2nd edition

Basic
Cantonese

A Grammar and Workbook

Virginia Yip and
Stephen Matthews

BASIC CANTONESE

Basic Cantonese introduces the essentials of Cantonese grammar in a straight-forward and systematic way. Each of the 28 units deals with a grammatical topic and provides associated exercises designed to put grammar into a communicative context. Special attention is paid to topics which differ from English and European language structures.

This new edition features:

- clear, accessible format
- lively examples to illustrate each grammar point
- informative keys to all exercises
- glossary of grammatical terms

Basic Cantonese is ideal for students new to the language. Together with its sister volume, *Intermediate Cantonese,* it forms a structured course of the essentials of Cantonese grammar.

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BASIC CANTONESE: A GRAMMAR AND WORKBOOK

Virginia Yip and Stephen Matthews

For Timothy, Sophie and Alicia,
fountains of creativity and inspiration

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PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

Since *Basic Cantonese* was first published in 2000, we have been pleased to hear from readers from around the world and from all walks of life. Some were learners married to Cantonese speakers, some were enthusiasts of *dim sum* and some had grown up in overseas Chinese families without a Cantonese-speaking environment. One or two were even writing historical novels featuring Cantonese-speaking characters.

We thank the readers of the book, and especially those who have written to us over the years, and those who have reviewed and critiqued it in print and online. Many readers requested Chinese characters, which we are pleased to provide in this second edition. We hope the revised book will support a wider range of learners, including those who have knowledge of characters or aim to acquire it. Native speakers who teach Cantonese may find it useful to make the tacit knowledge of their mother tongue explicit when they want to teach it to their students.

Cantonese remains a major language, with 62 million speakers according to the Ethnologue's statistics. With Mandarin and English on the rise, Cantonese cannot be limited to a monolingual context. The way to ensure a bright future for Cantonese is for it to be learnt alongside English and Mandarin in a multilingual setting. Many learners around the world are enthusiastic about learning the language. Increasingly, this includes people of Chinese ancestry for whom Cantonese is a heritage language who have grown up in overseas communities. As long as Cantonese is acquired as a first language by children, the language and its rich culture will surely be transmitted from generation to generation. The best way to preserve the Cantonese heritage is for our children to be immersed in the Cantonese language and its culture.

We thank Szeto Pui Yiu for his dedicated efforts and meticulous support with editing this book. For assistance with Cantonese characters and valuable comments, we thank Kobe Tsui Wa Hin and Cindy Cheung Shu Ting. We thank the members of the Childhood Bilingualism Research Centre for their support and commitment over the years, especially Mai Ziyin, Deng Xiangjun, Angel Chan, Hinny Wong, Emily Ge, Zhou Jiangling, Jacky Kwan, Tracy Au and Sophia Yu. Our joint sabbatical in 2016, made possible by the Chinese University of Hong Kong and the University of Hong Kong, has enabled us to complete this revision.

Virginia Yip and Stephen Matthews
4 June 2016, Hong Kong

INTRODUCTION

This book is for learners of Cantonese who aim to take their knowledge of the language beyond the phrase-book level. While our *Cantonese: A Comprehensive Grammar* was designed as a reference book, *Basic Cantonese* is more pedagogical in orientation. It highlights the key building blocks of sentence structure, leaving details of grammar and usage for the more advanced learner. It also provides practice for the grammar points of each unit in the form of communicatively oriented exercises.

The book is self-contained in the sense that it can be used on its own for self-paced learning. With the grammar points presented in approximate order of difficulty, it should also be useful for practice, revision and reference. It can be used in conjunction with a language course or lessons from a tutor. Either way, it should be understood that to learn a tone language such as Cantonese effectively requires some aural support – ideally from native speakers or, as a second-best option, from audiovisual materials.

The Cantonese language

Cantonese is named after the city of Canton (known as Guangzhou in Mandarin), the capital of Guangdong province in southern China. Apart from the provinces of Guangdong and Guangxi, it is spoken in neighbouring Hong Kong and Macau and also in Chinese communities overseas. Both in southern China and in Singapore and Malaysia, where it is widely spoken, it enjoys considerable prestige due to its association with the prosperous southern provinces as well as with the Cantonese culture of films and popular music ('Canto-pop'). It is also widely used in cities such as Toronto and Vancouver in Canada, Sydney in Australia, New York and San Francisco in the USA, Ho Chi Minh City in Vietnam and Kuala Lumpur in Malaysia.

Since the return of Hong Kong to Chinese sovereignty in 1997, many have asked whether Cantonese is in decline or even under threat. The use of Putonghua has naturally increased in Hong Kong, Macau and the Guangzhou area. In Hong Kong, schools increasingly teach Chinese literacy through Putonghua, and a significant proportion of children grow up speaking English and/or Putonghua instead. Nevertheless, Cantonese remains the lingua franca of Hong Kong. As of 2011, Cantonese was the usual language

of 89.5% of the population, and 95.8% were able to speak it. Cantonese will continue to be spoken in Hong Kong and around the Pacific Rim in the twenty-first century.

Cantonese is generally regarded, even by its own speakers, as a dialect of Chinese. This tends to imply, misleadingly, that it differs from standard Chinese (Mandarin or *Putonghua* 'common speech') largely in pronunciation, with some differences in vocabulary and relatively few in grammar. The grammatical differences are often underestimated, and it should not be assumed that the same Chinese grammar (essentially that of Mandarin) can be applied straightforwardly to Cantonese. In fact, spoken Cantonese has its own fully fledged grammatical system, largely independent of Mandarin grammar. Indeed the Chinese 'dialects' vary in grammar, as they do in other respects, as much as the various Romance languages such as French, Spanish and Italian. Moreover, the dialects of southern China, which include Cantonese and Taiwanese, are especially distinctive and diverse. Naturally, some knowledge of Mandarin can be helpful in learning Cantonese, but one cannot assume that it is simply a matter of learning a new pronunciation for the same language or a new set of vocabulary to go with the same grammar. Hence, to learn Cantonese effectively, one needs to pay attention to its grammar.

Cantonese grammar

Readers should be aware that the concept of 'grammar' used here is essentially that of contemporary linguistics, which is descriptive in approach, rather than that of traditional school grammar with its prescriptive concern for what is 'good' or 'correct'. The descriptive approach aims to capture the patterns of language as they are actually used by native speakers, without imposing value judgements on particular grammatical forms. Speakers of Cantonese are often puzzled by the idea of Cantonese, as a 'dialect', having its own grammar. Perhaps the simplest way to demonstrate that it does is to consider examples of 'Cantonese' as spoken by foreign learners, such as the following:

> ***Ngóh fāan ūkkéi chìh dī** 我返屋企遲啲 I'll go home later.
> ***Kéuih móuh heui-jó** 佢冇去咗 He didn't go.

These two sentences are unacceptable to a native speaker (the asterisk * marks them as ungrammatical), the first because in Cantonese adverbs of time such as **chìh dī** 遲啲 meaning 'later' come before the verb, not after as in English, and the second, because the suffix **-jó** 咗 indicating completion is incompatible with most types of negative sentence (see Unit 18). These explanations, simply put, are rules of grammar (the precise details are, of course, more complicated). By grammar, then, we mean the rules or principles governing the structure of sentences.

The kind of grammar to be learnt in mastering Cantonese, however, is not like that of Latin or Spanish where the forms of words – noun declensions, verb conjugations and the like – call for study. Instead, the more important

questions are those of syntax: the order and patterns in which words are put together to form sentences. Sometimes Cantonese syntax resembles English:

leng sāam 靚衫	pretty clothes
taai loih 太耐	too long
gwa héi 掛起	hang up
ngóh sīk kéuih 我識佢	I know him.

In other cases, the order of words is markedly different. In some of these features, Cantonese differs from English as well as from Mandarin – the construction with **béi** 畀 'to give' being a well-known example:

Ngóh béi chín léih 我畀錢你
(*lit.* I give money you)
I give you money.

Where the syntax is likely to cause difficulty in following the examples, as in this case, we give a literal word-by-word gloss reflecting the Cantonese word order as well as the natural, idiomatic English translation. As a general principle we have aimed to do this where the English translation diverges substantially from the Cantonese original, as in the case of questions and 'topicalized' sentences:

Léih sihk mātyéh a? 你食乜嘢呀**?**
(*lit.* you eat what)
What are you eating?

Tìhmbán ngóh m̀h sihk la 甜品我唔食喇
(*lit.* dessert I not eat)
I don't eat dessert.

The glosses, within parentheses preceded by *lit.,* are omitted once a pattern has been established.

Chinese writing and romanization

The relationship of spoken Cantonese to Chinese writing is complicated. The Chinese writing system is based on Mandarin, the spoken language of Beijing and northern China. Although Cantonese can be written as it is spoken – with some difficulty, since many Cantonese words lack established characters – written Cantonese of this kind is used for informal purposes such as popular magazines and newspaper columns. For more serious writing, standard Chinese is used instead. This standard written Chinese can then be read aloud with Cantonese 'readings' (pronunciations) for each character, which are taught in schools in Hong Kong and Macau, enabling educated Cantonese speakers to be literate in standard Chinese while speaking only Cantonese.

In this revised edition, in response to feedback from readers, we have included characters as used in Hong Kong, as well as the Yale romanization

system (with the minor modifications introduced in our *Cantonese: A Comprehensive Grammar*). This system has proved effective for learners and is used in most language courses, textbooks, dictionaries and glossaries. The main disadvantage of the Yale system is that most native speakers are unfamiliar with it and, therefore, find it quite difficult to read: it should be considered merely as an aid to learning the spoken language.

Pronunciation

Beyond grammar, one of the main difficulties of Cantonese is posed by its pronunciation, and tones in particular. For this reason, the first three chapters are devoted to establishing and reinforcing the main features of Cantonese pronunciation. Learners who do not have access to native speakers or Cantonese media should be sure to acquire some tapes or other audiovisual materials in order to practise recognition and production of tones. Online resources include our website at www.cuhk.edu.hk/lin/cbrc/CantoneseGrammar and Cantodict, an English–Cantonese dictionary which provides characters, romanized forms and recordings, at www.cantonese.sheik.co.uk/dictionary/.

Exercises

The exercises in this book are intended to be communicatively useful tasks, rather than the mechanical rote practice of some past grammars. The emphasis is placed on expressing ideas and, to give them a more authentic feel, some are situated in a real-life context: ordering dishes in a restaurant, asking for directions and the like. Because many of the exercises are open-ended, they naturally allow more than one answer: the suggested answers given in the key by no means represent the only options. Learners with access to native speakers may benefit from reading out their own answers to them and eliciting alternatives. More demanding exercises, which may require additional knowledge or reference to other units, are marked with a dagger (†).

Further practice

Few learners will be satisfied with armchair knowledge of the language: to put grammatical knowledge to practical use, exposure to Cantonese media and practice with native speakers will be needed. This book aims to provide a firm foundation on which to build proficiency. Using the minimum of terminology, it should provide just enough grammatical apparatus for the teacher and learner to devise further practice activities of their own. Readers graduating from this book will also be able to progress to *Intermediate Cantonese* which takes them into new and more challenging territory.

UNIT 1
Consonants

In Cantonese, it is useful to distinguish initial consonants, that is those which occur at the beginning of a syllable, from those found at the end of a syllable.

Initial consonants

	Unaspirated	*Aspirated*	*Fricative*	*Nasal/liquid*
Bilabial/labiodental	b	p	f	m
Dental/alveolar	d	t	s	n/l
Velar/glottal	g	k	h	ng
Labiovelar	gw	kw		
Alveolar affricates	j	ch		

The consonant sounds in the third and fourth columns – the fricatives **f**, **s**, **h** and the nasals **m**, **n**, **ng** – are pronounced much as in English, while the first two columns pose greater difficulty. Whereas English stops such as **p** and **b** are distinguished by the fact that **p** is voiceless and **b** voiced, no Cantonese stops are distinctively voiced; instead they are distinguished by aspiration – a burst of air emitted in the process of articulation. In English, this feature is also present in that initial **p** is normally aspirated and **b** not; however, this contrast is not a distinctive one. To an English speaker, Cantonese **b** as in **béi** 畀 'give' may sound either like **p** (because of the lack of voicing) or like **b** (because of the lack of aspiration). This combination of features – voiceless and unaspirated – is not found in English, making the Cantonese consonants **b/d/g** difficult to recognize and produce at first. Remember that **b-** as in **bāt** 筆 'pen', **d-** as in **deui** 對 'pair' and **g-** as in **gwai** 貴 'expensive' are not voiced. The problem also arises in romanized place names: *Kowloon,* for example, is generally pronounced by English speakers with an aspirated [k], but in the Cantonese form **Gáulùhng** 九龍 the initial consonant is not aspirated.

In the labiovelar consonants **gw** and **kw**, the initial velar consonant is articulated more or less simultaneously with the bilabial [w] as in **gwa** 掛 'hang' and **kwàhn** 裙 'skirt'. There is a tendency to simplify **gw** and **kw** to [g] and [k],

respectively, before **o** or **u**, e.g. **gwok** 國 'country' sounds identical to **gok** 覺 'feel'. Similarly:

Gwóngjāu 廣州	→	**Góngjāu** Canton (Guangzhou)
gwú 估	→	**gú** guess
gwun 罐	→	**gun** can (of beer, Coke, etc.)
kwòhng 狂	→	**kòhng** crazy

The affricates **j** and **ch** are probably the most difficult of the initial consonants. They are distinguished by aspiration: **ch** is accompanied by a breath of air while **j** is not. There are two rather different pronunciations for each consonant, depending on the following vowel:

(a) Before the front vowels **i**, **yu** and **eu** or **eui**, the affricates **j** and **ch** are alveo-palatal, [tʃ] and [tʃ'], respectively, formed with the tongue touching both the alveolar ridge and the palate:

jī 知	know	**chī** 黐	to stick
jyū 豬	pig	**chyūn** 村	village
jēui 追	chase	**chēui** 吹	to blow

In these cases, the sounds are fairly close to their English counterparts as in 'June' and 'choose'.

(b) In all other cases, the affricates **j** and **ch** are alveolar, [ts] and [ts'], respectively, formed at the front of the mouth (like **d** and **t**) at the alveolar ridge just behind the teeth:

jā 揸	to drive	**chàh** 茶	tea
johng 撞	crash	**cho** 錯	wrong

These sounds are different from any in English: **chàh** 茶 should not be pronounced like 'char'. In all cases, remember that the Cantonese **j** is not voiced, just as **d** is not, while **ch** as in **chín** 錢 is aspirated, like **t**.

Consonants and names

The romanized forms of names used in Hong Kong and south China follow various older transcription systems which can be confusing for the learner. To pronounce them correctly, bear in mind the following correspondences:

Place name	Yale Romanization	Surname	Yale Romanization
Kowloon 九龍	Gáulùhng	Kong 江	Gōng
Kwun Tong 觀塘	Gwūn Tòhng	Kwok 郭	Gwok
Tai Po 大埔	Daaih Bou	Tang 鄧	Dahng
Tsimtsatsui 尖沙咀	Jīmsājéui	Tse 謝	Jeh
Shatin 沙田	Sātìhn	Shek 石	Sehk

Semivowels

The semivowels **w-** and **y-** also occur at the beginning of a syllable. They can be pronounced much as in English:

w-	**wah** 話	say	**wúih** 會	will
y-	**yiu** 要	want	**yuhng** 用	use

In the case of initial **y-** followed by the vowel **yu**, technically we would have **yyu**, but this combination is conventionally written more simply as **yu**, as in **yuht** 月 'month'.

Nasals

The velar nasal written as **ng-** is a single consonant, which presents two problems:

- It is basically the same sound that we find in 'sing' and 'singer', but in Cantonese, it can begin a syllable, as in **ngóh** 我 'I'. It can be produced by pronouncing 'singer' as 'si-nger'.
- Cantonese speakers frequently do not pronounce it where expected. Thus, the pronoun 'I' is often heard as **óh**, 'duck' is either **ngaap** or **aap** 鴨, while **ńgh** 五 'five' may be pronounced as **ḿh** instead.

A similar problem arises with the distinction between **n** and **l** which is made in dictionaries and some textbooks. Although certain words nominally begin with **n**, notably the pronoun **néih** 你 'you', most speakers pronounce these with **l** instead:

néuih-yán 女人	or	**léuih-yán** woman
nám 諗	or	**lám** think
nīdouh 呢度	or	**līdouh** here

As a result of this change, words pronounced with initial **l-** may not appear in dictionaries. In such cases, the word may be found under initial **n-**.

Syllabic nasals

The nasal consonants **m** and **ng** occur as syllables in their own right, albeit only in a few words. The most frequently encountered examples are:

ḿh 唔	not (the main negative word: see Unit 14)
ńgh 五	five (also pronounced **ḿh**: see above)
Ńgh 吳	Ng (a common surname)

Note that these words each carry a tone of their own.

Final consonants

Only two kinds of consonants occur at the end of a syllable:

• The stops **-p**, **-t**, **-k**: these stops are unreleased, i.e. the airstream is closed to make them but not reopened again, so that no air is released. Such consonants occur in casual pronunciation in English (e.g. 'yep!') as well as in German and many other languages and are not difficult to produce. What is more difficult is to hear the difference between them, as they tend to sound alike:

baat 八 (eight) vs. (**yāt** 一) **baak** 百 ((one) hundred)
sāp chē 濕車(wet car) vs. **sāt chē** 失車(missing car) vs. **sāk-chē** 塞車 (traffic jam)

• The nasals **-m**, **-n**, **-ng**: these are easily pronounced, although Mandarin speakers may have difficulty with **-m**.

sāam 三 (three) vs. **sāan** 閂 (to close) vs. **sāang** 生 (alive)
làahm 南 (south) vs. **làahn** 難 (difficult) vs. **láahng** 冷 (cold)

One complication here is that many speakers pronounce the **-ng** words with **-n** in certain syllables, so that **hohksāang** 學生 'student', for example, is pronounced **hohksāan**.

Exercise 1.1

Pronounce the following words paying special attention to the consonants. You may need to look at Unit 2 (vowels) and Unit 3 (tone) in order to pronounce the words correctly. If possible check your pronunciation with a native speaker.

1	**baat** 八 eight	6	**luhk** 六 six
2	**taap** 塔 tower	7	**seun** 信 letter
3	**je** 借 lend/borrow	8	**cheung** 唱 sing
4	**ngoh** 餓 hungry	9	**ngh** 五 five
5	**ngāam** 啱 exactly	10	**yaht** 日 day

Exercise 1.2

The following words are 'minimal pairs' differing in only one feature. Identify this difference and make sure that your pronunciation distinguishes the two words.

1	**bin** 變 change	**pin** 片 a slice
2	**baai** 拜 worship	**paai** 派 distribute