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

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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 and Min 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 wasn’t until the twentieth 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.  

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¹ For example, the earliest extant material for the Min dialect is 詩鏡記, a drama composed in the 16th century. 馮夢龍 (1574-1646) compiled a collection of folksongs, entitled 山歌, written in a colloquial Wu dialect.

² 粵謳 was a collection of close to a hundred Cantonese love songs produced by 招子庸 in 1828.
and contents, a preservation that is critical 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 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-HK-Macao region where they had to interact with the locals while pursuing their activities. One of the first textbooks compiled was *Chinese Christomathy in the Canton Dialect* in 1841. In almost 700 pages, the author covered a wide range of linguistic and cultural topics written mostly in the colloquial form. 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.

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.


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