
*Modern Cantonese Phonology* by Robert S. Bauer and Paul K. Benedict is the first comprehensive, English-language publication on Cantonese (Yue dialect) phonology since [Yue-] Hashimoto’s Phonology of Cantonese (1972), published a quarter of a century ago and long out of print. Bauer and Benedict (hereafter B&B unless specific reference is to the first author) present a very detailed description of the phonetics and phonology of modern Cantonese, with "modern" to be broadly interpreted to cover the language over a fifty-year span; that is, changes since the early 1940’s are chronicled in this book. Furthermore, fully aware that today’s Hong Kong and Guangzhou (Canton City) varieties of Cantonese are not identical, B&B are careful to note differences between Hong Kong and Guangzhou Cantonese throughout the book. They also draw on other subdialectal differences among the Yue dialects in tracing historical changes in Cantonese, as in the case of the search for the historical origin of the high-rising changed tone in Cantonese by analyzing corresponding phenomena in other Yue dialects.

The book (p.xii) states that its intended audience includes "beginning students of Cantonese, Cantonese native-speakers, teachers of English to Cantonese-speaking students, professional
linguists, and laymen curious about one of Southeast Asia’s major languages" (where Cantonese is treated as being spoken in the same part of the world as languages such as Burmese, Thai, and Vietnamese). Despite the stated readership, however, a beginning student of Cantonese may be quite overwhelmed by the amount of detail, especially those pertaining to other Yue subvarieties. At the same time, learners of Cantonese, native speakers, and English teachers with no background in articulatory phonetics before opening the book are bound to find the linguistic terms and phonetic transcriptions that use the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) quite daunting and intimidating. The book’s steep price would also discourage the casual reader from purchasing it. Given the rich details, informative endnotes, and careful documenting and referencing of sources throughout the book, those who would benefit the most from this work are researchers, linguists who are especially interested in Cantonese and Chinese dialectology. The study does not purport to be based on any particular phonological theory, opting instead for a more general descriptive approach, and making use of phonetic details and acoustic research at various times as part of the study in determining phonological contrasts. Even then, the authors prefer broad phonetic transcriptions to strict phonemicization. For phonologists and dialectologists (which include the reviewer), the book is a treasure trove – a rich reference source for information that draws from numerous publications spanning half a century or more and brings them together into a single volume. This book is very much data-driven, containing systematic and detailed articulatory and acoustic descriptions of different aspects of the phonology of Cantonese. The information is based on both published sources and the authors’ own research and data-collection and recording. Scattered throughout the book are tables that summarize and list much of the data in a format that is convenient for the reader to consult.