

Character Writing, Lexicon and Syntax in 19th Century Cantonese: Some Observations from Bridgman (1841)

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Bridgman's *A Chinese Chrestomathy in the Canton Dialect* (1841) is the first and most comprehensive record of colloquial Cantonese, which contains thematic collections of Cantonese phrases and conversations about a wide range of topics: human body, kindred relations, classes of men, commercial affairs, mechanical affairs, etc. The book is a precious documentation of the 19th century local vernacular, given that the dominant written variety of Chinese was still *wen2yan2wen2* 文言文 'literary Chinese' at the time.



Chapter 5 *jat6jung6pin1* 日用篇 'Domestic Affairs' from the book is chosen for characterizing 19th century Cantonese. As the name of the chapter suggests, this chapter covers topics which are also discussed today. Character writing, lexicon and syntactic structures are examined to find out (i) differences in Chinese character writing, lexicon and syntactic structures between the 19th century variety and the variety today and (ii) the implication of these differences.

The study has the following findings: (i) In terms of character writing, graphic variants are very common. *Faan4tai2* 繁體 'traditional variants' are dominant, and slight differences between graphic variants of the same character are observable, e.g. some additional strokes (1a) or difference in the shape of a stroke (1b), or an additional radical for one variant over the other (1c). (ii) As for lexicon, some common nouns, verbs, idiomatic expressions and loan words have undergone semantic shifts, while others retained their core meaning. On the other hand, Bauer's (2018: 127) findings of Hong Kong Cantonese on borrowing Chinese characters for transcription apply to loan words in the 19th century variety. (iii) Syntactically, A-not-A questions show diversified structures in the text: VP-NEG-V (2a), VP-NEG (2b) and V-NEG-V (2c). Double object constructions contain a particle right before the indirect object (3). These two syntactic findings are also observed in Tai (2009). The study also discovers an undiscussed construction: the *gu2* 估 "suppose" + sentence construction today appears as sentence + *gu2* in 19th century Cantonese (4).

The above findings are indicative in three ways: (i) from character writing, it is evident that the lack of standardized writing practice in Cantonese can be traced back to as early as the 19th century; (ii) the special lexicon and syntactic structures may be the result of interaction between Cantonese and literary Chinese; (iii) the uncertain grammatical status of *gu2* 估 'suppose' in the "suppose" construction remains to be verified, although in this study it is assumed to be a verb.

To further the study, additional language data from literary Chinese are necessary for comparison with Cantonese language materials. It is hoped that additional linguistic evidence will provide insights into understanding the "suppose" construction in 19th century Cantonese.

Examples

- (1) a. (19th c. variants) 番, 番 *faan1* ‘again’
 b. (19th c. variant)  *sam1* ‘heart’
 (21th c. variant) 心
 c. (19th c. variant)  *wui3* ‘(modal) can’
 (21th c. variant) 會
- (2) a. 重 要 的 乜野 添 唔 要 呀 (VP-NEG-V)
zung6 jiu3 di1 mat1je5 tim1 m4 jiu3 aa3
 still need bit what thing TIM NEG need SFP
 ‘Do you need anything else?’
 b. 佢哋 有 賞 冇 呢 (VP-NEG)
keoi5dei6 jau5 soeng2 mou5 ne1
 3PL have reward NEG SFP
 ‘Have they any rewards?’
 c. 你 試 吓 個 件 帽 睇 中意 唔 中意 (V-NEG-V)
nei5 si3 haa5 go2 gin6 mou2 tai2 zung1ji3 m4 zung1ji3
 2SG try HAA5 that piece hat see like NEG like
 ‘Just try on this bonnet and see if it will suit you.’
- (3) 遞 隻 過 我 (V DO Particle IO)
dai6 zek3 gwo3 ngo5
 send CL EXP 1SG
 ‘Send me one of them.’
- (4) 我 睇 得 你 杯 茶 濃 估 呀 (19th c. variety)
ngo5 tai2 dak1 nei5 bui1 caa4 nung4 gu2 aa3
 1SG see DAK 2SG CL tea strong suppose SFP
 ‘I fear, sir, your tea is too strong.’

Select References

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