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KEY DIFFERENCES IN MANDARIN AND CANTONESE THAT COMPLICATE THEIR MUTUAL UNDERSTANDING

The article argues the key differences that exist in two most spoken dialects of Modern Chinese language, namely Mandarin and Cantonese. While the first one is the official language for the People's Republic of China, the second one is still widely-spoken in its southern parts, including Hong Kong and Macau. For successful communication and good academic performance, those who learn Chinese as a second language should master the basics of both dialects. Although both varieties belong to analytical languages with SVO word order and similar syntaxes (in most cases), the phonology of the two differs drastically due to the fact that they originate from different lects. The paper analyzes roots of Cantonese and Mandarin Chinese in order to explain why they are that different nowadays. It points to the fact that the first one is mainly based on the pronunciation of the Yueyu dialect group, which is widely-spread in the southern part of China, while the second belongs to the northern Guanhua dialect group. Historically, the latter dialectic group underwent more phonetical changes (for instance, lost syllable-finales [-m], [-p], [-t], and [-k] that are still present and actively used in Yueyu dialect). Moreover, the article focuses on the morphological structure of the dialects and explains how the reform in the Mainland China contributed to more misunderstandings among the speakers of Mandarin and Cantonese. The initiative that aimed at simplifying characters did not receive support at Canton region and ended up in a phenomenon called "one language – two writing systems." The fact that Mandarin Chinese adopted simplified characters, while Cantonese still used the traditional ones, deepened the gap between the regions. With a regard to the aforementioned differences in two dialects, it becomes particularly important to specify their peculiarities and features.

Key words: Mandarin, Cantonese, phonology, morphology, syntax, comparative linguistics.

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КЛЮЧОВІ ВІДМІННОСТІ МІЖ ПУТУНХУА (МАНДАРИНОМ) ТА КАНТОНСЬКИМ ДІАЛЕКТОМ, ЩО УСКЛАДНЮЮТЬ ЇХ ВЗАЄМОЗРОЗУМІЛІСТЬ

У статті проаналізовано основні відмінності між найпопулярнішими діалектами сучасної китайської мови, а саме – Путунхуа (або Мандаринський) та Кантонським діалектом. Перший з них має статус державної мови, тоді як другий активно використовують у південних регіонах Китаю, в тому числі і Гонконзі та Макао. Для забезпечення якісної освіти та уникнення проблем з подальшим працевлаштуванням ті, хто вивчають китайську мову як іноземну, повинні мати уявлення та розрізняти ключові аспекти обох діалектів. Хоча обидва різновиди належать до аналітичних мов з чітким порядком слів (підмет-присудок-додаток) та здебільшого мають однаковий синтаксис, їхня фонологія кардинально відрізняється, адже вони походять від різних лектів. У поданій статті досліджується походження Кантонського та Мандаринського діалектів, щоб обґрунтувати, чому на цей час вони так сильно відрізняються. Виявляється, що фонетична система першого здебільшого базується на правилах вимови діалектної групи Юею, розповсюдженій на півдні країни, тоді як другий належить до північної групи Гуаньхуа. Історично так склалося, що вимова Гуаньхуа зазнала більших змін, ніж Юею (наприклад, у ній зникли фінальні приголосні [-m], [-p], [-t], та [-k], що досі активно використовуються у південних діалектах). Крім того, автор звертає увагу на морфологічну структуру діалектів та пояснює, яким чином мовна реформа материкового Китаю ускладнила порозуміння між тими, хто спілкується Мандаринським та Кантонським. Хоча зазначена ініціатива була спрямована на спрощення ієрогліфів, вона не здобула очікувану підтримку у Кантонському регіоні, в результаті чого і виник феномен, який називають «одна мова – дві системи письма.» Той факт, що Мандаринський діалект наразі використовує спрощені ієрогліфи, а Кантонський залишився вірним традиційному написанню, поглиблює прірву порозуміння між регіонами. З огляду на викладені відмінності виникає необхідність детального аналізу особливостей двох діалектів.

Ключові слова: Мандаринський діалект (Путунхуа), Кантонський діалект, фонологія, морфологія, синтаксис, порівняльна лінгвістика.

Problem statement. Due to the rapid development of Chinese economics and its strong international presence, more and more students decide to learn this language. Nowadays, the majority of international students learn only the official Mandarin dialect, which is popular in the Mainland China. However, when it comes to practice, even native speakers of Chinese that come from different regions, for instance – Beijing and Hong Kong, cannot understand each other. That happens because even though both aforementioned versions of Chinese have many common aspects in syntax, they drastically vary on the phonology and characters. Nowadays, Cantonese dialect of Chinese language is a mother tongue for more than 75 million people living in the Guangdong and Guangxi provinces, Hong Kong, Macau, and for the migrants of these regions¹. Moreover, the language has official status in Hong Kong and Macau, which means that it can be used not only for daily conversations but also for business and administrative purposes (Pierson, 2017). Therefore, taking into account the wide spread of Cantonese dialect, those who learn Chinese should have at least general understanding of its key differences with Mandarin.

Morphology. The first and key difference that a reader sees in Mandarin and its Cantonese variety is that they have different characters. The previous sentence is partially true, because when a person digs deeper, he/she sees that actually the majority of characters has the same radicals, but still looks different. For instance, traditional character for the word “language” is “語” and its simplified form looks “语”. It consists of three radicals, namely “speech” (言 or 讠), “five” (五), and “mouth” (口), that can be logically interpreted as “a [speech] that is common for at least [five] different people [mouths].”

It happens because the Cantonese still uses traditional characters that come from *wenyan* (文言, classical Chinese written language used until the beginning of 20th century) (Wang, 2017). On the other hand, Mandarin Chinese has been simplified after the language reforms of 1956 and 1964 that aimed at increasing the literacy rate among the population by making characters easier to remember and quicker to write (Pierson, 2017). Since that, a reader who sees Mandarin characters may have problems with interpreting the meaning that lies behind each radical.

The simplification applied various methods starting from replacing the radicals and characters built with them by simpler forms (as it was shown in

the example above) and up to the structural changes that adopted new standardized forms or removed some radicals from the simplified character. The latter changes received a portion of critique, as many simplified characters actually lost some important semantic roots (Zhao, 2015; Yan, 2016; Wang, 2017). In particular, the traditional writing of character “愛” that means “love” has four radicals “claws” (爫), “roof” (宀), “heart” (心), and “to go” (攴), which can be interpreted as “[love] is when you [walk] hand by hand with a person that took your [heart] and leave under one [roof] despite all quarrels [claws].” The radicals play a crucial role in understanding the underlying meaning of the word. However, according to the rules of simplification, the character has undergone significant changes and now is written as “爱.” The irony is that “love” lost its “heart” and now consists of three radicals, namely “claws”(爫), “roof” (宀), and “friendship” (友), which can be interpreted as “[friends] that quarrel [claws] under one [roof]”.

The language reforms in People’s Republic of China (PRC) aimed at simplifying the writing system of Mandarin Chinese and therefore increasing the literacy among its citizens, but at the same time, it cut off some important roots of the words etymology. The Cantonese has not adopted the proposed changes, and keeps using the traditional radicals and characters that date back to the Classic Chinese language (Wang, 2017). As such, those who want to understand the newspapers written in Cantonese have to learn the simplified radicals and be ready that some characters may have more building blocks than their Mandarin equivalents do.

Phonology. Even though the educated Chinese adult from PRC can get the meaning of the piece written in Cantonese based on the characters, it is impossible for him/her to understand the oral conversation. That happens because the Cantonese, as other dialects of Chinese, has its unique phonological system².

De facto the pronunciation of Cantonese is based on the local variety of Chinese language used in Guangzhou that was called *Canton* by European traders (Pierson, 2017). The local variety has minor differences with other dialects that belong to *Yueyu* (粤语) dialect group, but they are mutually intelligible³. On the other hand, the official Mandarin Chinese is based on the pronunciation common for northern regions, in particular Beijing dialect, that belongs to *Guanhua* (官话) dialect group.

² 徐朝晖. (2015). 香港, 广州粤方言语音及词汇差异例析. 韶关学院学报, 36(11), 48-51.

³ 吴维. (2016). 钦州粤语与广州粤语语音系统对比研究. 广西教育学院学报, 1(1), 45-47.

¹ Cantonese language (2013, August 26) In Encyclopædia Britannica. Retrieved from: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Cantonese-language>

Mandarin Chinese has undergone more phonetical changes than the Cantonese. Nowadays, it is less complicated syllables and fewer tones. In particular, Guanhua (官话, the dialectic group where Mandarin belongs to) does not have syllable-finales [-m], [-p], [-t], and [-k] that are still used in Cantonese (Bauer, & Benedict, 2011). As such, words in Mandarin Chinese usually end up with a vowel or [-n] / [-ŋ] sounds, while Cantonese is not limited to them.

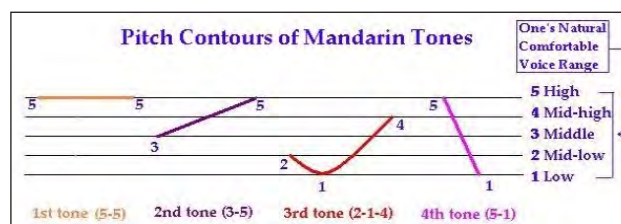
The tone system is a particularly important and interesting part of the phonology for those who learn Chinese. Tone is a so-called “marker” of the syllable, which helps distinguish different words. While consonants and vowels are produced by mouth, the “production of tones is centered in the larynx” (Bauer, & Benedict, 2011, p. 10). The speech sounds are produced by the vibrations of the vocal cords, and the number of these vibrations per second give different tones to the particular syllable. While Mandarin Chinese has only 4 tones and a neutral one, the number of Cantonese tones is still not specified. The majority of linguists agree that Cantonese has 6 basic contrasting tones and 3 more variations (Hashimoto, 1972; Chan, & Li, 2000; Qin, & Mok, 2011). However, the recent research of Bauer and Benedict (2011) assumes that modern Cantonese has 12 distinguished tones. The table 1 below show the generally accepted classifications of four Mandarin and nine Cantonese tones with the descriptions of their intonation.

Table 1

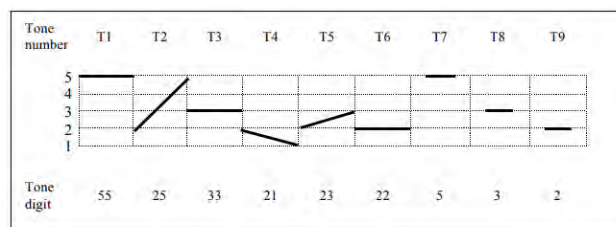
Tones of Mandarin and Cantonese

Tone number	Mandarin	Cantonese
T1	Flat high (long)	High level, high falling
T2	Mid-high rising (short)	Mid rising
T3	Down-up (long)	Mid level
T4	Falling (short)	Low falling, very low level
T5		Low rising
T6		Low level
T7 (or T1)		High level (short)
t8 (or T3)		Mid level (short)
T9 (or T6)		Low level (short)

Based on the classification presented above, one can clearly note that even though Cantonese has more tones than Mandarin, the down-up (long) tone of the latter is not common for Cantonese. Picture 1 and 2 illustrate the intonation of the pronounced syllable in Mandarin and Cantonese accordingly.



Picture 1. Visual scheme of Mandarin tones⁴



Picture 2. Visual scheme of Cantonese tones (To, Cheung, & McLeod, 2013, p. 46)

Taking into account all phonetic differences mentioned above, one can clearly see why Mandarin and Cantonese are mutually unintelligible on the oral level. The key issues include the presence of multiple syllable-finales and tones in Cantonese when compared to Mandarin.

Syntax. Despite striking differences in the phonology of Cantonese and Mandarin, both languages tend to use same syntax and are analytic. As such, having mastered the key transformational changes between simplified and traditional characters, one can read and fully understand the written text in both dialects.

The core for Mandarin’s syntax is formed by subject-verb-object (SVO) word order. In most cases, the same scheme is applicable for Cantonese. However, the last one is not that strict and often violates this rule, as it is more “topic-prominent” language than Mandarin (Matthews, & Yip, 2013). The research by Lee (2019) confirms that while Mandarin speakers tend to express additional information through adverbs, prosodic stress and sentence-final particle, Cantonese speakers would likely change the word order instead. For instance, one may compare two sentences presented in Table 2.

Another interesting difference in two languages is the ways they show possessive case. While Mandarin Chinese has one particle 的 [de] that is somewhat equivalent to English “ ’s ”, Cantonese has two particles 嘅 [ge3] and 啲 [di1] that are placed before nouns in singular and plural respectively (Table 3).

Conclusions. Summing all things up, Mandarin Chinese, which is commonly taught to the international students, is not mutually understandable by those who speak Cantonese.

⁴ Retrieved from: <http://web.mit.edu/jinzhang/www/pinyin/tones/>

Table 2

Common word order in expressive sentences

	Mandarin	Cantonese
Common sentence	我已经听过这首歌了。 I've already heard this song.	这首歌我已经聽過了。 (As for) this song, I've already heard (it).
Word order	SVO: S= I; V= have (already) heard; O = (this) song.	OSV: O= (as for) this song; S= I; V = have (already) heard.

Table 3

Possessive case in Mandarin and Cantonese

Mandarin		Cantonese	
Singular	Plural	Singular	Plural
我的书。 My [的] book.	我的书。 My [的] books.	我嘅書。 My [嘅] book.	我啲書。 My [啲] books.
<i>Comment:</i> The reader cannot understand whether the noun “book” (书) is in singular or plural form.		<i>Comment:</i> Even though the word “book” itself did not change (書), the reader can understand the quantity due to different possessive particles.	

This mainly happens due to drastic differences in phonology. However, both languages have many similarities in syntax, vocabulary and characters (if the student knows the rules of simplification). As such, it is still possible to use written language for successful communication.

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