Siew-Yue KILLINGLEY

A NON-INSTRUMENTAL EXPERIMENT ON
CANTONESE PHONOLOGICAL TONE :
FIVE OR SIX ?(*)

RESUME

Cinq personnes ayant comme langue maternelle le cantonais de Hong Kong étaient les sujets de cette expérience. La méthode suivie est fondée sur l'action réciproque entre son et signification ; et non entre caractère écrit et signification. Contrairement aux pratiques linguistiques habituelles cinq sujets n'eurent pas à lire des caractères ; on leur demanda seulement de concentrer leur attention sur la langue parlée, et non sur la langue écrite. Dans ces circonstances, chaque sujet avait cinq tons phonologiques et non six.

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It is a well-known fact that although instrumental measurements 'are a great help for describing the physical nature of tonemes after they have been otherwise discovered', they 'do not contribute greatly to their analysis' (Pike 1948: 20). So in setting up tonemes, there is no getting away from having to use an auditory approach at some point, coupled with a consistent linguistic approach based on speech rather than on writing. Elsewhere (Killingley 1985), I have shown why the validity of the six phonological tones for Cantonese should be called into question. In this paper, I would like to present some detailed findings from an experiment carried out in June 1985, as a follow-up to an earlier experiment on a Malayan Cantonese (MalCant) speaker in September 1984. Both these experiments are summarized in Killingley (1985).

Through the kind offices of Philip Shaw and the Language Centre of the University of Newcastle upon Tyne, I was able to obtain the kind co-operation of five native speakers of Hong Kong Cantonese (HKCant). I had hoped very much to be able to obtain some illiterate speakers as subjects, as their responses, uninfluenced by their awareness of the pronunciations of isolated characters, would have been of greater value, but they were not to be found on this occasion. Unfortunately also, Dr. Shaw was unable to persuade the only male potential subject and non-arts student to take part. The attitude of this (engineering) student shows how difficult it is still for the researcher on Cantonese (unlike the researcher on English) to convince native speakers that their speech is not defective even though they are not language specialist. This student, though very interested as well as being a native speaker of Cantonese, could not bring himself to participate in the experiment because he considered his Chinese 'all wrong'. The subjects who did take part were young women in their twenties following postgraduate courses in education or intensive English at the university or the polytechnic. They returned a completed questionnaire (Appendix 2) which satisfied me that they were all native speakers of Cantonese, although some spoke other Chinese dialects as well. They all wrote Cantonese(1) and read it according to the Mandarin-based Cantonese pronunciation taught in Hong Kong (see Bauer (1984: 70), Killingley (1977: 77-78), (1985: 10)), having received their education mainly through the medium of English. (Since some of them wish their results and linguistic details to remain unconnected with their names, I shall refer to them as subjects A, B, C, D and E.) They either did not know any linguistics or had only studied it a little, so I sent a letter (Appendix 1) to each of them beforehand to guard against any automatic identification of the Chinese character with the spoken word (cf. Fok 1974), and to try and get them ready to supply only monosyllabic free word forms (Killingley 1977). Linguistic terminology was avoided as much as possible

(1) See Appendix 2, Question 8, and fn. 3.