CHALLENGING ISSUES IN CANTONESE-ENGLISH LEXICOGRAPHY

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ABSTRACT

At the outset of writing a bilingual Cantonese-English dictionary that is comprehensive in scope, the lexicographer confronts a series of challenging issues that are fundamental to the successful creation of such an ambitious dictionary. Among the crucial questions to be satisfactorily resolved are at least the following eight: 1) What are the principal criteria that guide the lexicographer's selection of the Cantonese lexical items that form the contents of the bilingual dictionary? Further, what is the scope of the lexical contents? Broad, by encompassing all lexical items that occur in the speech of Hong Kong Cantonese speakers, even those items that overlap with standard Chinese? Or, narrow, by focusing only on the uniquely Hong Kong Cantonese lexicon? 2) What categories of information about the lexical items should form the structural contents of lexical entries? These could include parts of speech, speech registers, cross-referencing of related lexical items, synonyms, alternative pronunciations and variant written forms, example sentences, etc. 3) How detailed should the equivalent English translations of the Cantonese lexical

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items be? 4) Should lexical entries include information on their social, cultural, historical, and political associations, usage, etymology (origin and historical development), etc.? 5) What is the organizing principle by which the Cantonese lexical entries are listed in the dictionary, as there are at least four? 6) As for Cantonese pronunciation, which register of the language should be romanized? The conservative, literary, standard pronunciation? The colloquial, informal, commonly-used 懶音 *laan5 jam1* "lazy" pronunciation? Or both of these? 7) Several Cantonese romanization systems are currently in use, so which one is best for representing Hong Kong's contemporary Cantonese pronunciation? 8) Given that the written form of the Cantonese language has never been formally or officially standardized, so that some lexical items are typically written in two or more different ways, what criteria should guide the lexicographer in deciding how Cantonese words are graphically transcribed in a Cantonese-English dictionary? In writing his *ABC Cantonese-English Comprehensive Dictionary* 粵語英語大詞典 (Bauer 2020) over the past decade and a half, the author had to face and then answer appropriately each of these important questions. This article has described how he addressed and practically resolved these and other related problems.

KEYWORDS

Cantonese **L**exicography **B**ilingual **D**ictionary **R**omanization system

1. HOW DOES ONE WRITE A CANTONESE-ENGLISH DICTIONARY?

In writing this kind of dictionary the Cantonese-English lexicographer confronts a host of challenging issues that require practical resolution. Among these issues stated as questions are the following:

1) What is the overriding criterion that guides the lexicographer in selecting the Cantonese lexical items that form the contents of the bilingual dictionary?
2) What categories or components of information about the lexical items should form the structure of the lexical entry?
3) How detailed should the equivalent English translations of the Cantonese lexical items be?