

Contact-induced language change in Hong Kong Written Chinese: A case of *baa2*- and *zoeng1*-constructions

Kay Hoi Yi Wong

The Chinese University of Hong Kong

Languages, unless unusually isolated, come into contact with one another at different levels and with varying intensities (Thomason 2001; Sankoff 2001). With 150 years history of colonization, language contact is nothing new to the Hong Kong speech community. To date, the literature on language change phenomenon in Hong Kong focused mostly on the influence of English on Cantonese. In light of the increasing contact of Mandarin and Cantonese after the return of sovereignty, researchers have looked into the classifiers (Tsou & Mok 2013) and double-object construction (Chin 2009) in Hong Kong Cantonese and suggested that there is an on-going language change.

In an attempt to capture and understand this phenomenon, this study systematically investigates the possible diachronic change of *baa2*- and *zoeng1*-constructions (also known as the pre-transitive constructions). They are of particular interests because *zoeng1*-construction is considered as the nearest equivalent to *bǎ*-construction in Mandarin (Matthews & Yip 2011). In addition, it is observed that Cantonese speakers increasingly replace *zoeng1*-construction with *baa2*-construction in speech due to heavy influence of Mandarin in the Pearl River Delta Region¹. However, this study seeks to investigate the written forms, which are Hong Kong Written Chinese (HKWC) and Standard Written Chinese (SWC) as it is suggested that indirect language contact through written texts is more prominent than face-to-face interactions in Hong Kong (Leung 2004). Unlike previous comparative studies which capitalize on synchronic language data (Diao 2012; Leung 2004), this study applies a diachronic corpus methodology. The data are extracted from newspapers and government documents in Hong Kong and China from 1975 to 2015 and are analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively in three ways: The change in the frequency of the pre-transitive constructions, the change in the verbs used in the two constructions and the change in the frequency of the semantic types are examined diachronically.

Results show that both pre-transitive constructions are on the rise in HKWC in both official documents and newspapers. I argue that the increase is due to the influence of SWC since the pre-transitive constructions are more frequently used in SWC. Also, more *baa2*-construction than *zoeng1*-construction is used in official documents since 1990 in Hong Kong but the same phenomenon is not as clear in newspapers. This indicates that the genre of the texts matters in analyzing the language change process. Besides, the analysis on the verbs used reveals a more similar usage of both constructions in HKWC and SWC than before. Despite these findings, the analysis on the semantic types of the pre-transitive constructions shows no significant diachronic change. This study concludes that the influence from SWC is not prevalent in all areas and may vary across two different genres. Nonetheless, the current study still provides evidence indicating that both quantitative and qualitative changes in HKWC are the linguistic outcomes of the language contact phenomenon in Hong Kong.

¹ An observation made by Benjamin K. Tsou and is mentioned in Kwan (2014).