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Shek Kam Tse, Hui Li

EARLY CHILD CANTONESE

FACTS AND IMPLICATIONS

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Early Child Cantonese

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by

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Foreword

Cantonese, the third most widely spoken Chinese language dialect, is used by over 70 million people¹. The vernacular is spoken in Southern China, Hong Kong, and Macau. In addition, considering that many overseas Chinese from Guangdong (formerly Canton) Province have emigrated, Cantonese is also commonly heard in overseas Chinese communities. However, given that Cantonese has no official standard written form, it is neither taught in schools nor used in government communications.

China has experienced tremendous economic growth and is poised to soon become the world's second largest economy. Investment in research has led to a phenomenal increase in scientific studies and China is expected to lead the world in the production of scientific research by the end of this decade. Although the literature on child development in China is burgeoning, there are few methodologically rigorous large-scale studies of Chinese language acquisition. Given the pervasiveness of Mandarin Chinese, even fewer research projects have been concerned with the acquisition of Cantonese. In light of these situations, a volume on early childhood Cantonese is particularly necessary and timely.

The authors of this book, Shek-Kam Tse and Hui Li, have extensive research experience in Chinese language development and education. Based on a large corpus of language data gathered from a representative sample of nearly 500 preschoolers in an authentic situation, they have made a seminal contribution to our understanding of Cantonese language acquisition. Through their detailed and carefully analyzed findings, they have reported on the development of preschool children's vocabulary, grammar, and use of questions and temporal words.

I believe that this well-written and comprehensive volume would be appropriate as a reference book for courses on Chinese language acquisition, Chinese linguistics, and early childhood development and education in Chinese societies. The findings on normative Cantonese language development are also relevant to the work of speech therapists working with Chinese populations. Furthermore, the findings presented in this book will be beneficial to those who are interested in language acquisition from a cross-cultural perspective, particularly to scholars who are interested in

¹ Mandarin Chinese is the most widely spoken form of spoken Chinese with about 850 million speakers, followed by Wu Chinese, which has about 90 million speakers.

how children acquire the grammatically simple, tonal Cantonese dialect. This book will also be of interest to psychologists, curriculum designers, textbook writers, educators, and policymakers concerned with development and education during the early years.

I hope that this very useful and timely book, *Early Child Cantonese: Facts and Implications*, will be an impetus for further empirical research on language development in Cantonese-speaking children.

Nirmala Rao
Professor, Faculty of Education
and Associate Dean, Graduate School
The University of Hong Kong

Preface

Chinese is often considered very difficult to learn by Western language users. Typically, Western language users are puzzled by the ideographic Chinese characters and Chinese grammar due to the significantly different characteristics of Chinese from some common Western languages such as Spanish, French, and English. This perplexity with Chinese further deepens when the written form of Chinese is taken into consideration—the written form varies across dialects such as Cantonese and Mandarin. Nevertheless, these characteristics have inspired Western scholars to learn and investigate effective approaches to learning Chinese.

To acquire Chinese, it is important to grasp the most basic language elements first. Therefore, it is inevitable to explore child language as reflected in the present study. In addition, the time between ages three and six is considered to be an important period of language development. During this period, children rapidly acquire their native language and develop their mental and physical capacity. Notably a delay in language development in the preschool years would result in the postponement of the acquisition of knowledge and communicative skills, making it difficult for follow-up education to remedy such a loss. Hence, language development in children is always an important topic in the field of psycholinguistics.

In the present scenario, however, kindergartens and parents often concentrate more on the skills in taking entrance examinations for the next school level. Under the very competitive education system, children's native language development is not given considerable attention. Worse, the current preschool language curriculum has been designed in a way that assumes that children undergo similar life experiences as adults do. Therefore, the so-called "common words" in many textbooks are actually found by counting the frequencies of words in newspapers and magazines. In other words, these "common words" are linked with events in the adults' world rather than connected with children's life experiences. In fact, requesting children to speak, learn, and make use of these words ignores their actual developmental needs and capabilities.

We published this book to promote the characteristics and importance of early language development. The research in this book was conducted and analyzed from both the educational and linguistic perspectives to provide an understanding of the basic Cantonese usage of Hong Kong preschoolers

aged between three years and five years and 11 months. The research data were collected from carefully sampled local kindergartens by recording the children's utterances in an authentic classroom setting. The commonality in the data was then statistically analyzed by calculating the proportions of the selected language elements such as word and sentence types and syntactic operations in utterances. We hope that this study can serve as a good resource to researchers and educators in their efforts to develop curricula and teaching materials, which are more realistic and in accordance with children's daily experiences.

We sincerely present this work to all educational, developmental, and cognitive psychologists, psycholinguists, educational researchers, speech therapists, and language teachers, as well as anyone who is interested in child development or the Chinese language. If this book helps them better understand the needs of children, and if it provides them with insights for improving their services or teaching strategies, then it has indeed achieved its purposes.

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We are very grateful to all our colleagues and friends who have collaborated in the development and production of this publication. At each step, from the initial proposal stages to the final production details, we were greatly blessed for having colleagues who have generously shared their time and talents by giving feedback on our work.

First of all, we must especially mention that this project was originally proposed and developed by Dr. Sylvia Opper, who has worked with us at the University of Hong Kong for many years. We wish to present this publication as a tribute to our beloved former colleague.

Second, we would like to extend our thanks to Professor Peter Jordens (series editor of SOLA), Dr. Ursula Kleinhenz (in-house editor of the Mouton series *Studies in Language Acquisition*), and Dr. Julie Miess (senior editor at Mouton de Gruyter). Without their support, patience, and cooperation, this publication would not be possible.

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Fourth, we are very grateful to the participating teachers, principals, and their kindergarteners for their exceptional collaboration and participation in this project. Without their involvement, the corpus of early childhood Cantonese could not be established, and this publication would be impossible. Special thanks must go to Professor Nirmala Rao, associate dean of the Graduate School of the University of Hong Kong. She has been recognized internationally for her excellent work on early childhood development and education. A highly resourceful mentor, Professor Rao wrote the Foreword, which has greatly polished the contents of this book.

Finally, we wish to express our sincere thanks to the reviewer of this book. His/her insightful comments and critical review have contributed in numerous positive ways to the overall presentation of this book. Further-

more, we take this work as a token of gratitude to all our friends and colleagues who have made the long journey of working at the University of Hong Kong a truly rewarding experience.

Shek Kam Tse and Hui Li

May 2011

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Chapter 1

Introduction

This opening chapter introduces the background, rationale, and objectives of the studies presented in this book. A brief overview of Cantonese is presented, and the differences between Cantonese and Mandarin are discussed. Summary accounts of early language acquisition theories are outlined, and the purposes of studying young children's acquisition of Cantonese are likewise explained. Consequently, there is an outline of the main body of research carried out to gather the evidence used in the studies presented in the various chapters. Each chapter reports the research strategy and outcomes, the conclusions generated from each particular study, together with the implications for further research and the development of children's Cantonese proficiency in the early years of schooling.

1. Cantonese as a major Chinese dialect

The Chinese language is the most widely spoken language in the world today (Weber 1997). Given the immense geographical topography of China's many provinces, several Chinese regional dialects have developed over the years. To achieve a degree of uniformity in language usage, Mandarin (also known as Putonghua) has been designated as the official spoken language across Mainland China. Mandarin is also spoken in Taiwan, and it is one of the official languages of Singapore. Standard Written Chinese (SWC) is the written equivalent of spoken Mandarin, and its script is used across all regions of Mainland China, regardless of the local dialect. Meanwhile, Cantonese, one of the many major Chinese dialects of Chinese, is currently used as the lingua franca in Southern China, Hong Kong, Macau, and many "Chinatowns" in North America. Majority of overseas Chinese communities originate from Southern China; hence, most of them speak Cantonese either as their mother tongue or as a second language. The word "Cantonese" is associated with the word "Canton", used by early European merchants for the region around the capital city of Guangdong. Although it is spoken by some 70 million people, Cantonese has no official standard writ-

ten form and is neither taught in schools nor used in formal business and government communications. Although there are five major sub-dialects of spoken Cantonese (Yue–Hashimoto 1991), this book only focuses on the Cantonese spoken in Hong Kong as the everyday form of verbal communication at home and in commerce, media and schools.

1.1. Phonology of the Cantonese language

1.1.1. *Syllables*

Like Mandarin and other Chinese dialects, Cantonese characters are monosyllabic. However, it is possible for each character to have multiple syllable pronunciations. A syllable may also correspond to multiple character homophones (Tse 2006). Cantonese and Mandarin belong to the family of Sino-Tibetan languages, which are also monosyllabic and tonal. However, there are important linguistic differences between the two, including “the inventory of syllable segments, the tone system and lexical and grammatical structures” (Matthews and Yip 1994). As an example, Cantonese has 625 base syllables (tone-independent monosyllable units), which are over a third more than the 420 syllables in Mandarin (Lee, Lo, Ching, and Meng 2002).

1.1.2. *Initials and finals*

In spoken Mandarin, *initials* or beginning sounds are always consonants. *Finals* are the ending sounds, which always begin and may end with vowels, consonants or diphthongs. In the analysis of Lee, Lo, Ching, and Meng (2002), there are 23 initials and 37 finals in Mandarin, whereas 19 initials and 53 finals are found in Cantonese. The number of finals in Mandarin is less than that in Cantonese because the latter “has six different consonant codas, whereas the former only has two” (Lee et al. 2002). Generally, the 53 Cantonese finals can be broadly classified into five categories according to Lee et al. These categories are “simple vowels, diphthongs, vowels with nasal coda, vowels with stop coda, and syllabic nasals”. Lee et al. further stated that, “except for syllabic nasals, all Cantonese syllables contain at least one vowel element”. In Cantonese, the initials are optional and all consonants can be present as initials, but not all initials are conso-

nants. Some initials are semi-vowels or nasals. Non-nasal initials include liquids, glides, fricatives, affricates, and plosives.

Like many languages whose pronunciation of words has changed over time, Hong Kong Cantonese contains evidence of exposure to other world languages such as Japanese and English. “Loanwords” from external languages have gradually crept into Cantonese, and there is usually a measure of diversification in the initials and finals used in Cantonese, even by linguists and other scholars. Table 1.1 (page 16) shows the initials system proposed by the Linguistic Society of Hong Kong (2002) with a complement suggested by Bauer and Paul (1997) on the existence of non-contrastive, palatalized allophones. Table 1.2 shows the vowel system proposed by Bauer and Paul (1997) with reference to the Linguistic Society of Hong Kong’s (2002) Romanization of International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) in Cantonese.

Table 1.2. Inventory of Cantonese finals as represented in IPA

Final Con- sonant										
Nil	<i>i</i>	<i>u</i>	<i>y</i>	<i>a</i>		<i>ɛ</i>	<i>œ</i>		<i>ɔ</i>	
-i				<i>ai</i>	<i>ɐ</i>		<i>ei</i>		<i>ɔi</i>	
-u	<i>iu</i>	<i>ui</i>		<i>au</i>	<i>ɐ u</i>	<i>ɛu</i>				
-y								<i>øy</i>		
-m	<i>im</i>			<i>am</i>	<i>ɐ m</i>	<i>ɛm</i>				<i>m</i>
-n	<i>in</i>	<i>un</i>	<i>yn</i>	<i>an</i>	<i>ɐ n</i>	<i>ɛn</i>		<i>øn</i>	<i>ɔn</i>	
-ŋ	<i>iŋ</i>			<i>aŋ</i>	<i>ɐ ŋ</i>	<i>ɛŋ</i>	<i>œŋ</i>		<i>ɔŋ</i>	<i>ŋ</i>
-p	<i>ip</i>			<i>ap</i>	<i>ɐ p</i>	<i>ɛp</i>				
-t	<i>it</i>	<i>ut</i>	<i>yt</i>	<i>at</i>	<i>ɐ t</i>	<i>ɛt</i>	<i>æt</i>	<i>øt</i>	<i>ɔt</i>	
-ik	<i>ik</i>			<i>ak</i>	<i>ɐ k</i>	<i>ɛk</i>	<i>æk</i>		<i>ɔk</i>	

For the convenience of presenting utterance information to non-Chinese readers, the transliteration symbols presented in this book use the *Jyutping* system, which was developed by the Linguistic Society of Hong Kong and is interchangeable with IPA symbols. A cross-reference table from the Linguistic Society of Hong Kong (2002) is shown in extract in Appendix I.

1.1.3. *Tones*

Tones in monosyllabic languages are regarded as a feature of pitch movement within syllables. Cantonese is a tonal language whose every syllable contains usually one lexical tone. The identification of a Cantonese tone relies on both the pitch contour and the relative pitch level. The duration of Cantonese tones also plays an important role in separating the so-called “entering” tones from others. Tone identification is essential for recognizing Cantonese, which is renowned for its richness in tones. In Mandarin, only five tones are used, whereas in Cantonese, nine different lexical tones are recognized.

A six-tone classification of Cantonese spoken in Hong Kong is commonly adopted and agreed upon by local linguists: (1) high-level tone (or high-falling tone), (2) mid-rising tone, (3) mid-level tone, (4) low-falling tone, (5) low-rising tone, and (6) low-level tone. In traditional rhyming, the first and fourth tones are regarded as “flat category”, whereas the other tones are said to be “oblique”. (See Table 1.3 on page 17.)

1.2. Cantonese versus Mandarin

Cantonese and Mandarin have both developed from Middle Chinese. Moreover, they both maintain the tone system commonly used in ancient times. Cantonese used to be the main language of southern China before the port-opening policy that commenced in the Qing Dynasty. At the time, Canton (Guangdong) was a relatively stable and cohesive region in terms of political, cultural, economic, and socio-linguistic development. In general, the Cantonese dialect possessed several linguistic characteristics of Middle Chinese, including the structured tonal system. For instance, it featured the three kinds of tone levelling: rising and departing tones with the final “*p*”, “*t*”, and “*k*”. Also, some words in the popular lexicon in Cantonese have been maintained and used as they had been in Middle Chinese, for example, “係” (*hai6*: to be) “晏” (*gan3*: late), “鵸突” (*wat6 dat6*: ugly). These words may be found in classical Chinese dictionaries; however, they are no longer used in Mandarin. In contrast, Northern China has been characterised by a more chequered history, unstable politics, and fluctuating economic development. Its people had frequent contact with other ethnic Chinese groupings and with those who spoke foreign languages. Consequently, although Mandarin is also a branch of Middle Chinese, the phonetic system in the North changed considerably as it fused with other contact

languages and absorbed words popularly spoken in neighbouring cultural and trading environments. Therefore, although there are lexical differences between Cantonese and Mandarin, and the discourse exchanges in the two linguistic cultural groups use local social and phonetic inventories, the syntax and grammar in the two dialects carry distinct similarities.

1.3. The Romanization of Cantonese

There are several Romanization systems presently used for writing phonetic versions of spoken Chinese. In the case of Cantonese, the Yale Romanization system is commonly used in the United States. In 1993, The Linguistic Society of Hong Kong proposed a new standardized system called *Jyutping*. This new system set out to avoid some of the problems experienced in other Romanization schemes (such as reformulating the tones, consonants, and coda of the Cantonese phonetic inventory) employed as a strategy for achieving consistency and uniformity. The form of Romanization used in the Jyutping system employs the English alphabet and morphemes to achieve consistency and standardization in print. The Jyutping scheme (<http://www.lshk.org/cantonese.php>) is used throughout this book.

Question Box:

1. What is Cantonese? Who speaks Cantonese in their everyday life? Where do they live?
2. What are the differences between Cantonese and Mandarin? Why and how have differences emerged in the evolution of the two languages?
3. How is Cantonese Romanized?
4. How many initials and finals are there in Cantonese? How many combinations of these are there?

2. Reasons for studying early childhood Cantonese

2.1. Cantonese deserves systematic research

2.1.1. *Cantonese is ancient as well as modern*

As spoken today, Cantonese features certain phonological characteristics that are quite close to some pronunciations in Middle Chinese. In fact, some classic Chinese literary pieces, especially poetry, sound close to the original when read in Cantonese because Cantonese phonology is similar in many aspects to the pronunciations used in Middle Chinese. In contrast, the pronunciation of Mandarin is very different from Middle Chinese; thus, poetry in Middle Chinese can sound quite discordant when read in Mandarin. Using Mandarin phonology in poetry and other rhyme-based writings originally composed in Middle Chinese may sometimes make the lines of the poem sound quite incoherent as Mandarin differs so markedly from Middle Chinese phonology (for a review, see Newman and Raman 1999).

Cantonese is generally a “word-of-mouth” language; hence, almost all Cantonese-speaking people speak colloquial Cantonese in their daily interactions. The spoken form of Standard Written Chinese (SWC), also known as “High Cantonese”, is quite formalized and is only used in official communications. As a living, dialectal language, Cantonese contains numerous slang words popularly used in the environment and the media. The influence of mass media and pop culture spans many years; hence, the language of the young people of Hong Kong constantly changes and evolves. Moreover, the impact of English on Cantonese is considerable, as many “loanwords” used in contemporary Cantonese appear to be “borrowed” from English. In fact, many of these loanwords have been transliterated with Chinese characters by people who map the pronunciations of English words to those in Cantonese, for example, *baal si2* ‘bus’. As a result, new examples of slang, trendy expressions and English words constantly appear in the Cantonese language.

2.1.2. Cantonese is localized as well as globalised

Cantonese is localized because it is mostly spoken by people in Guangdong, Guangxi, the Pearl River Delta, and adjacent regions such as Hong Kong and Macau. However, Cantonese is also to an extent globalised, as it is used internationally by millions of ethnic Chinese speakers around the world. For example, it is spoken by Chinese in many South-East Asian countries, including Thailand, Malaysia, and Singapore. Cantonese is also spoken by immigrants from Hong Kong and the Guangdong area, as well as those in areas (i.e., “Chinatowns”) in foreign cities such as San Francisco, New York, Vancouver, Toronto, and Melbourne. Nevertheless, Mandarin is the officially designated medium of communication and education in Mainland China. It is even prescribed for official functions in Cantonese-speaking regions.

2.1.3. Cantonese is both “dying” and “evolving”

As a dialectal language, Cantonese can be viewed as both “dying” and “evolving”. It is arguably dying considering that Mandarin is the official as well as the dominant language in Mainland China. Mandarin has been strongly prescribed in Hong Kong since the former British colony’s return to Chinese sovereignty in 1997. Hence, an outsider might expect the number of people using Cantonese to diminish and the number of people using Mandarin to increase. However, viewed from a sociolinguistic perspective, Cantonese is clearly a developing, vibrant language and can be said to have two written forms in Hong Kong: the formal form and the colloquial version. Formal written Cantonese follows the syntax, semantics, and lexicon of SWC to maintain a standardized written communication with people using other Chinese dialects. Although the written form of colloquial Cantonese adopts standard Chinese characters, localized characters regularly surface in Hong Kong Cantonese alongside the colloquial usage of Cantonese grammar. In fact, special characters appearing in SWC often evolve from other languages such as English and Japanese. Sometimes, they may even be created by Hong Kong people themselves. This applies particularly to the Cantonese spoken by people in non-Chinese locations and in Internet chat rooms. Moreover, a number of local newspapers are now written in “colloquial Cantonese”, which although well received by Hong Kong people, is found to be tiring and difficult to read by many Mandarin speakers who do not know Canto-

nese. In other words, although Cantonese may be viewed as “dying” by some, it is in fact growing and evolving linguistically over time.

2.2. Early childhood Cantonese deserves empirical exploration

Classic studies of language development from infancy are renowned in the West, all of which are relevant to learners of Chinese. Piaget (1926) studied the development of language and thought in infants in French-speaking Switzerland, whereas Vygotsky (1962) looked at the relationship between language and thought development among children in Russia. Skinner (1957) made a systematic study in the United States of how “language behaviour” is operantly acquired through conditioning like any other behaviour; on the other hand, Chomsky (1965) argued for the presence of a language acquisition device, regarded as an innately inherited capability of all humans. Particularly, he looked into syntax, sentences, and language acquisition, as well as how children seem to “invent” language structures they have not previously encountered. From this nascent research platform, Western research then seemed to take a variety of diverse paths, with the attention focusing on the growth of language proficiency in children in early childhood classrooms (Brown 1973; Carol and Carol 1985). Western studies have focused on psycholinguistics and information processing and on applied language in the form of reading and writing and its pivotal role in education (Lunzer and Gardner 1979). More and more studies have examined language in the classroom, how different approaches to teaching language succeed or fail, and the vital importance of effective language development for scholastic performance (Bullock 1975).

With the burgeoning emergence of Chinese language scholars in recent years, more and more studies have been conducted on the development and education of Chinese children. However, little academic research has been reported about the early acquisition of Chinese languages. The impetus to look closely at the language used for learning and teaching in Hong Kong accelerated with the admission and knowledge that Cantonese is the medium of instruction in most Hong Kong kindergartens and primary schools. It is also used in many secondary schools, especially to explain concepts that are difficult to understand when presented in English.

Researching Chinese children’s language development swiftly gathered momentum in the last few decades, with studies of how spoken Chinese could best be taught and how ways of writing characters could accelerate children’s learning (Tse 2007). However, the bulk of formal research has

been directed towards attaining competence in Mandarin. Cantonese and Mandarin differ in their phonologies, vocabulary, and grammatical structures (Li and Shirai 2000); hence, there is a need for a systematic and intensive study of language development in Cantonese-speaking children. In fact, in recent years there has been a gradual shift in Hong Kong towards studying Cantonese. Most published academic studies have tended to focus on primary school and junior high school children's acquisition of the Chinese language (Chan 1985; Hong Kong Education Department 1986; Tse 1990; Tse and Cheung 1991; Tse and Lam 1992). Furthermore, most of these studies have tended to focus on language channels in isolation, for example, lexical development (Hong Kong Education Department 1986) and writing (Tse 1990; Tse and Cheung 1991; Tse and Lam 1992). Thus, there is still doubt today about the exact number of words in the productive repertoire of young Cantonese-speaking children. Likewise, there is no consensus among researchers about children's productive repertoire of Cantonese temporal words. For example, Fletcher, Leonard, Stokes, and Wong (2005) suggest that preschoolers can produce at least six aspect makers, whereas Matthew and Yip (1994) and Yip and Matthew (2000, 2001) suggest 13 markers as the baseline. In addition, Cantonese-speaking preschoolers' productive repertoire of interrogatives has not been extensively and systematically examined in previous studies. In effect, there is a dearth in the number of qualitative and systematic studies of Cantonese acquisition in early childhood and in the first years of formal education.

Given the paucity of research studies in the field, there are difficulties associated with the design of preschool syllabi and curriculum design and evaluation. What is needed is a drive to conduct empirical research with representative samples of Hong Kong preschoolers, especially research that systematically looks into their early childhood Cantonese development. Researchers in the present study were inspired to conduct a large-scale study of Cantonese acquisition in the early years to address this literature gap. It is hoped that this publication will make a significant contribution to the field of early childhood Cantonese development, and that it will stimulate awareness of important implications for policy making, teacher education, and curriculum design. These policies may influence the allocation of resources for early childhood Cantonese education and pull together the various strands that do not always move ahead in the same direction.