 家姐 佢地 [三 個 (人)] NP 已經 差唔多
*ji*⁶ *gaa*¹*ze*¹ *keoi*⁵*dei*⁶ *saam*¹*go*³ *jan*² *ji*⁵*ging*¹ *caa*¹*m*⁴*do*¹
 second elder.sister APL three CLF person already almost
 行-到-埋-黎
*hang*⁴-*dou*³-*maai*⁴-*lai*⁴
 walk-arrive-closed-come
 ‘My second-elder sister and her associates – three of them – have almost arrived.’ [LIHKG, 2018; <https://lihkg.com/thread/591506/page/25>]
- (37) 35 蚊 可以 買-到 KERORO, TAMAMA 佢地
*saam*¹*sap*⁶*ng*⁵ *man*¹ *ho*²*ji*⁵ *maai*⁵-*dou*² *Keroro* *Tamama* *keoi*⁵*dei*⁶
 thirty.five dollar can buy-accomplishment Keroro Tamama APL
 [五 個] NP 個 頭
*ng*⁵ *go*³ *go*³ *tau*⁴
 five CLF CLF head
 ‘For thirty-five dollars we could buy the five figures including Keroro and Tamama.’¹²

In (36), 二家姐佢地 *ji*⁶*gaa*¹*ze*¹*keoi*⁵*dei*⁶ ‘second elder sister and her associates’ is followed by 三個 *saam*¹*go*³ ‘three (people)’, implying that two associates are back-

12. https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=2ahUKewinzaqt27KEAxWxa_UHHXiNAlI4MhAWegQIERAB&url=https%3A%2F%2Fhkcmforum.com%2Farchiver%2F%3Ftid-67341.html%26page%3D7&usg=AOvVawOW-n0QnQkZJTJcoIB-510D&opi=89978449

grounded. Similarly, (37) regards a famous anime in which *Keroro*, *Tamama*, and three other characters belong to the same team. The numeral 五 *ng*⁵ ‘five’ follows the focal referents, i.e. *Keroro* and *Tamama*, implying that three associates are backgrounded. Example (37) shows that multiple focal referents are possible, similar to (35). Since the APL construction commonly consists of a [+human] focal referent, the classifier in a co-referring NP is predominantly the general classifier 個 *go*³. By contrast, classifiers for nouns with a lower animacy are not attested; e.g. 隻 *zek*³ or 條 *tiu*⁴. On the other hand, collective classifiers such as 班 *baan*¹ (38) and plural classifier 啲 *di*¹ (39) can occur in an NP that co-refers to an APL construction:

- (38) 應該 試-下 爭取-吓 方國珊 佢哋 [個 班 人]NP
*jing*¹*goi*¹ *si*³-*haa*⁵ *zang*¹*ceoi*²-*haa*⁵ *fong*¹*gwok*³*saan*¹ *keoi*⁵*dei*⁶ *go*² *baan*¹ *jan*⁴
 should try-DEL fight.for-DEL Fong.Kwok.Shan APL DEM CLF people
 支持
*zi*¹*ci*⁴
 support
 ‘That person should try to fight for the support from Fong Kwok-Shan and her associates.’ [HKGolden, 2016]¹³

- (39) 同 Shroud 佢哋 [啲 啲]NP 一 team 可能 得 嘅
*tung*⁴ *Shroud* *keoi*⁵*dei*⁶ *go*² *di*¹ *jat*¹ *team* *ho*²*nan*⁴ *dak*¹ *ge*²
 with Shroud APL DEM CLF one team maybe can SFP
 ‘(Your team could achieve a high kill count in the mobile game) if Shroud and his associates are on the same team as you.’ [LIHKG, 2019; <https://lihkg.com/thread/1019848/page/38>]

In (38) and (39), the circumscribed NPs consist of the demonstrative 個/啲 *go*² and a classifier 班 *baan*¹ or 啲 *di*¹ respectively. Both classifiers contribute to the plural meaning because 班 *baan*¹ denotes a group of people while 啲 *di*¹ is a plural classifier. Note that a numeral 一 *ja*¹ ‘one’ could precede both classifiers without altering the meaning of the sentences. 個班 *go*²*baan*¹ ‘that group of people’ and 啲啲 *go*²*di*¹ ‘those (people)’ can function similarly to an APL marker; consider (40) and (41) where the APL marker 佢哋 *keoi*⁵*dei*⁶ is absent:

- (40) 除左 張任 個 班 人, 其他 人 隨時 做 25
*ceoi*⁴*zo*² *zoeng*¹*jam*⁶ *go*² *baan*¹ *jan*⁴ *kei*⁴*taal* *jan*⁴ *ceoi*⁴*si*⁴ *zou*⁶ *ji*⁶*ng*⁵
 except Cheung.Yam DEM CLF person other person anytime do traitor
 ‘Except for Cheung Yam and his associates, other people would become a traitor anytime.’ [HKGolden, 2024]¹⁴

13. <https://md.hkgolden.com/view.aspx?message=6455317>

14. <https://forumd.hkgolden.com/view.aspx?type=AN&message=7863335&page=2>

- (41) 包括 張敬軒 果 d 歌手
baau¹kut³ zoeng¹ging³hin¹ go² di¹ go¹sau²
 including Cheung,King,Hin DEM CLF singer
 ‘(Unlike older songs, I cannot repeatedly listen to modern pop songs,) including (the songs sung by) Cheung King Hin and other modern singers.’
 [LIHKG, 2022; <https://lihkg.com/thread/3156272/page/1>]

個班 *go²baan¹* ‘that group of people’ (40) and 果d *go²di¹* ‘those people’ (41) function similar to an APL marker. That is, together with the focal referents 張任 *zoeng¹jam⁶* ‘Cheung Yam’ (40) and 張敬軒 *zoeng¹ging³hin¹* ‘Cheung King Hin’ (41), the construction denotes ‘Cheung Yam and his associates’ and ‘Cheung King Hin and other modern singers’. Moreover, similar to how a focal referent is a part of the APL/3PL 佢哋 *keoi⁵dei⁶*, the focal referents are a part of 個班 *go²baan¹* and 果d *go²di¹*. In other words, in (38) and (39), each example could arguably consist of two APL markers. Nonetheless, 個班 *go²baan¹* (38; 40) and 嗰啲/果d *go²di¹* (39; 41) are not grammaticalized APL markers, compared to 佢哋 *keoi⁵dei⁶*. First, the construction could ambiguously function as a possessive construction that consists of a possessor, a classifier and a possessee. That is, (40) could denote ‘Cheung Yam’s subordinates’ while (41) could denote ‘Cheung King Hin’s singers’. Second, 個班 *go²baan¹* and 嗰啲 *go²di¹* are morphologically independent of the focal referents. When the focal referents 張任 *zoeng¹jam⁶* ‘Cheung Yam’ (40) and 張敬軒 *zoeng¹ging³hin¹* ‘Cheung King Hin’ (41) are dropped, the sentences remain grammatical. By contrast, 佢哋 *keoi⁵dei⁶* could be clipped as 哋 = *dei⁶* which must follow a focal referent (13).

No examples are attested in which an APL construction follows a co-referring NP with a numeral. For instance, in (42), 三個人 *saam¹go³jan²* ‘three people’ precedes the APL construction 家姐佢地 *gaa¹ze¹keoi⁵dei⁶* ‘elder sister and her associates’. Such examples are unattested and judged ungrammatical:

- (42) *[三 個人]NP 家姐 佢地 已經 差唔多
saam¹go³jan² gaa¹ze¹ keoi⁵dei⁶ ji⁵ging¹ caa¹m⁴do¹
 three CLF person elder.sister APL already almost
 行-到-埋-黎
hang⁴-dou³-maai⁴-lai⁴
 walk-arrive-closed-come
 Intended: ‘My elder sister and her associates – three of them – have almost arrived.’
 (Modified from (36))

7. Functions and usages of the associative plural construction

After discussing the structural and semantic properties of the associative plural (APL) construction, this section examines how and in which situations an APL construction is used.

The APL marker 佢地 *keoi⁵dei⁶* is not obligatory, based on grammatical rule(s). It is unlike the plural *-(e)s* in Standard English which is required for most pluralized nouns. The APL construction is a vague category, where the relationship between a focal referent(s) and associate(s) is backgrounded (Daniel 2020). Such a relationship can be identified with items outside of the APL construction and/or with the discourse context. Alternatively, one may explicitly express the relationship by using conjunctive coordination. Compare the APL construction (43) and conjunctive coordination (44):

- (43) Plan 下 星期一 遞 信 老細 佢地 好 好人
Plan haa⁶ sing¹kei⁴jat¹ dai⁶ seon³ lou⁵sai³ keoi⁵dei⁶ hou² hou²jan⁴
 Plan next Monday submit letter boss APL very nice
 ‘I am going to submit the resignation letter. Boss and his/her associates (=the speakers’ workmates) are very nice to me.’
 [LIHKG, 2022; <https://lihkg.com/thread/2854678/page/1>]
- (44) Plan 下 星期一 遞 信 老細 同 同事 好 好人
Plan haa⁶ sing¹kei⁴jat¹ dai⁶ seon³ lou⁵sai³ tung⁴ tung⁴si⁶ hou² hou²jan⁴
 Plan next Monday submit letter boss and workmate very nice
 ‘I am going to submit the resignation letter. The boss and my workmates are very nice to me.’
 (Modified from (43))

In (43), if the APL construction 老細佢地 *lou⁵sai³keoi⁵dei⁶* ‘boss and his/her associate(s)’ is viewed independently, the associate(s) could be the boss’s brother, friends, workmates, daughter, et al. The associate(s) are identified as workmates because of 遞信 *dai⁶seon³* ‘submit a resignation letter’, and because the discussion is surrounding the topic of resignation. One may opt to explicitly express the associates with conjunctive coordination; e.g., 老細同同事 *lou⁵sai³tung⁴tung⁴si⁶* ‘boss and workmates’ (44). Therefore, an APL construction is not required to denote a group of associated referents. Nonetheless, the APL construction suffices to specify the relationship between a focal referent(s) and associate(s). Another piece of information backgrounded is the identity of each associate, as discussed below (52–55).

The APL construction in Cantonese is used to refer to a third person group of people, meaning that a focal referent and/or associate(s) should not denote any speaker or addressee. For example, although the focal referents are kinship terms,

i.e. 婆婆 *po⁴po²* ‘grandmother’ (45) and 細佬 *sai³lou²* ‘little brother’ (46), they are semantically a speaker and an addressee respectively (Langacker 1987: 131–132):

- (45) 點解 成日 唔 探 婆婆 (*佢哋) ? !
dim²gai² sing⁴jat⁶ m⁴ taam³ po⁴po² keoi⁵dei⁶
 why always NEG visit grandmother APL
 {said by a grandmother to a grandchild} ‘Why do you not visit grandma regularly (*and her relatives)?!’
- (46) 細佬 (*佢哋) 肚-唔-肚餓 呀?
sai³lou² keoi⁵dei⁶ tou⁵-m⁴-tou⁵ngo⁶ aa³
 little.brother APL hungry-NEG-hungry SFP
 {an elder brother is talking to his younger brother} ‘Are my little brother (*and his friends) hungry or not?’

In (45) and (46), the focal referents 婆婆 *po⁴po²* ‘grandmother’ and 細佬 *sai³lou²* ‘little brother’ are formally third person. Nonetheless, ‘grandmother’ refers to the speaker while ‘little brother’ refers to the addressee. Examples (45) and (46) should be logically possible because both 婆婆 *po⁴po²* ‘grandmother’ and 細佬 *sai³lou²* ‘little brother’ are kinship terms that can be focal referents (17). Nonetheless, (45) and (46) are ungrammatical when the APL marker is present. This implies that APL construction semantically refers to a third person group of people – a speaker and/or addressee cannot be referred to with an APL construction.

The APL construction is used in a context similar to a proper name. First, it is used to introduce referents that have not been mentioned in a discourse (47–50). It is also used when the referents are not at the center of an addressee’s consciousness (51) (Croft 2022). The APL construction is not used as an anaphor, although it consists of a pronoun 佢哋 *keoi⁵dei⁶* ‘3PL’.

Since the relationship between a focal referent(s) and associate(s) is not explicitly stated in the APL construction, a speaker expects an addressee to successfully decode the relationship between a focal referent and associates, and potentially decode each individual within the associates.

In the first context, APL construction is used when the referents are introduced to a discourse without prior mention (47):

- (47) 想 問 *thanos* 打-完 *im* 佢哋 之後 佢哋 有 咩
soeng² man⁶ thanos daa²-jyun⁴ Ironman keoi⁵dei⁶ zi¹hau⁶ keoi⁵dei⁶ jau⁵ me¹
 want ask Thanos fight-finish Ironman APL after 3PL have what
 做?
zou⁶
 do
 ‘(I) want to ask what Iron-man and his friends are doing after fighting
 Thanos?’ [LIHKG, 2018; <https://lihkg.com/thread/662903/page/1>]

Example (47) is the title of an internet forum post in which *Ironman* is a public figure. Since it is the title of a post, (47) can be understood as the counterpart of the first turn in a conversation. Even though only the focal referent is overt while the associates are covert, the APL construction is informative enough for the addressees to decode the information, that is, the construction is referring to a group of heroes. In the same “turn”, no focal referent precedes the second 佢地 *keoi⁵dei⁶* ‘3PL’. When the APL construction is the antecedent, 佢地 *keoi⁵dei⁶* ‘3PL’ suffices to co-refer to the same referents without using an APL construction again which is a lengthier expression. Another example is (48) which is the first turn of a verbal conversation:

- (48) 喂！凱凱 佢哋 琴日 有冇 來 哩度 啊？
wai³ hoi²hoi² keoi⁵dei⁶ kam⁴jat⁶ jau⁵ mou⁵ lai⁴ ni¹ dou⁶ aa³
 VOC Hoi.Hoi APL yesterday have NEG come DEM place SFP
 ‘Did Hoi-Hoi and his associates come here yesterday?’

[The Hong Kong Cantonese Corpus, 1997–1998]

In (48), the people referred to by the APL construction 凱凱佢哋 *hoi²hoi²keoi⁵dei⁶* ‘Hoi-Hoi and his associates’ are not mentioned in prior discourse because (48) is the first turn of the conversation – it is partially reflected by the usage of the vocative 喂 *wai³* ‘hey!’ that draws the addressee’s attention to engage in a new discourse. The focal referent 凱凱 *hoi²hoi²* ‘Hoi-Hoi’ and the associates are expected to be known by the speech act participants. The existence of the focal referent is required to specify the associate(s) when they are newly introduced in a conversation (Goldberg 2005).¹⁵

In the second context, a focal referent has been mentioned once (or more) in prior turns whereas an associate(s) has not been mentioned before:

15. A similar distribution can be found in APL construction in other languages. In Mwotlap, the associative non-singular construction contains a focal referent and a third person non-singular pronoun (i.e. dual, trial, paucal), such as (i).

- (i) Mwotlap (Oceanic; Vanuatu)

Wilson kōyō

Wilson 3DU

‘Wilson and his associate.’

(François 2001)

Example (i) is an associative dual construction; i.e., a construction with a focal referent followed by a dual marker. It is used to refer to two people only. Interestingly, similar to Cantonese, the associative non-singular constructions are used to refer to referents that are new to the discourse, rather than referents that are mentioned in recent discourse (François 2001; Alexandre François p.c.). Similarly, in Hup (Patience Epps p.c.) and Goemai (Birgit Hellwig p.c.) most APL constructions refer to people who are not mentioned in previous discourse.

- (49) 頭先 阿 明哥 佢哋 同 我 討論-過
tau⁴sin² aa³ ming⁴go¹ keoi³dei⁶ tung⁴ ngo⁵ tou²leon⁶-gwo³
 just.now PART brother.Ming APL and 1SG discuss-EXP
 ‘Not long before big brother Ming and his wife have discussed with me.’
 [The Corpus of Mid-20th Century Hong Kong Cantonese, 1965]

The focal referent 明哥 *ming⁴go¹* ‘big brother Ming’ is mentioned once before (49). The associate (his wife), is only implied by the context and is not mentioned before. 明哥 *ming⁴go¹* ‘big brother Ming’ is chosen as the focal referent not only because it is definite (Heine & König 2010), but also because it has been used previously in the discourse; i.e., it has a higher discourse prominence, compared to his wife who has not been mentioned before (von Heusinger & Schumacher 2019).

In the third context, the APL construction is employed after a topic shift. For instance, (50) is produced after a topic shift, mentioning *Tony* for the first time in the conversation:

- (50) Tony 佢哋 前嗰排 啊，參加-咗 個，誒，歌唱比賽
Tony keoi³dei⁶ cin⁴go²paai⁴ aa³ caam¹gaa¹-zo² go³ e⁶ go¹coeng³bei²coi³
 Tony APL not.long.before SFP join-PFV CLF uh singing.contest
 啊。
aa³
 SFP
 ‘Tony and his friends have recently joined ... uh ... a singing context.’
 [The Hong Kong Cantonese Corpus, 1997–1998]

The topic prior to this turn was “dictionaries”. The topic shift can be supported by the turn prior to (50). Some turns preceding (50) are provided below. They belong to a conversation between speaker A and speaker B:

- A: 都幾係野，如果即係睇幾行又要查幾個字咁查法睇一兩版之後都要死
 左嚟真係。
 ‘That’s quite tough. If you search for the meanings of some vocabulary after reading a few sentences, you would die after reading a few pages.’
 B: 係啦係啦。
 ‘Yes, yes.’
 B: 係啦，嗯。
 ‘Yes, yes.’
 A: (50)

The turn before (50) is used to “close” the discourse sequence. It contains response tokens 係 *hai⁶* ‘yes’ and 嗯 *ng³* ‘yes’ which do not contribute new information to the conversation, similar to *oh* in English (called a *sequence-closing third*

(Schegloff 2007)). Compared to the APL construction in (48) which is used at the beginning of a conversation, the APL construction in (50) is used in the middle of a conversation, i.e. the beginning of a new topic.

In the fourth context, the referents (i.e. the focal referent and the associates) are mentioned before in a distant turn. Using the APL construction can re-introduce the referents to the addressee's consciousness (51):

- (51) Tiffany 佢哋 跟住 又 八 號 返學
Tiffany keoi⁵dei⁶ gan¹zyu⁶ jau⁶ baat³ hou⁶ faan¹hok⁶
 Tiffany APL then again eight date return.school
 'Tiffany and her classmates will go to school on the 8th again.'
 [The Hong Kong Cantonese Corpus, 1997–1998]

In (51), both the focal referent *Tiffany* and the associates 'classmates' have been mentioned before, but the previous mention of 'Tiffany and her classmates' is 24 turns before (51). Logically, replacing the APL construction with a bare 3PL pronoun should unambiguously refer to 'Tiffany and her classmates' because no other group of people is mentioned. However, the APL construction is still preferred because of the distance between (51) and the last mention of these referents, i.e. the referents become less accessible to the addressee's mind and hence the APL construction serves to re-introduce the referents to the addressee's consciousness (Arnold 2010; Levshina 2022).

The APL construction can logically be used to disambiguate a group of referents from another group of referents, but such an example is unattested. For instance, if two groups of referents are mentioned in a discourse recently (e.g., 'Mary and her friends' and 'Ming and his family'), a bare 佢哋 *keoi⁵dei⁶* '3PL' would potentially refer to either 'Mary and her friends' or 'Ming and his family', inducing semantic ambiguity. By using an APL construction that contains a focal referent (e.g., 小明佢哋 *siu²ming⁴keoi⁵dei⁶* 'Ming and his family'), the intended group of referents can be specified.

As mentioned above, the relationship between a focal referent(s) and associates(s) is backgrounded because 佢哋 *keoi⁵dei⁶* 'APL/3PL' does not specify such a relationship (43). Another aspect that is backgrounded is the identity of each associate. Using an APL construction can arguably reduce the articulatory costs. Compare the subjects in (52)–(55), i.e. an exhaustive list of proper names (52), APL construction (53), bare 3PL pronoun 佢哋 *keoi⁵dei⁶* (54) and zero anaphora \emptyset (55). Assume the number of referents is equal in (52)–(55), i.e. three people:

- (52) *Exhaustive list*
 小明 小麗 小浩 睇-緊 戲
siu²ming⁴ siu²lai⁶ siu²hou⁶ tai²-gan² hei³
 Ming Lai Ho watch-PROG movie
 ‘Ming, Lai and Ho are watching a movie.’
- (53) *APL construction*
 小明 佢哋 睇-緊 戲
siu²ming⁴ keoi⁵dei⁶ tai²-gan² hei³
 Ming APL watch-PROG movie
 ‘Ming and his friends are watching a movie.’
- (54) *Pronoun*
 佢哋 睇-緊 戲
keoi⁵dei⁶ tai²-gan² hei³
 3PL watch-PROG movie
 ‘They are watching a movie.’
- (55) *Zero anaphora*
 Ø 睇-緊 戲
tai²-gan² hei³
 watch-PROG movie
 ‘(They are) watching a movie.’

Example (52) includes an exhaustive list of proper names; i.e., the referents are 小明 *siu²ming⁴* ‘Ming’, 小麗 *siu²lai⁶* ‘Lai’, and 小浩 *siu²hou⁶* ‘Ho’, where no other referents are backgrounded. An exhaustive list of referents is sometimes followed by a universal quantifier 都 *dou¹* (Matthews & Yip 2011:337). In (53), the APL construction only contains one proper name, namely the focal referent 小明 *siu²ming⁴* ‘Ming’. In (54), 佢哋 *keoi⁵dei⁶* ‘3PL’ is the subject – no proper name is present. In (55), the subject is covert. It could be an answer to the question ‘Where are A, B, and C?’

The APL construction as a shorter expression suffices to indicate the group of referents (53), compared to an exhaustive list of nouns (52). In some situations like an orchestra, a group of referents consists of a large number of members. Using the APL construction can arguably reduce the articulatory cost, because only the focal referent(s) is explicitly stated while other associates are backgrounded (Keller 1994:107). Moreover, an APL construction is used to introduce new referents (47)–(49), used after topic shift (50), and/or used to reintroduce referents that are mentioned before in a distant turn (51). A bare pronoun 佢哋 *keoi⁵dei⁶* or zero anaphora tends not to be used in such contexts. For instance, if a group of people are introduced in a discourse by a 3PL pronoun or zero anaphora, the addressee may ask “Who are ‘they’?” or “Who are you talking about?” In

other words, the APL construction is informative enough to refer to a group of referents without stating each associate and without inducing ambiguity, therefore high efficiency is achieved when methods with minimal effort attain a goal (Ariel 1990; Levshina 2022).¹⁶

Another motivation of using the APL construction is incomplete information. For example, a speaker may not know and/or remember the identity of all the referents in an orchestra. Nonetheless, s/he will know the prominent member such as the leader, the conductor or the principal player. This prominent member is expressed as the focal referent while other members are backgrounded. In other words, the APL construction can be a compromise between the most or the least informative option (e.g., specifying everyone by name in an orchestra, versus specifying none), based on the speaker's partial knowledge/information (e.g. only knowing the conductor in an orchestra) (Clancy 1992).

8. Conclusion

This study has examined the structure and function of the associative plural (APL) construction in Cantonese. The APL construction consists of a focal referent and associate(s). A focal referent tends to be a proper name, kinship, or occupational term. An associate(s) can be friends, relatives, colleagues, and so forth. This study uses examples from corpora and internet sources, accompanied by a grammatical judgment test targeting native Cantonese speakers. Regarding the structure of the APL construction, it is argued that the APL marker 佢哋 *keoi⁵dei⁶* is a clitic because it can be a free third person pronoun or a bounded form 哋 = *dei⁶* which must attach to the focal referent. Moreover, some examples show that the focal referent can be more than one person, depending on the reading of constituency. Regarding its function, the APL construction is used to refer to a third-person group of referents. Moreover, it is widely used to introduce new referents, used to reintroduce referents that are referred in a distant turn, and used after a topic shift. The APL construction can denote a group of referents without stating the relationship between the focal referent and associates and without the need to provide an exhaustive list of referents, and in turn the articulatory cost is reduced.

16. Levshina (2022: 37) compares a nominal expression, pronoun and zero anaphora in terms of how explicit these referential expressions are. Examples (52)–(55) show that an APL construction can be included in this comparison; it is less explicit than a full-nominal expression (i.e. an exhaustive list), but it is more informative than a pronoun and zero anaphora.

Sources

This study uses three Cantonese corpora including *The Hong Kong Cantonese Corpus*, *PolyU Corpus of Spoken Chinese*, and *The Corpus of Mid-20th Century Hong Kong Cantonese*:

1. The Hong Kong Cantonese Corpus: It is a corpus of Modern Cantonese based on transcribed conversations recorded between March 1997 and August 1998. (<https://github.com/fcbond/hkcancor>)
2. PolyU Corpus of Spoken Chinese: It is a corpus of Modern Cantonese that contains a set of audio-recordings of conversational exchanges in Cantonese between interviewers and interviewees. (<http://wongtaksum.no-ip.info:81/corpus.htm>)
3. The Corpus of Mid-20th Century Hong Kong Cantonese: It is a corpus where the data is collected by transcribing the dialogues of Cantonese movies produced in Hong Kong between the 1940s and the 1970s.


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List of abbreviations

1	first person	LOC	localizer
2	second person	NEG	negator
3	third person	PART	particle
APL	associative plural	PL	plural
CLF	classifier	PROG	progressive
CONT	continuous	Q	question particle
COP	copula	SFP	sentence final particle
DEM	demonstrative	SG	singular
DU	dual	VOC	vocative
EXP	experiential		

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