

Introduction

Cantonese, locally called 粵語 *Jyutjyu* or 廣東話 *Gwongdungwaa*, is academically represented by the speech of Guangzhou. It is spoken, together with Hakka and Min, in Guangdong Province, and it is also used in areas outside Guangdong. Cantonese in the broad sense can be divided into many branches, e.g., 廣府 Guangfu, 四邑 Siyi, 高陽 Gao-Yang, 欽廉 Qin-Lian, etc., among which there is no complete mutual intelligibility. As reflected by the 2011 Population Census, it is the main language used by 90% of the population of Hong Kong. Both Hong Kong and Guangzhou Cantonese belong to the Guangfu Branch and essentially share the same language system.



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Phonetic Features

Hong Kong Cantonese (henceforth Cantonese) has 19 consonants, such as (in LSHK Romanization) *p*, *m*, *t*, *h*, and 22 vowels, including monothongs, such as *a*, *e*, *i*, *u*, and diphthongs, such as *ei*, *ai*, *ou*. The Entering tones, lost in Mandarin, are preserved in Cantonese and distinguished by the syllables with the plosive final *p*, *t* or *k*, e.g., 濕 *sap1*, 失 *sat1*, 塞 *sak1*. The bilabial nasal *m* can be found in Cantonese in the syllable-final position, such as 林 *lam4*, whereas in Mandarin it is only used as an initial. Cantonese is often said to have nine tones. The traditional categories of Level, Rising, Departing and Entering tones are each further divided into Light and Dark counterparts. The Dark Entering tone is also further sub-divided, and a resulting nine tonal categories are formed. As a matter of fact, the three Entering tones can be subsumed into the other tones of the same contour. Thus, the nine tones in Cantonese can be re-classified into six tonal categories, namely, high level, high rising, mid level, low falling, low rising and low level tones.

Grammatical Features

Cantonese verbal suffixes are numerous. There are around forty of them in total, outnumbering those in Mandarin. For instance, 食飯 *sik6 faan6* 'eat rice or have a meal' can be expressed as “食咗 (*zo2*) 飯, 食過 (*gwo3*) 飯, 食緊 (*gan2*) 飯, 食完 (*jyun4*) 飯, 食定 (*ding6*) 飯, 食吓 (*haa5*) 飯, 食住 (*zyu6*) 飯, 食翻 (*faan1*) 飯, 食埋 (*maai4*) 飯, 食晒 (*saai3*) 飯, 食得 (*dak1*) 飯”. Each suffix contribute to a distinctive meaning. Besides, the abundance and diversity of sentence-final particles is another grammatical feature pertaining to Cantonese. With a number of more than forty, they can be further divided into seven sub-categories, including monosyllabic 添 *tim1*, 囉 *lo1*, 喎 *wo5*, and disyllabic 之嘛 *zi1maa3*, 得㗎 *dak1gaa2*, 吓話 *haa6waa5*. Some particles show varying meanings with the change of tone. Example sentences include 食飯啦 (*laa1*), 食飯喇 (*laa3*) and 食飯啫 (*laa4*). Besides, there is a special type of constructions in Cantonese in which two words echo with each other on both sides of a phrase. When Mandarin 快說完 *kuài shuōwán* 'nearly finished talking' is translated into Cantonese, it can be expressed as 差唔多完咁滯 *caa1m4do1 jyun4 gam3zai6*; both 差唔多 *caa1m4do1* and 咁滯 *gam3zai6* carries the meaning of 'nearly', and they co-exist in the same sentence. This co-occurrence pattern is called the “discontinuous construction”, which is exemplified with dozens of word pairs.

Future of Cantonese Studies

Cantonese is undoubtedly the mother tongue of most Hong Kong people. The affection for our mother tongue is a natural emotion and its expression in the form of care and devotion should be held in high regards. Studying Cantonese from the linguistic perspective can drive us to view and be amazed by its delicate structure. It also cultivates sophistication and sensibility into the love of our mother tongue. Combined with love and passion, our understanding of the subtleties of Cantonese will be pursued with even greater energy, vibrancy and motivation. “Fun with Cantonese” – as it is so suggested here – is an attempt to put forth these forward-looking and interest-creating ideas.