

One Language, Two Systems:
A Phonological Study of
Two Cantonese Language
Manuals of 1888

CANTONESE MADE EASY:

A BOOK OF SIMPLE SENTENCES IN THE CANTONESE DIALECT, WITH
FREE AND LITERAL TRANSLATIONS, AND DIRECTIONS
FOR THE RENDERING OF ENGLISH GRAM-
MATICAL FORMS IN CHINESE.

SECOND EDITION.
REVISED AND ENLARGED.

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"Tonic Marks," &c.

Abstract: In 1888, two Cantonese teaching manuals were published, one in Hong Kong and one in the United States, both using characters and romanization to teach Westerners how to acquire a good command of a language so very different from their native tongues. Upon close examination, however, the sounds and tones as recorded in the books demonstrate some major differences that make it unlikely to conclude that they were based on the same Canton dialect, as the authors claimed. *Cantonese Made Easy* (CME), by Dyer Ball, a British government officer and a language pedagogue in Hong Kong, gives a sound system with 22 initials, 56 finals, and 9 tones. In contrast, the book published in the United States, *A Chinese and English Phrase Book in the Canton Dialect* (PB) by Thomas Stedman and K. P. Lee, offers 19 initials, 51 finals, and 8 tones. When compared with modern Cantonese, CME appears to be more in sync with what we know about the language of the 20th century. If CME is to be taken as an early version of Cantonese, then what would PB represent? A different variety of Cantonese? Studies of the neighboring dialects in the Pearl River Delta, including both early reports and modern dialect surveys, seem to point to Zhongshan as a possible base for the language in PB. It should also be noted that Lee, one of the two authors, was a native of Zhongshan.

Keywords: early Cantonese; historical phonology; dialectal pronunciations; language teaching manuals; *Cantonese Made Easy*; *A Chinese and English Phrase Book in the Canton Dialect*

1. Introduction

Any historical investigation begins with data. Data tell of the past by betraying secrets of change; they also help us gauge the direction of these changes and reconstruct the patterns in which the changes have taken place. Data, however, could also be misleading. Historical linguistics resorts to both modern idioms and ancient documents in its efforts to examine how languages evolve over time and to account for differentiation and assimilation between languages and language communities. Chinese, not being a phonetic language, is known for its inadequacy in capturing sounds or sound changes in its orthographic system. Early writings in dialects other than Mandarin were scarce, and the scarcity is even more pronounced in Cantonese. Unlike the Wu 吳 and Min 閩 dialects which saw some productions of fiction and drama in regional speech in as early as the 16th century,¹ the earliest extant work in Cantonese is a collection of folksongs that dates back to the early 19th century.² However, because of their composite style of mixing the vernacular with the classical, the songs do not necessarily reveal much about the actual happenings in the language. It was not until the 20th century, thanks to radio recordings and movie productions especially in Hong Kong, that colloquial Cantonese was recorded and preserved in its full gamut of styles and contents, a presentation that is crucial to any form of linguistic inquiry.

On the other hand, Cantonese has long been the focus of pedagogical attention since the 19th century. When the Manchu (Qing) government opened Canton to the West for trading in the early 1800s, and especially after Hong Kong was ceded to the British in 1842, there was a growing demand for Cantonese language instruction to meet the urgent needs of Western colonial officers, businessmen, and missionaries who came to the Canton–Hong Kong–Macao region where they had to interact with the

¹ For example, the earliest extant material for the Min dialect is *Lijing ji* 荔鏡記, a drama composed in the 16th century. Feng Menglong 馮夢龍 (1574–1646) compiled a collection of folksongs, entitled *Shan'ge* 山歌, written in a colloquial Wu dialect.

² *Yue'ou* 粵謳 was a collection of close to a hundred Cantonese love songs, produced by Jiu Jiyung (Zhao Ziyong 招子庸) in 1828.

locals while pursuing their activities. One of the first textbooks compiled was *Chinese Chrestomathy in the Canton Dialect* in 1841. In almost 700 pages, the author covered a wide range of linguistic and cultural topics written mostly in colloquial Cantonese. A series of other primers followed suit in subsequent years, both in China and abroad. The pool of teaching materials produced since then has been vast in quantity and varied in both pragmatic concerns and pedagogical devices. They provide a most valuable source of colloquial data that document how the language has changed in a span of almost two hundred years.³

Admittedly, the use of pedagogical materials for linguistic analysis has its shortcomings. As teaching materials in general are prescriptive by design and tend to use simple sentences and words in beginning chapters, the paradigms do not always represent or reflect the complexities in the actual language. On the other hand, as Cantonese textbooks are primarily written in romanization of one kind or another, the transcriptions preserve the colloquial flavor otherwise impossible to achieve in the regular writing system. By virtue of its phonetic make-up, a romanized text is more readily equipped to record and reflect sounds and sound changes than a character version. In this regard, the Cantonese pedagogical materials are richly informative, and critical to our efforts to look into the phonological past especially of the early days when neither radio nor video recordings were available.

The year 1888 saw the publication of two such Cantonese manuals, both designed for teaching English speakers how to study the Cantonese language. One was published in Hong Kong, with a preface actually dated 1887. The other came out in New York, with a Chinese title page showing 光緒十四年, i.e., 1888, as the year of publication.

J. Dyer Ball. 1888. *Cantonese Made Easy: A Book of Simple Sentences in the Cantonese Dialect*. Hong Kong: China Mail Office.

T. L. Stedman and K. P. Lee. 1888. *A Chinese and English Phrase Book in the Canton Dialect*. New York: William R. Jenkins.

³ I have used some of these materials in my works on early Cantonese grammar. See, for example, Cheung (1997; 2001).

Cantonese Phonology as Reconstructed from Popular Songs



Abstract: For many centuries, our knowledge of ancient Chinese phonology has relied primarily on the study of rhyming patterns in particular poetic corpuses. The effort is based upon the presumption that poets and lyricists share not only the same language, but also a common phonological awareness that allows them to choose rhyme words with the same or similar *yunmu* in their compositions. Any differences in practice may be construed as indicative of dialectal variations or of new developments in language. This article challenges that view by examining the rhyming practice in close to 500 popular Cantonese songs. The phonological system as reconstructed on the bases of thousands of rhyme words yields 24 finals, 19 short of what we find in the actual spoken language. The results are alarming. Close analysis reveals that while phonological identity remains a strong preference in rhyming, it is not the precluding factor. Many words rhyme because they share the same vowel even though they may differ in their consonantal endings. Others interact for historical reasons and do not reflect any phonological changes in modern pronunciations. Cross rhyming allows literary flexibility but can be misleading in terms of what it informs us about the language. The article also discusses the use of bilingual rhyming in lyrics that contain English words, a phenomenon that bespeaks the hybrid nature of speech in contemporary Cantonese.

Keywords: rhyming in Cantonese songs; Cantonese sounds and tones; cross rhyming between Chinese and English; the *xilian* approach to diachronic investigation

1. As Chinese characters are essentially morphemic in nature and do not necessarily inform the language of their pronunciations, the task of reconstructing ancient phonological systems has to rely on linguistic data other than the writing system itself. While it is true that the majority of Chinese characters are *xiesheng* 諧聲 compounds each of which contains a phonetic signifier, the phonetic correspondence, however, does not always remain constant or reliable as the language evolves. On the other hand, the long literary tradition in China has produced and preserved large collections of ancient writings that readily avail themselves for diachronic linguistic investigation. In particular, Chinese poetry which is characterized by a ubiquitous rhyming practice that makes it convenient to group words according to phonological affinities. If character X rhymes with character Y in a text, the two must have sounded identical to the author at least in terms of the last portion of the syllables. This last portion, generally referred to as *yunmu* 韻母 in Chinese, includes primarily the vocalic nucleus and, if there is one, the consonantal ending. When a series of rhyme words is established through meticulous research of verse materials of the same time period, a series that is readily distinguishable from other rhyme series in the same material, we can comfortably identify them as members of a rhyme category or *yunbu* 韻部. Even though the exact phonetic or phonemic value of the category has yet to be reconstructed through mediation of other materials such as modern dialects, the practice of *yunbu* categorization represents the first step towards a methodical analysis of the sound system of the past.

For centuries, our knowledge of ancient Chinese phonology has relied heavily on the study of rhyming patterns in poetic corpuses. Many important diachronic studies are products of these elaborate investigations, ranging in time period from the pre-Qin to the late imperial eras.¹ Presumably, speakers of the same language observe the same rhyming

¹ Most notable among the works of this nature are Luo Changpei and Zhou Zumo (1958), *Han Wei Jin Nanbeichao yunbu yanbian yanjiu*; and Ting Pang-hsin (1975a), *Chinese Phonology of the Wei-Chin Period: Reconstruction of the Finals as Reflected in Poetry*. In 1992, I worked on the reconstruction of ancient Suzhou phonology by examining the rhyming practice in a 17th-century collection of Wu folksongs.

principle when they write, namely the identity in *yunmu* among the rhyming words. When differences begin to show up in practice and form regular patterns of deviations, the discrepancies may be construed as results of dialectal variations or as indications of new developments in the language. Such a view, however, poses certain empirical dangers. First of all, is rhyming always an accurate reflection of actual linguistic behaviors? Could factors other than phonological identity contribute to the rhyming convention? Furthermore, when two words are chosen as a rhyming pair, do they have to share exactly the same *yunmu*? Is there any flexibility that allows for partial identity?² If so, do vowels or other segments in the finals play a deciding role in rhyming? These are some of the questions that we need to address in order to either confirm or reevaluate the validity of our efforts to reconstruct a sound system by way of *yunbu* categorization.

The project of utilizing rhyme words in a historical investigation invites a challenge, a challenge that is theoretically justifiable but, again, empirically rather difficult to confront. As a historical project involves a historical language, there is no living evidence to prove right or wrong what we conclude from a study based essentially on secondary materials. Unless what is observed has been reported by the contemporaries of that historical period, our analysis remains speculations, forever shy of capturing the actual happenings in the language. In the case of versification, when an ancient text displays a certain rhyming pattern, how do we verify whether the choice was phonologically motivated or if it was made for other reasons? As an alternative, we could look for historical proofs in the modern, living language, which represents after all an intermediary stage in the long process of linguistic evolution, a stage that is perhaps one or a few steps removed from the past. The present may reflect the past, but it does not necessarily speak for the past. The past can never be fully retrieved, a regrettable fact that, nonetheless, does not have to prevent us from using the modern language to test the validity

² In his 1992 MA thesis entitled “Notes on Consonantal Cluster Endings in Archaic Chinese,” Zev Handel proposes an *nd*-ending in his reconstruction for the rhyme category in Archaic Chinese and argues that *-and* and *-an* words, in spite of their slight difference in syllabic structure, could interact in the *Shijing* as rhyme words just as they do in English popular songs. See pp. 15–19.