

Sun Yat-sen's 1924 speech: Historical background and brief linguistic analysis of the Cantonese audiorecording

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Sun Yat-sen—or Sun Zhongshan—known as the father of modern China, passed away in Peiping (Beijing) in March 1925, three years before his re-structured Nationalist Party launched the Northern Expedition from Guangzhou and set up the nationalist government in Nanjing. While in Guangzhou, a year before his death, Dr. Sun was audiorecorded by Mr. Zhuowu Shen (沈卓吾) of China Evening Post (中國晚報) in two speeches, one read in Mandarin and the other in Cantonese, wherein he reintroduced and reinstated his earlier revolutionary ideology of The Three People's Principles: Nationalism, Democracy and People's Livelihood. These two audiorecordings, made on 30 May 1924, constitute our only known audiorecording of Dr. Sun.

This paper focusses on the Cantonese speech (available at multiple websites online), lasting under 7 minutes. We have three main objectives: 1) to provide some brief research on the background to his 1924 speech given in Cantonese, 2) to trace Dr. Sun's multilinguistic background during his formative years, and 3) to conduct a preliminary study of some of the linguistic variations that are found in Dr. Sun's speech, variations that result from lengthy exposure to both Zhongshan Cantonese and standard Cantonese in Hong Kong and Guangzhou. The recording contains interesting mixtures of these two major subvarieties of Cantonese. Not surprisingly, he retains some features of Zhongshan Cantonese, since he was born in Xiangshan (香山), a district that was renamed Zhongshan (中山) in his memory in 1925. At the same time, he had also lived in both Hong Kong and Guangzhou, and was thus also exposed to standard Cantonese spoken in those two major cities.

Take, for example, the subordinative particle, 嘅, pronounced [kɛ] in standard Cantonese (Ball 1924) and [kɔ] in Zhongshan Cantonese (Chao 1948, based primarily on fieldwork conducted in 1929 in Shiqi (Zhongshan City); Chan 1980). Dr. Sun does not produce the particle as [kɛ] but as [kɔ]. In the case of syllables where standard Cantonese has the diphthong, [ei], Dr. Sun's pronunciation is sometimes [ei] and sometimes [i], the latter occurring in Zhongshan Cantonese; examples include productions such as 內地 [nɔi ti] 'inland,' on the one hand, and 畀 [pei] 'give' and 我哋 [ŋɔ tei] 'we' on the other. An interesting observation can also be made concerning the vowel corresponding to [œ] in the final, [œŋ], in standard Cantonese. This vowel is transcribed as *ö* in Ball (1924:lirii) and described by him as "nearly like *er* in *her*"; in other words, phonetically [œ]. That vowel in Zhongshan, however, is "broken" into [ɔɔ], as noted by Chao (1948) and Chan (1980). The [ɔɔ] production is very salient in Dr. Sun's speech, such as in the phrase, 世界上 [sei kai sɔɔŋ] 'in the world.'

The above is a sampling of the findings that will be presented on the 1924 audiorecording of Dr. Sun's Cantonese speech.

References:

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