A Secret Language in Hong Kong

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The article describes the secret Cantonese language used among girls in a secondary school in Hong Kong. The language reduplicates nearly all syllables. The added second syllable replaces the initial of the reduplicated syllable by /s/ and reproduces its final without changing it. There is tone change, into a regular alternating tone pattern.

Key words: sociolinguistics; phonology; secret languages; Cantonese.

L'article décrit un langage secret utilisé par des adolescentes chinoises d'une école secondaire à Hong Kong, dont la langue est le cantonais. Elles redoublent systématiquement presque toutes les syllabes et remplacent l'initiale de la syllabe redoublée par un /s/, tout en maintenant la finale inchangée. Le résultat est intéressant et donne un véritable langage secret, incompris des non-initiés.

Mots-clés : sociolinguistique; phonologie; langages secrets; cantonais.
1. A SECRET LANGUAGE

Schlegel recounts his experience when he arrived "in the year 1858 in Amoy" to detect a secret language among children, similar to European practices, including his own with his sister and brother. He names it the sa-la language:

"instead of saying: goá (I) kā (to) li (you) kóng (say), they said: goásoa kāsa līsa kóngsong, or goáloasoa kālasa līlīsi kónglōngsong. As it will be seen by this example, the dodge consists in doubling or trebling the syllable and changing the initial consonant into s or l." (1891).

In Hong Kong¹, we have found this secret language in a secondary school for better-to-do girls. At the request of the girls, we will not name the school. They want to keep the language secret. They call it the "Swallow Language" which in Cantonese is 燕子語 [jin⁴ dzi⁴ jy⁵]². The girls do not know who named or invented it or when this language appeared. Its other name is "S-Language", from the rule of adding an /s/. It is not compulsory for the girls to learn this language, however, the S-language is quite commonly known by them. If the girls have an interest in learning it, they can, because they are enjoined to practice it in discourse.

During data collection, the girls feared that their language would be stolen. They did not allow recording beyond some first few sentences, they did not interact with the fieldworker in the language, and the fieldworker had to guarantee that she would not master it. Only then was she allowed to observe usage and to take notes.

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² IPA transcription within brackets.