Language contact: The production of aspect markers in narratives by advanced heritage Cantonese speakers

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This paper examines how advanced Cantonese heritage (ACH) speakers use aspect markers in Cantonese to tell stories and whether there is evidence of hybridization as Cantonese and English come into close contact in these speakers. Aspect as a universal linguistic concept is expressed differently in Cantonese and English. While English only has one grammatical marker (*-ing*) to encode the imperfective aspect, Cantonese distinguishes between progressive (*-gán*) and stative (*-jyuh*). The perfective marker (*-jó*) in Cantonese serves multiple language-specific functions such as marking the peak event or the end of a discourse unit in addition to encoding boundedness. The acquisition of aspect by different kinds of learners has been studied extensively in Mandarin and other languages (e.g., Chen & Shirai, 2010; Ma, 2006; Mikhaylova, 2012), yet hardly any attention has been paid to Cantonese heritage speakers though these speakers have a significant presence in overseas Chinese communities. The current study aims to fill that gap.

The data for this study consist of 23 stories from 13 ACH speakers and 55 stories from monolingual controls. The ACH speakers were all undergraduates enrolled in advanced conversational Cantonese courses at the time of the study. They all acquired Cantonese as a first language in early childhood and continued to have exposure to the language after English became their dominant language when formal education started around age 5. Of the ACH speakers' stories, 13 of them were Frog Stories based on a children's wordless book about a boy looking for his missing pet frog. The remaining stories were Pear Stories, which the subjects told after they watched a video on Dr. Mary Erbaugh's Pear Stories' website (http://pearstories.org/). The video depicts a boy stealing a basket of pears from a man who was picking pears from a tree and the boy's later adventures. For comparisons with the ACH speakers' stories, I also analyzed 30 Pear Stories from Hong Kong Cantonese speakers and 20 from English speakers available on the same website as well as five Frog Stories told by Hong Kong immigrants.

HK Cantonese speakers used a variety of aspect markers to encode a wide range of functions. The durative marker, *-jyuh*, appeared more often than the progressive marker, *-gán*, for backgrounding. The delimitative marker, *-háh*, was also used for backgrounding, e.g., *kéuih jaahk-háh jaahk-háh yìhnjīhauh lohk-fāan-làih lak* "He picked a bit picked a bit, and then came back down." The verbal particle *saai* "all" precluded *-jó* whereas the verbal particle *dāi* "down" or a directional verb compound was used with *-jó* when intransitive verbs such as *dit* "to fall" and *tìhng* "to stop" appeared; e.g., *jek lúk tìhng-dāi-jó* "the deer has stopped." The English speakers preferred to use the historic present to tell their Pear Stories and reserve the past tense for background information; e.g., "the man who was picking pears comes down his ladder." The adverb *off* was used frequently. If translated into Cantonese, it would often correspond to *-jó* in Cantonese; e.g., "he takes his kerchief off, and he wipes it off" would be *kéuih chèuih-jó tìuh sáugān, tùhngmàaih kéuih maat-jó kéuih*.

There is no evidence that the ACH speakers equated *-jó* with the English *-ed*, as less advanced Cantonese or Mandarin learners might do (Ma, 2006). On the other hand, there is strong evidence that ACH speakers had acquired the basic functions of aspect markers and used them in ways similar to the Hong Kong Cantonese speakers'. Furthermore, both groups of speakers tended to mark telic verbs such as *dit* "to drop" and *jíng-laahn* "to break" with *-jó*. Though language-specific factors may weaken them, the correlates between grammatical and semantic aspect have generally been observed in acquisition studies across languages (Chen & Shirai, 2010). Whether the ACH speakers had acquired the more advanced functions of aspect markers is harder to assess because telic verbs such as "to drop" and "to break" also tended to mark the peak or end event. There is evidence that some ACH speakers might not have acquired the advanced functions. The interaction between *-jó* and verbal particles is an area of difficulty for ACH speakers. These results will be elaborated. Overall, they suggest that formal training would be helpful to draw ACH speakers' attention to such details in the Cantonese aspectual system.

References:

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