

Heritage Voices: Language – Cantonese

About the Cantonese Language



Cantonese is an official language in Hong Kong and a spoken dialect in the southern region of China, including Guangdong (Canton), Pearl River, and Guangxi. Due to the large-scale emigration of Cantonese speakers, Cantonese is also widely used in many overseas communities in Canada, the United States, Australia, Europe, and Southeast Asia, including Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, Singapore, and the Philippines (Wikipedia, 2010, Cantonese). Cantonese is

within the Yue dialect group, one of the seven major dialect groups in the Chinese language family (Ramsey, 1987).

Written Cantonese can be divided into two significantly different versions: formal and colloquial. The formal version is the same as standard written Chinese, which uses Chinese characters and is based on Mandarin (Ager, 1998–2011). Cantonese and Mandarin speakers are able to read this version. The colloquial version represents spoken Cantonese. Mandarin speakers are not able to read this version. Table 1 illustrates the different characters used in the two versions.

FORMAL VERSION	COLLOQUIAL VERSION	ENGLISH
喝	飲	Drink
看	睇	Look
騙	呃	Cheat
哭	喊	Cry
否	咪	Not Be
無	冇	Not Have
睡	瞓	Sleep

Table 1: Examples of Cantonese Words in Formal and Colloquial Versions (Wikipedia, 2010, Cantonese)

Spoken Cantonese is monosyllabic and tonal. One character corresponds to one syllable. By changing the syllabic tones, the meaning of characters can be totally different. For example, 有 (/jau5/) means “have” and 又 (/jau6/) means “again.”

The character of spoken Cantonese changes depending on the speakers. Younger speakers, who are unable to distinguish between certain phoneme pairs, may merge one sound into another. Such merges are denounced as "lazy sounds" (懶音).

One such example is pronunciation of the name of Hong Kong's Hang Seng Bank (香港恆生銀行). The correct pronunciation is /hœ:ŋ kǎ:ŋ hɛŋ sɛŋ ŋɛn hǒ:ŋ/, but younger speakers may pronounce it as /hœ:n kǎ:n hɛn sɛn ɛn hǒ:n/, sounding like Hon' Kon' itchy body (痕身 /hɛn sɛn/) bank.

Another example is the name of the Cantonese language (廣東話, "Guangdong speech"). The correct pronunciation is /kʷɔ:ŋ tɔŋ wǎ:/, but some pronounce it as /kǎ:ŋ tɔŋ wǎ:/, sounding like "講東話," "speak eastern speech" and /kǎ:n tɔŋ wǎ:/, sounding like "趕東話," "chase away eastern speech" (Wikipedia, 2010, Hong Kong Cantonese).

To indicate aspect, Cantonese particles can be added to the end of a sentence or verb. For example, 咩 (/me1/) is placed at the end of sentences to indicate disbelief, 呢 (/ne1/) is placed at the end of sentences to indicate a question, and 未 (/mei6/) is placed at the end of sentences to ask if an action is complete.

Hong Kong Cantonese



Due to long exposure to English during the British colonial period in Hong Kong, a lot of "Hong Kong" style vocabularies were developed based on English words.

For example, the word "巴士," pronounced as "/baa1/ /si2/", was directly borrowed from the English word "bus" (Wikipedia, 2010, Hong Kong Cantonese).

In Hong Kong, Cantonese and English are the mediums of instruction in secondary schools and universities. Code-switching (using more than one language in a conversation) has become common due to the following reasons:

- Many English words are common and widely understood, so efficiency of communication can be increased by using the least number of words.
- English words can help avoid some shy and embarrassing situations, especially related to expressing feelings and emotions in public. One of the typical examples is saying "I love you" in English, which is more comfortable than saying "我愛你" in Chinese (Wikipedia, 2010, Code-switching in Hong Kong).
- Code-switching is used to differentiate Hong Kong residents from the rest of China in order to signify that Hong Kong was a British colony before 1997.

Some code switching examples are:

- "聽日一齊去食 lunch 吖," which means "Let us have lunch tomorrow"
- "佢地好 friend", which means "they are good friends" and
- "咁都唔 make sense", which means "it doesn't make sense"

In some cases, some new meanings of English words were created. For example, "至 yeah," literally "the most yeah," means "the trendiest." "Yeah" means "yes" in English, but it means "trendy" when incorporated into Hong Kong Cantonese (Wikipedia, 2010, Code-switching in Hong Kong).

Cantonese in the United States

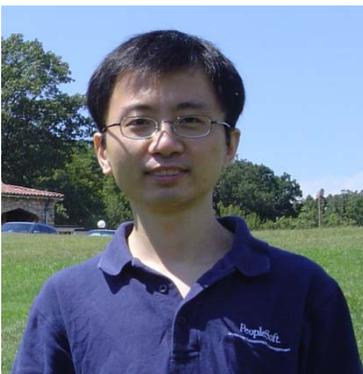
Early Chinese immigrants to the U.S. from the mid-nineteenth century through the early postwar decades were mostly from small regions in Guangdong province. Therefore, Cantonese was widely used among Chinese American communities, and the majority of Chinese schools in the U.S. taught Cantonese. Immigrants from Hong Kong reinforced the use of Cantonese among Chinese immigrants. Furthermore, the importance of Cantonese speakers was enhanced by the influx of ethnic Chinese from Vietnam, the majority of whom were Cantonese speakers (Spencer & Merino, 1984). The strength of Cantonese is documented by the fact that 31% of all New York Chinese surveyed by Pan (1997) used Cantonese as their first dialect.

After World War II, the Mandarin-speaking population in the U.S. increased rapidly, especially from the 1970s on. Mandarin gradually superseded Cantonese as the predominant language of instruction in community-based Chinese schools. By the mid-1990s, Cantonese remained the language of instruction for only one out of every eight students (Lai, 2004).

Spotlight on Cantonese Speakers in the U.S.

This section describes the experiences of two Cantonese speakers: Chun-Kit Ngan, who immigrated to the U.S. for college and graduate studies, and Allen Chong, who was born in the U.S., but his first language was Cantonese.

Chun-Kit Ngan



My name is Chun-Kit ("Ben") Ngan. I am from the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) of the People's Republic of China. I have been in the United States for almost nine years.

I have a Bachelors Degree in Electronic Engineering, a Masters Degree in Business Administration and Management Information Systems, and a Graduate Certificate in Database Management. I am now pursuing a Ph.D. in Information Technology at George Mason University. My research interests are decision guidance systems, optimization models and algorithms, and database management systems over multivariate time series. While earning my doctorate degree, I am a Graduate Lecturer in the Department of Applied Information Technology, where I teach Java programming courses for undergraduate students. I was also a Graduate Teaching Assistant in the Department of Computer Science. My responsibility was to assist Professors in

developing course materials, setting up course websites, conducting lab sections, and tutoring students.

While I was born in Hong Kong, my first spoken languages are Cantonese and Mandarin. I speak Cantonese, because I grew up in Hong Kong, where Cantonese is the most widely spoken language outside of classrooms. I emphasize that my spoken language is “Hong Kong” Cantonese, because the variety of Cantonese used in Hong Kong is different from its original variety, which originated in Guangzhou, due to the long exposure to English during the British colonial period. As described in the first section, written Cantonese exists in two very different versions: formal and colloquial. The colloquial version is easy for me, because it represents spoken Cantonese; however, the formal version, which is based on Mandarin and is used as the language of instruction at school, poses a major challenge to Hong Kong students, including me.

I also speak Mandarin because of my father’s family background. My father’s family immigrated to Hong Kong from Beijing, China, when he was 14 years old. Even though he and my grandparents have lived in Hong Kong for more than 50 years, they still speak Mandarin to me and my brothers. It is a surprise to many of my Mandarin-speaking friends that I can talk to them in Mandarin with a “Cantonese-accent” in a quite fluent but funny way. Instead of using the word “Mandarin,” some people from Hong Kong use the term “Gwok Yu” (/gwok/ /jyuor/) that literally means “national language.” We also use the word “Putonghua” to refer to Mandarin, which means “common speech.”

As Hong Kong was a colony under the sovereignty of the British government before 1997, I was educated in an English environment when I attended secondary school and university. Apart from Chinese subjects, all of the textbooks and language of instruction were Cantonese and English.

Allen Chong



I am American by birth, but my first language was Cantonese. My grandmother, who only speaks Cantonese, lives with my family and played an integral role in raising me; when my mother returned to work, my grandmother became the primary caregiver during the day. “Back then, all you spoke was Cantonese,” she tells me. “We would listen to songs and watch movies together, and you always had plenty to say about everything.” My parents spoke fluent English, but the dominant language of the home was Cantonese.

However, significant changes came when I entered elementary school. I remember taking a test and the test administrator’s reaction when I had completed it. She seemed surprised, and, I think, displeased. Soon thereafter, I was placed in remedial classes. My parents became concerned that I would never learn English—they worried that my use of Cantonese would hinder my ability to succeed in school.

My grandmother remembers clearly the moment when she encountered a change in home language use: “I went home to Malaysia for a year; when I came back to the U.S. and saw you again, it was as if we were strangers. You couldn’t understand anything I said to you, and I could hardly understand what you were saying to me. It only took one year for you to forget how to speak.” Despite the return of my grandmother and the revival of Cantonese in the home, my development as a Cantonese speaker was irrevocably altered. The fear that speaking a language other than English would negatively impact language development was common at that time; bilingualism was viewed as a hindrance, not an advantage.

Attitudes have changed since then, including my own. Like many first-generation Americans, I used to feel a strong desire to speak only English, to hide any perceived differences from my peers. Now I have much more pride and interest in my cultural and linguistic heritage—like many heritage language speakers, connecting with older generations of my family has become a central driving motivation for me to improve my Cantonese. While I have regained fluency in certain respects, I still have much more work to do and many more gaps to fill. Sometimes I joke with my grandmother that, one day, I will be as eloquent as I was when I was a child.

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The Heritage Voices (Cantonese) Profile was prepared by Chun-Kit ("Ben") Ngan and Allen Chong for the Alliance for the Advancement of Heritage Languages, Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL), Washington DC.

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