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Colloquial Cantonese

The Complete Course
for Beginners

Dana Scott Bourgerie, Keith S.T. Tong,
and Gregory James

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Introduction

Cantonese: language or dialect?

The “Chinese language” is extremely diverse, yet the speakers of the different varieties of Chinese do not regard themselves as members of different linguistic communities. All the varieties of Chinese look toward a common “standard” model, fundamentally the linguistic standards of the written language. In modern China, linguistic standards for speech have been based on the pronunciation of the capital, Beijing, and the national language of the People’s Republic of China is called Putonghua, “the common language,” or Mandarin. Cantonese is that variety of Chinese that is spoken in wide areas of the southern coastal provinces of Guangdong (capital Guangzhou, or Canton) and Guangxi (capital Nanning), and in some neighboring places such as Hong Kong and Macao, as well as in numerous places in Southeast Asia outside China proper, such as Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam. The latter half of the twentieth century witnessed a great deal of accelerated emigration of Cantonese speakers, notably to Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States, and Cantonese is the dominant form of Chinese spoken in many families of the “chinatowns” of the major cities in these countries. Indeed, in the United States, many of the early Chinese immigrants also trace their ancestry not only to Guangdong Province, but to one particular rural district, Taishan (about ninety kilometers southwest of Guangzhou), whose accessible harbor was used by American ships which came to recruit cheap labor along the Chinese coast in the middle of the nineteenth century.

Traditionally, Cantonese has been considered a “dialect” of Chinese. However, this term is misleading, and tends to have more socio-political

than linguistic significance. Over the four thousand and more years of the history of Chinese, the language has developed in different ways in the various regions of China. In particular, the regional varieties of the language that have emerged have been marked by their individual sound systems. Many of the varieties of modern Chinese are mutually incomprehensible when spoken, yet because of the uniformity of the written characters of the language, communication can often be effected successfully through the medium of writing. The situation, generalized throughout the language, is similar to, say, a Spanish speaker not understanding an English speaker saying the word “five,” yet comprehending fully the written figure “5.”

Some varieties of Chinese—like some varieties of English—enjoy more prestige in the language community than others. Ever since the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), by which time the Pearl River delta had become an important economic and cultural center, the Cantonese of Guangzhou has been an important variety of Chinese, and even the medium for an extensive vernacular literature, including ballads, epic poetry, and some fiction writing. Although these styles are regarded as rustic by purists, their popularity has given rise to the generation of special written forms for Cantonese colloquialisms. Indeed, Cantonese is the only variety of Chinese (besides Mandarin) with widely recognized non-traditional written characters for such colloquial words and expressions. Such “dialect writing” is disapproved of in the People’s Republic of China, but is kept alive in the Cantonese press and other publications in Hong Kong and elsewhere. Many of the non-traditional characters of Cantonese are known throughout China—at least in the urban areas. In the north the use of Cantonese colloquialisms, because of the association of this variety of Chinese with the West, through Hong Kong, adds a touch of exoticism or raciness to one’s speech.

Cantonese is thus more than simply a dialect. It is a regional standard, with a national and an international prestige and currency not enjoyed by any other variety of Chinese, except Mandarin. In spite of the special written characters that have emerged, Cantonese remains essentially a spoken language, with no universally recognized written form. The language has several geographical dialects, distinguished largely by their phonological characteristics, but the “Colloquial Cantonese” used in this book would be accepted by native speakers

as a standard form of the language, as spoken in Hong Kong. Within this standard, there are levels of formality and informality in expression. We have aimed for a neutral style in speech, appropriate to a wide range of social and professional situations. In one or two instances, where the formal–informal distinction is significant, for example where the use of particular words in public broadcasting differs from the corresponding words that would be used in conversation, this has been pointed out.

Cantonese grammar

From several points of view, the grammar of Cantonese is extremely straightforward. Verbs do not conjugate for person or number, nor are there different forms for tense, mood, or voice. Nouns and adjectives do not decline, and have no number, gender, or case. There is no subject-verb or adjective-noun agreement. In short, Cantonese is free of the challenges with which learners of European languages are so familiar.

However, superficial simplicity of form does not mean that there is any less functional capability in the language. One can say in Cantonese anything that one would wish to say in English, or any other language; but the relationships between words and meanings that are made formally in English by, for example, inflection or agreements are expressed in different ways in Cantonese. Word order is especially important, and subject to more rigid regulation than in English. Cantonese also possesses a series of “classifiers,” which identify objects largely by shape, and a rich repertoire of “particles” which are used to express mood, emotion, attitude, etc. There are many multifunctional words, which can act as nouns, adjectives, or verbs, depending upon the context (compare the various functions a word such as “right” has in English); indeed, even the formal distinction between nouns, verbs, and adjectives in Cantonese is often extremely blurred.

The varieties of Chinese show a great deal of syntactic uniformity. Yet there do exist some significant differences amongst them. Cantonese and Mandarin, for example, differ in word order in certain constructions. In Cantonese the direct object precedes the indirect object, whereas the opposite obtains in Mandarin:

Cantonese:	béi syū ngóh give + book + (to) me
Mandarin:	gěi wō shū give + (to) me + book.

Certain adverbs (such as **sīn** “first”) which precede the verb in Mandarin follow the verb in Cantonese (as in **heui sīn** “go first” vs. Mandarin **xiān qù** “first go”). Often the differences are more subtle: a Mandarin sentence pattern in Cantonese will sometimes be understood by native Cantonese speakers, but will nevertheless not be accepted as truly idiomatic. Conversely, colloquial Cantonese has a number of patterns that would not be linguistically acceptable in Mandarin.

Cantonese vocabulary

Cantonese, like all varieties of Chinese, is generally considered to be monosyllabic: almost every syllable carries meaning. Although there are many monosyllabic words (words of one syllable), it is by no means true that every word is made up of one syllable: there are many words which are made up of two, or three, syllables, such as:

sáubīu	wristwatch
syutgwaih	refrigerator
fēigēichèuhng	airport
láahngheigēi	air conditioner

Whereas syllables in English are often individually meaningless (e.g. “*syl-la-ble*,” “*car-ries*”), syllables in Cantonese are largely individually meaningful:

sáubīu	sáu = “hand” + bī u = “watch”
syutgwaih	syut = “snow” + gwaih = “cupboard”

This is not always the case, and Cantonese has examples of “bound” syllables, which carry meaning or express function only when they occur with other syllables, but these forms are often the result of foreign borrowing:

bōlēi	glass
pùihwùih	to linger

Neither **bō** nor **lēi** nor **pùih** nor **wùih** carries any meaning apart from in these combinations. Similar examples in English are “cranberry” or “kith and kin.” The syllables “cran-” and “kith” have no individual meanings—that is, they cannot occur meaningfully alone—but they do have meaning when they occur with “-berry” and “and kin” respectively.

While most Cantonese vocabulary is the same as other varieties of Chinese, in some cases words that are common in everyday Cantonese are seen as archaic and literary in Mandarin, for example:

mihn	face
hàahng	walk
sihk	eat
wah	say

There are also examples where the meanings of words differ or are even reversed in Cantonese and Mandarin. The word for “house” in in Cantonese, **ūk** (Mandarin **wū**), typically means “room” in Mandarin. Conversely, Cantonese **fòhng** (Mandarin **fáng**), that ordinarily means “room” in Cantonese, refers to “house” in Mandarin.

At the same time, in recent history, Cantonese has, because of its socio-cultural contacts, borrowed a large number of words from other languages, especially English:

jyūgūlik	chocolate
nèihlùhng	nylon
wàihhtāmhng	vitamin
wāisihgéi	whisky

The sound system of Cantonese

The romanization adopted in this book, and in *Cantonese: A Comprehensive Grammar*, also published by Routledge, is the Yale system, which is a widely used and convenient learning tool. Note, however, that this is not the system generally found in official transliterations of personal and place names, where there has been little standardization over the centuries.

Below we list the various sounds of Cantonese, as they are transcribed in the Yale romanization. Two terms may need explanation:

“aspirated” and “unreleased.” Aspirated consonants are pronounced with a puff of air, as in English “p” in “pan” and “lip.” In some cases, such as, in English, after “s” (“span,” “spill”), the same consonants lose the puff of air and are unaspirated. At the end of a word they may not even be completed: the lips close to form the sound but do not open again to make the sound “explode”; such sounds are termed “unreleased.”

A more elaborate description of the Cantonese phonological system can be found in *Cantonese: A Comprehensive Grammar*.



Consonants (Audio 1:2)

- b** resembles the (unaspirated) “p” in “span,” “spill”; to an unaccustomed ear, an initial unaspirated *p* can often sound like “b” in “bill.”
- d** resembles the (unaspirated) “t” in “stand,” “still.”
- g** resembles the (unaspirated) “c” in “scan,” and “k” in “skill.”
- gw** resembles the “qu” in “squad,” “square.” There is some evidence that this sound is becoming simplified over time, and words transcribed with **gw-** in this book may actually be heard, in the speech of some native speakers, as beginning with **g-**. As a learner, you are advised to follow the pronunciation of the transcription.
- j** an unaspirated sound something between “ts” in “cats” and “tch” in “catch.”
- p** in initial position resembles the (aspirated) “p” in “pat,” “pin”; in final position, that is, at the end of a syllable, “p” is unreleased.
- t** in initial position resembles the (aspirated) “t” in “top,” “tin”; in final position, “t” is unreleased.
- k** in initial position resembles the “k” in “kick,” “kill”; in final position, “k” is unreleased.
- kw** a strongly aspirated plosive, resembles the “qu” in “quick,” “quill.”
- ch** resembles the (aspirated) “ch” in “cheese,” “chill.”
- f** resembles the “f” in “fan,” “scarf.”
- s** resembles the “s” in “sing,” “sit.”
- h** (only in initial position in the syllable) resembles the “h” in “how,” “hand.” (Where it appears later in the syllable, “h” is explained under Tone, below.)

- l** resembles the “l” in “like,” “love.”
- m** resembles the “m” in “man,” “stem.”
- n** resembles the “n” in “now,” “nice.” There is a widespread tendency, particularly amongst the younger generation of Cantonese speakers, to replace an initial **n** by **l**, and there is consequently some variation in pronunciation: many words which are transcribed with an initial letter *n* in this book may be heard as beginning with *l*, for instance **néih** “you,” may be heard as **léih**. As a learner, you are advised to follow the pronunciation of the transcription.
- ng** resembles the southern British English pronunciation of “ng” as in “sing” (that is, without pronouncing the “g” separately). This sound occurs only after vowels in English, but in Cantonese it can also occur at the beginning of syllables. However, many native speakers do not pronounce this sound initially. And, just as in English, a final **-ng**, particularly after the long vowel **aa**, is often replaced by **-n**, although this variation does not have the social connotation it has in British English (cf. “runnin’ and jumpin’”).
- y** resembles the “y” in “yes,” “yellow.”
- w** resembles the “w” in “wish,” “will.”

Vowels (Audio 1:3)



- a** resembles the “u” in the southern British English pronunciation of “but.”
- aa** resembles the southern British English “a” in “father.” When this sound is not followed by a consonant in the same syllable, the second **a** of the **aa** is omitted in writing: **fā** is pronounced as if it were “faa.”
- e** resembles the “e” of “ten.”
- eu** resembles the French “eu” as in “feu,” or the German “ö” as in “schön.” It is pronounced like the “e” of “ten,” but with rounded lips.
- i** resembles the “ee” of “deep.”
- o** resembles the “aw” in “saw.”
- u** resembles the “u” in the southern British English “put.”
- yu** resembles the French “u” as in “tu,” or the German “ü” as in “Tür.” It is pronounced like the “ee” of “deep,” but with the lips rounded instead of spread.



Diphthongs (Audio 1:4)

The diphthongs consist of the vowels in different combinations:

- ai** **a + i**, a combination of “a” plus “i,” a very short diphthong, much shorter than the sound of “y” in “my.”
- aai** **aa + i**, resembling the “ie” in “lie.”
- au** **a + u**, resembling the “ou” in “out.”
- aaui** **aa + u**, resembling a long “ou” in “ouch!”
- eui** **eu + i**, a combination of “eu” plus “i,” something like the hesitation form “er” in English (without the “r” sound) followed by “ee”: “e(r)-ee.”
- iu** **i + u**, a combination of “i” plus “u,” something like “yew” in English.
- oi** **o + i**, resembling the “oy” in “boy.”
- ou** **o + u**, resembling the “oe” in “foe.”
- ui** **u + i**, resembling the “ooey” in “phooey.”



Tone (Audio 1:11)

Cantonese is a *tone language*. This means that the same syllable pronounced on different pitches, or with different voice contours, carries different meanings. Consider first an example from English. To agree with someone, you might say simply, “Yes.” The voice tends to fall, from a mid-level to a low pitch. If, however, the answer “Yes” to a question is unexpected, you may repeat it as a question: “Yes?” meaning: “Did you really say ‘yes’?” The voice tends to rise from a mid-level to a high pitch, the span of the rise depending upon the amount of surprise you want to convey. A further example might be the answer “Yes!” as an exclamation, to show surprise or amazement, with the voice tending to fall from a high to a mid-level pitch, again with the span of the fall depending on the intensity of the exclamation. These instances demonstrate that, in English, syllables can be pronounced on different pitches and with different voice contours to express different attitudes. The fundamental meaning of the syllable remains the same; “yes” means “yes” whatever the pitch. However, the variations in pitch indicate whether “yes” is a statement “yes,” a questioning “yes?,” an exclamatory “yes!,” etc. In English the combinations of the sounds in individual words carry the formal meanings

of the words, that is, what the words *denote*. The pitch, or intonation, variations indicate the speaker's attitudes or emotions, that is, what the words *connote*.

Another example: if you asked, in English, "What day is it today?" the answer might be "Monday." Normally, this would be said with the voice falling from mid-level to a lower level. Such an intonation contour indicates a plain statement of fact in English. If the answer were to be given with a rise at the end, it might be interpreted as insecurity on the part of the speaker ("I'm not sure. Is it] Monday?"), or perhaps not even understood. On the other hand, a strongly stressed first syllable with a high pitch, followed by an unstressed second syllable on a lower pitch ("Monday!") might indicate the speaker's surprise at being asked the question at all, perhaps expressing something like "Don't you know it's Monday?" The differences in pitch contours indicate differences in the speaker's attitude, the *connotation* of the answer. However, in Cantonese, a similar question **Gāmyaht sīngkèih géi?** "What day is it today?" might be answered **Sīngkèih yāt**, with the first syllable high, the second syllable a low fall and the third syllable high. This would mean, "Monday." With one change, from a relatively high pitch to a lower level pitch on the last syllable, **Sīngkèih yaht**, the meaning becomes "Sunday"! The pitch, or tone, variation, indicates a change in the *denotation* of the word: it means something different—in this case, a different day of the week. Every syllable has to be said on a particular pitch for it to carry meaning, and the same syllable said on a different pitch has a different *denotational* meaning.

Connotation, which in English is conveyed by pitch variation in the voice, is often indicated in Cantonese by individual syllables, usually particles which occur at the end of the sentence, such as **gwa** or **lō**, as in the Cantonese equivalents to the answers discussed above:

Sīngkèih yāt gwa	= I'm not sure. Is it Monday?
Sīngkèih yāt lō	= Monday! I'm surprised you asked me.

How many tones are there in Cantonese? Analyses vary: some say six, some seven, some even nine. In this book, we distinguish six tones, not simply because this is the minimum with which to operate comprehensibly and successfully in Cantonese, but because further distinctions actually depend on fine theoretical linguistic arguments.

Native Cantonese speakers appear nowadays to be confining themselves to these six definitive pitch differentiations in their speech, with any minor tonal variations beyond these certainly not being significant from the point of view of someone beginning an acquaintance with the language.

Actual pitch does not matter—everyone’s voice is different in any case—but relative pitch is important. There are three levels of tones: *high*, *mid*, and *low*, and as long as a distinction is made from one level to another, comprehensibility is enhanced.

The *mid* level is the normal level of one’s voice in conversation, and is the point of reference for the other levels.

The *high* level is a pitch somewhat higher than the mid level.

The *low* level is a pitch somewhat lower than the mid level.

Cantonese has words which are distinguished by pitch at each level, such as:

(high)	mā	mother
(mid)	ma	<i>question particle</i>
(low)	mah	to scold
(high)	sī	poetry
(mid)	si	to try
(low)	sih	a matter

It is important to note the transcription adopted here. A macron (ˉ) is used to indicate a high-level tone (**mā**, **sī**). The absence of any such diacritic indicates a mid-level tone (**ma**, **si**) or a low-level tone (**mah**, **sih**), with the latter having an **h** following the vowel to indicate the low-level tone. The letter **h** is pronounced as in “how” or “hand” *only* when it occurs in initial position in the syllable; elsewhere it is merely a marker of low-level tone, and is not pronounced separately.

In addition to words said on a fixed level—high, mid, or low—there are three tone combinations: two rising, and one falling. For some speakers of Cantonese there is a second falling tone, the high falling, which is merged with the high level in most speakers.

The *high rising* tone is a rise from mid to high, rather like asking a question on one word in English: “Monday?”

The *low rising* tone is a rise from low to mid, again like asking a question, but rather suspiciously.

The *low falling* tone is a fall from mid to low, somewhat like an ordinary statement in English.

Note the transcription: an acute accent mark (´) is used for a rising tone, and a grave accent mark (`) is used for a falling tone. Again, remember that the letter **h**, when not in initial position, indicates low level.

Look at the following lists of words, in which the pairs are contrasted by tone only. Try to ensure that you make the tonal distinctions between each pair of words. Return to this exercise often, so as to practice these differences—they *are* important!

<i>High level</i>	tāu (to steal) sīng (star) tōng (soup) chīm (to sign)	<i>Low falling</i>	tàuh (head) sihng (city) tòhng (sugar) chihm (to dive under water)
<i>High level</i>	dāng (lamp) fān (to divide) jēui (to chase) gām (gold)	<i>Mid level</i>	dang (chair) fan (to sleep) jeui (drunk) gam (to ban)
<i>Mid level</i>	gin (to see) si (to try) seun (letter) yim (to loathe)	<i>Low level</i>	gihn (classifier for clothes) sih (a matter) seuhn (smooth) yihm (to test)
<i>High rising</i>	séui (water) sáu (hand) dím (a point) séi (to die)	<i>Mid level</i>	seui (years of age) sau (thin) dim (shop) sei (four)

For further information on tone see [Appendix, p. 292](#).

Comparison to the Mandarin tone system

In comparison to Mandarin, the Cantonese tone system is more complex and more closely reflects the system of earlier historical periods of Chinese. Although the tone values differ, there exists a mostly predictable correlation between the tone categories. Note that

coming from Mandarin, one can often only narrow the possibilities to one of two Cantonese tones.

<i>Mandarin</i>	<i>Cantonese</i>
first tone (high-level tone)	high level, high falling
second tone (high-rising tone)	low falling
third tone (dipping tone)	low rising
	high rising
fourth tone (falling tone)	mid level, low level

Also, note that when a Cantonese word ends with **-p**, **-t**, or **-k** (the historical entering tone or 入聲 category) the correspondence is greatly complicated. In these cases, the table does not predict the correspondence. For example, the mid-level word 白 **baak** in Cantonese is a second tone (rising) in Mandarin.

Using this book

This book is divided into fifteen units. Each unit has a similar format. At the head of each unit, you will find a short list of the objectives which the unit material aims to help you achieve.

The basic vocabulary of the unit is introduced in the *Vocabulary* sections. Look through the list of words. Read each item aloud, paying particular attention to the tone of every word. If you have the audio material, you can model your pronunciation on the recording.

The *Dialogues* are short, realistic exchanges preceded by questions. Read the questions, and then read or listen to each dialogue in order to find the answers to the questions. If you have the audio recordings, listen to the dialogues and answer the questions before reading the texts. It is not necessary to understand every word of the dialogue to be able to answer these questions. At this stage, just concentrate on answering the questions, and do not worry about the rest. As the units progress, material presented in earlier units is recycled, for consolidation.

The *Idioms and structures* sections give explanations of the idiomatic expressions used in the dialogues, as well as comprehensive usage

notes, covering all the grammatical constructions introduced. Review these sections carefully, referring to the dialogues for the examples of usages.

You will find a series of *Exercises* to give you practice in using the vocabulary and structures introduced in the unit. You will also find a selection of *Communicative activities* toward the end of each unit. These are intended as extension exercises to allow you to put your newly acquired language skills into practice with the help of a partner or Cantonese-speaking friend.

Each unit ends with some related Chinese characters for recognition purposes, followed by a *Cultural point* section to provide a sense of the rich environment in which Cantonese is spoken, especially Hong Kong.

Special conventions of the Yale transcription

- 1 The tone mark on a diphthong always falls on the first written vowel, e.g. **yáuh**, **móuh**, but the tone is a characteristic of the diphthong as a whole.
- 2 In the syllable **ng̃h**, which has no vowel letters, the tone mark is written over the **g**, but the tone is characteristic of the whole syllable.
- 3 When **aa** is *not* followed by a consonant in the same syllable, the second **a** is dropped from the written form. Thus, **fā**, for example, is pronounced as if it were **faa**.

Conventions used in this book

- 1 The apostrophe is used to indicate elision of numerals, as in **y'ah** (the elided form of **yih-sahp**), **sā'ah** (the elided form of **sāam-sahp**), etc. See [Unit 5](#), p. 86.
- 2 The hyphen is used to indicate:
 - (a) numbers above ten, e.g. **ng̃h-sahp**, **sei-baak** (see [Unit 2](#), p. 33);
 - (b) verb-object constructions, e.g. **tái-syū**, **dá-dihnwá** (see [Unit 3](#), p. 47);

- (c) reduplicated forms of nouns and adjectives, e.g. **fèih-féi-déi**, **gōu-gōu-sau-sau** (see [Unit 5](#), p. 80);
 - (d) comparative adjectives, e.g. **fèih-dī**, **gwai-dī** (see [Unit 6](#), pp. 82 and 103);
 - (e) verbs with special markers, e.g. **sihk-jó faahn**, **cheung-gán gō** (see [Unit 6](#), pp. 100 and 137);
 - (f) days of the week and months, e.g. **sīngkèih-yāt**, **gáu-yuht** (see [Units 3](#) and [12](#), pp. 52 and 194).
- 3 The negative prefix for verbs, **m-**, becomes **-mh-** in choice-type questions (see [Unit 1](#), p. 21), e.g. **mhaih/haih-mh-haih**, **msái/sái-mh-sái**. No tone mark is used on **m-** or **-mh-**, but the syllable is always pronounced on the low falling tone.
- 4 The asterisk is used to indicate sentences or structures that are not grammatically correct, but are for illustration only.

Unit One

Gāaujai

Meeting people



In Unit 1 you will learn about:

- introducing yourself and others
- greeting people
- enquiring about someone
- the verbs “to be” and “can”
- forming negative statements
- forming choice-type questions and questions with question-words
- naming conventions, names of countries, languages, and nationalities





Dialogue 1



(Audio 1:12)

John and Carmen are at a gathering of the Cantonese Students' Club, where foreigners learning Cantonese meet and practice their Cantonese. Carmen is talking to Richard.

- (a) What country does Carmen come from?
- (b) What country does Richard come from?

CARMEN: Néih hóu, ngóh haih Carmen.

RICHARD: Néih hóu, Carmen. Ngóh haih Richard. Carmen, néih haih bīndouh yàhn a?

CARMEN: Ngóh haih Náusāilāahn yàhn.

RICHARD: O, néih haih Náusāilāahn yàhn.

CARMEN: Gám néih nē, Richard?

RICHARD: Ngóh haih Méihgwok yàhn.

CARMEN: How are you? I am Carmen.

RICHARD: How are you, Carmen? I am Richard. Where are you from?

CARMEN: I am a New Zealander.

RICHARD: Oh, you are a New Zealander.

CARMEN: And how about you, Richard?

RICHARD: I am an American.



Dialogue 2



(Audio 1:14)

John is talking to Emily.

- (a) Where does John come from?
- (b) What languages does he speak?
- (c) Where does Emily come from?
- (d) What languages does she speak?

JOHN: Néih hóu. Ngóh giujouh John. Néih giu mātyéh méng a?

EMILY: Néih hóu. Ngóh giujouh Emily. Haih nē, John, néih haih-mh-haih Yīnggwok yàhn a?

JOHN: Mhaih. Ngóh haih Oujāu yàhn. Ngóh sīk góng Yīngmán tūhng Dākmán.

EMILY: Ngóh haih Gānàhdaaih yàhn. Ngóh sīk góng Yīngmán tūhng síusíu Faatmán.

JOHN: How are you? My name is John. What is your name?

EMILY: How are you? My name is Emily. By the way, John, you are English, right?

JOHN: No, I am Australian. I speak English and German.

EMILY: I am Canadian. I speak English and a little French.

Dialogue 3



(Audio 1:16)

Carmen is introducing her friend Grace to John.



(a) Where does Grace come from?

(b) What languages can she speak?

CARMEN: Dáng ngóh lèih gaaisiuh. Nīgo haih Grace. Nī go haih John.

GRACE: Néih hóu, John.

JOHN: Néih hóu, Grace.

CARMEN: Grace haih Yahtbún yàhn. Kéuih sīk góng Yahtmán, Yīngmán tūhng Pótūngwá.

JOHN: Ngóh tūhng Carmen sīk góng síusíu Gwóngdōngwá, bātgo ngóhdeih msīk góng Pótūngwá. Haih nē, chéhng mahn Grace néih gwai sing a?

GRACE: Ngóh sing Sawada.

CARMEN: Let me make an introduction. This is Grace. This is John.

GRACE: How are you, John?

JOHN: How are you, Grace?

CARMEN: Grace is Japanese. She speaks Japanese, English, and Mandarin.

JOHN: Carmen and I speak a little Cantonese, but not Mandarin. By the way, Grace, what is your surname?

GRACE: My surname is Sawada.



Vocabulary



Countries (Audio 1:18)

Below is a list of some of the countries in the world. Try reading each item aloud. Practice pronouncing each word, using the audio recording if available.

Yīnggwok	Britain, the UK	Fēileuhtbān	the Philippines
Méihgwok	the U.S.	Yahtbún	Japan
Gānàhdaaih	Canada	Hòhngwok	Korea
Oujāu	Australia	Yandouh	India
Náusāilāahn	New Zealand	Bāgēisītāan	Pakistan
Faatgwok	France	Of course, we must not forget:	
Dākgwok	Germany	Hēunggóng	Hong Kong
Yidaaihleih	Italy	Jūnggwok	China
Sāibāanngàh	Spain		

Gwok literally means “country.” Hence **Yīnggwok** is “Britain,” and **Faatgwok** is “France,” **Dākgwok** is “Germany,” etc. The Cantonese names for some other countries are rough phonetic equivalents, for example: **Gānàhdaaih** for “Canada,” **Náusāilāahn** for “New Zealand,” **Yandouh** for “India,” and **Bāgēisītāan** for “Pakistan.” Sometimes the transliteration is based on the Mandarin readings of the Chinese characters and so is less obvious still.

To refer to the inhabitants of different countries, the word **yàhn**, which literally means “person(s),” is added to the name of a country. For example, a “Briton” is **Yīnggwok yàhn**, an “Australian” is **Oujāu yàhn**, “Indians” are **Yandouh yàhn**, and “Chinese” are **Jūnggwok yàhn**.

Now try reading out the list of countries again, but this time for each item add the word **yàhn** to the name of the country.



Languages (Audio 1:19)

Yīngmán	English	Yidaaihleihmán	Italian
Faatmán	French	Yahtmán	Japanese
Dākmán	German	Hòhnmán	Korean

Mán, wá, and yúh

Mán means “language,” which usually implies both the spoken and written forms. There is another word in Cantonese, **wá**, which refers only to the spoken form of a language. Thus, for the languages spoken by Filipinos, Indians, and Pakistanis, which Cantonese-speaking people may hear being used but will probably never learn to read or write, **wá** is used instead. Hence, they use the vague term **Fēileuhtbānwá** for all languages spoken by Filipinos including Tagalog, **Yandouhwá** for all languages spoken by Indians, and **Bāgēisītāanwá** for all languages spoken by Pakistanis.

Lastly, **yúh** is used for language as well but in a more general and more formal way. Note that with **Gwokýúh** below you cannot substitute **wá** or **mán** for **yúh**, but for national languages you often can. For example, **Faatyúh** for **Faatmán** “French” and **Yíngyúh** for **Yíngmán** “English.”

Jūngmán refers to Chinese in general, including written Chinese and a spoken form of it, while **wá** refers to individual varieties or dialects spoken in different parts of China. Although technically **Jūngmán** refers to the written form of the language, it is widely used to refer to the language as a whole. Hence:

Gwóngdūngwá/ Cantonese

Gwóngjāuwá

Seuhnghóiwá Shanghainese

Chìuhjāuwá The Chiu Chow dialect

Póutūngwá Putonghua (lit. “the common language”),
Standard Mandarin

Gwokýúh Standard Mandarin (lit. “the national language”)

Wáh gúh Standard Mandarin (outside of Greater China)

Idioms and structures



The items in the list below appear in the dialogues above. The *italicized* items are *new* items. In the notes, numbers in brackets refer to the expressions listed below.

- | | | |
|----|--|---|
| 1 | Néih hóu | <i>How are you?</i> |
| 2 | Ngóh haih Carmen | <i>I am Carmen.</i> |
| 3 | Néih haih bīndouh yàhn a? | <i>Where are you from?</i> |
| 4 | Ngóh giujouh John. | <i>My name is John.</i>
(lit. "I am called John.") |
| 5 | Néih giu mātýéh méng a? | <i>What is your name?</i> |
| 6 | Gám, néih nē? | <i>So, what about you?</i> |
| 7 | Haih nē, | <i>By the way,</i> |
| 8 | Néih haih-mh-haih
Yīngwok yàhn a? | <i>Are you British?</i> |
| 9 | Mhaih. | <i>No, I'm not.</i> |
| 10 | Ngóh sīk góng ... | <i>I can speak ...</i> |
| 11 | Yīngmán tùhng Dākmán | <i>English and German</i> |
| 12 | síusíu Faatmán | <i>a little French</i> |
| 13 | Dáng ngóh lèih gaaisiuh. | <i>Let me introduce you.</i> |
| 14 | Nī go haih Grace. | <i>This is Grace.</i> |
| 15 | bātgwo | <i>but</i> |
| 16 | chéhng mahn Grace néih
gwai sing a? | <i>Grace, may I know what
your surname is?</i> |

Greetings

(1)

Néih hóu is a slightly formal greeting expression, which is used at all times of the day and which can be translated into "How are you?" in English, except that it is not a question and the usual response is the same: **Néih hóu**. In practice, it is more akin to saying "hello."

Haih

(2)

The verb **haih** is a copula in Cantonese, meaning it is used to equate (A=B). For example, He **is** Chinese. Note that, unlike the English "to be," **haih** is not a state verb and is not used with adjectivals. For example, the English "She is tall" is rendered **Kéuih gōu** (lit. "s/he tall").

Questions with question-words

(3, 5)

Like “wh” questions in English (why, where, who, etc.), many questions in Cantonese are formed with a question-word. However, the question-word in Cantonese is not put at the beginning of the sentence like the question-word in English, but occupies the position taken by the required information in the answer. Thus, the word order in a Cantonese question is essentially the same as that of a statement. For example, to ask where someone is from you use the question-word **bīndouh** “where” and say: **Néih haih bīndouh yàhn a?**, which literally means “You are where person?” The answer **Ngóh haih Náusāilàahn yàhn** literally means “I am New Zealand person.” To ask someone their name you use the question-word **mātyéh** “what” and say: **Néih giu mātyéh méng a?**, which means “You are called by what name?” and the answer **Ngóh giujouh Emily** means “I am called Emily.”

Nē

(6)

Nē is a final particle used to ask how the topic at hand relates to a certain subject. So if we were discussing what languages people speak, then **neih nē?** would mean “and what languages do you speak?” Alternatively, if we were asking how people are doing, then **Neih nē?** would mean “And how are you doing?” or “And you?” Put another way, it is like saying “Regarding the topic at hand, how do you relate to it?”

Choice-type questions

(8)

Néih haih-mh-haih Yīnggwok yàhn a? is a “choice-type” question, which is a common structure in Cantonese for “yes/no” questions. The question here literally means “Are you or are you not British?” The positive answer to the question is **Ngóh haih Yīnggwok yàhn** or **Haih** for short. The negative answer is **Ngóh mhaih Yīnggwok yàhn** or **Mhaih** for short.

Choice-type questions are formed by reduplicating the verbal form and inserting the negative prefix **m-** in the middle. (In the romanization used here the **m-** is written as **-mh-** in these types of structures.) In the choice-type question **Néih haih-mh-haih Yīnggwok yàhn a?**, the

verb “to be,” **haih**, is repeated. In the choice-type question **Néih sīk-mh-sīk góng Faatmán a?**, “Can you speak French?,” the modal verb **sīk**, “can, know how to,” is repeated.

Negatives

(9)

Negatives in Cantonese are often formed by inserting the negative prefix **mh** before a verb or an adjective. For example, **Ngóh haih Jūnggwok yàhn** means “I am Chinese” while **Ngoh mhaih Jūnggwok yàhn** means “I am *not* Chinese.”

Classifiers for people

(14)

Nī wái is an honorific and polite way of referring to a person. Here **Nī go haih Grace** “this is Grace” would do if Grace is a peer student, for example. **Nī wái** is more polite than **Nī go** and as such would be the classifier to persons to whom you want to pay special respect. One normally never uses the classifier **wái** to refer to oneself, as it is a marker of respect to other people.

Introducing by surname

(16)

To ask for someone’s surname, the rather formal expression **néih gwai sing a?** is used. **Sing** is a verb, which means “to be surnamed,” while **gwai** is an adverb meaning “honorable.” So **néih gwai sing a?** translates into English as “What is your honorable surname?” The respectful expression **chéhng mahn** further heightens the degree of formality. Note that, because **gwai** is an honorific form, it is never applied to one’s own surname. Moreover, because **gwai sing** always refers to others, it becomes by default a question, even without a question particle at the end.

On formal occasions, it is very common for Chinese people to introduce themselves by surname, such as:

Ngóh sing Léih.

My (sur)name is Lee.

This situation nearly always would call for a response with a title such as **sīnsāang** “Mr.”

Léih sīnsāang, néih hóu.

How are you, Mr. Lee?