An Independent Learner’s Guide to Cantonese Instructional Materials

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Abstract

This article reviews some available instructional material for learning Cantonese, particularly from the point of view of the independent learner. These materials include introductory courses consisting of printed texts and audio tape recordings, as well as dictionaries and glossaries and academic descriptions of Cantonese. The more successful materials for self-study are identified and some possible ways of avoiding the usual pitfalls involved in learning Cantonese are discussed. Some suggestions for future instructional materials are made.

Introduction

Many non-Cantonese speakers in Hong Kong have an interest in acquiring at least a working knowledge of Cantonese. The most obvious reason is the fact that this is the language of the overwhelming majority of the population. Moreover, as the British colonial era comes to an end, it is increasingly important for those expatriates who wish to be employed here to demonstrate some competence in the local medium of communication. English teachers, of course, have their own motivation for wishing to understand something of the language of their students. However, it is apparent to many, and formally confirmed by Li and Richards (1995), that there is an extremely low success rate among many who set out to learn. The major exceptions appear to be officers in those government departments, notably the police force, which insist that personnel take courses in Cantonese early in their careers, and continually reinforce their knowledge by use on a daily basis. Missionaries, too, have produced some notable success stories as a result of motivation and long term commitment.

1 I am grateful to John Whelpton and three anonymous reviewers, who made useful comments on an earlier draft of this paper. The remaining shortcomings are, of course, my own.
A number of factors appear to be implicated in this general lack of success (Smith 1995), most of which are related to the fact that Cantonese and English are typologically very far apart. There are very few cognate lexical items, and wide differences in phonology and syntax cause enormous problems for the beginning learner. In the field of phonology, contrastive tone and vowel length and a variety of exotic phonemes are particularly daunting. The lack of inflectional morphology has led to the popular misconception that syntactic rules in Cantonese are arbitrary and ill-defined. In addition, social factors inhibit successful acquisition. Social distance between indigenous and expatriate communities and the widespread use of English in the territory mean that few expatriates depend on Cantonese for survival.

Notwithstanding the difficulties, the task of learning Cantonese has been tackled by many, and will no doubt continue to be a popular activity for resident expatriates. The aim of this article is to review some of the instructional materials available to assist with this task. The needs of the learner and the learner-centred curriculum have become the focus of considerable attention in recent years (Nunan 1988). This has led to new and effective methods of language teaching and learning, and this review will pay particular attention to those materials which are suitable for self-study.

What are the characteristics of a good course? So much depends on the motivation of the learner and other factors, but some courses are more ‘user-friendly’ than others and present material in a more interesting and accessible way. As courses have developed over the decades, emphasis on drilling has given way to more varied strategies and communicative activities designed to reinforce language acquisition through using the language in realistic situations. The courses presented below reflect this evolution of teaching methodology to some extent. More recent courses pay attention to the pace of the instruction, the use of psychologically proven methods of learning, such as prompts followed by adequate time for making a response; the use of comprehensible input as far as practicable; the modelling of correct answers only, rather than discussion of both correct and incorrect versions; and activities which are meaningful and ‘communicative’, given the constraints of the medium.

With regard to Cantonese instruction, another issue needs to be considered, and that is the means of representing Cantonese text to the reader. Most Cantonese speakers read Chinese characters, but this is
obviously inappropriate for the beginning expatriate learner. As a result, a number of systems to represent the sounds of Cantonese using familiar symbols from the English alphabet, i.e. Romanizations, have been devised. Unfortunately, several systems still co-exist in competition, and different course materials therefore vary in the amount of supporting material available in that particular Romanization. An early system was the Meyer-Wempe system, where diacritic marks represented the different pitch contours. (Meyer and Wempe 1947). Improved phonemic distinctions made later systems more satisfactory, and there are two currently popular systems, the Lau and Yale Romanizations.

The Yale system was pioneered in the instructional material from Yale University, especially Huang (1963), and it has become a popular standard. It represents low tones by the letter 'h' placed after the vowel. Rising and falling tones are represented by acute and grave accents respectively, while the mid level tone is unmarked. This system has the advantage that the marks are to some extent iconic, with rising and falling accents representing rising and falling pitches. One disadvantage is that the learner has to distinguish between the high falling and high level tones by writing the correct accent, even though the distinction between the two in contemporary speech appears to be insignificant. The Lau system was introduced by Sidney Lau in his course books and dictionary (Lau 1972, 1977), and indicates tone by means of superscript numbers one to six. Both level and falling high tones have the number '1', but the level tone can be distinguished if necessary by a degree symbol after the 'l'. Both systems are phonemic, although there are some differences in the choice of letters used to represent the different vowels.

The choice of system by learners is largely a matter of preference. It has been suggested that the Lau system is easier for those who are familiar with musical notation, while the iconicity of the Yale system is attractive to some learners. I personally find the Lau system somewhat easier, and found the use of both the letter 'h' and accent marks to indicate tone in Yale confusing at first. There are other systems as well. Woo et al (1995) have re-ordered Lau's number sequence while Chan and Crewe (1992) have adopted a completely iconic system where rising, falling or level marks are printed at three different levels next to each syllable. The Linguistic Society of Hong Kong has given a good deal of thought to the problem, and devised a new system known as Jyut6 Ping3, which is short for Jyut6jyu5 Ping3jam1, i.e. the 'Pinyin' of the Yue or Cantonese language. This has brought the symbols used a little closer to the International Phonetic Alphabet, but the main
advantage is that it is suitable for inputting computer data, and Microsoft have already included it in their Chinese language programmes. However, in the absence of a wide range of instructional materials or successful attempts to popularise the system, for example in public signs, it is difficult to see how it will replace the existing systems, although the LSHK does plan to produce a glossary using Jyut6 Ping3 in the near future.

In the following sections, a brief review of available taught courses is followed by a look at those courses texts which have been produced for use in conjunction with serious instruction over an extended period. Materials suitable for self-study will then be discussed in somewhat more detail (see also Smith 1996). They will be dealt with in the order in which they were published. Finally, there will be a look at some useful supplementary material such as dictionaries and glossaries.

Taught Courses

Some professions such as the police and (until 1997) army require overseas personnel to pass courses in Cantonese, and this need is typically addressed by the provision of in-house courses. This is not typical of the Civil Service generally, however, although the issue has recently become more widely debated as overseas civil servants attempt to transfer to local conditions of service, and Chinese language ability is likely to be an increasingly important factor in post-handover Hong Kong. For those with no in-house provision, there are a number of courses generally available. The most popular courses are probably those run by the YMCA, with a beginners' course nearly every night of the week, and follow-up intermediate and advanced courses. Several tertiary extra-mural and language departments offer courses, and a number of smaller language schools too have entered the market. Popular courses include the University of Hong Kong's courses offered by the School of Professional and Continuing Education and Department of Chinese, and the New Asia/Yale in China Chinese language Centre at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. Recently even the British Council has advertised courses in Cantonese, with the promise of more enlightened teaching methods based on its English programmes. Attending a course is a good way of maintaining motivation by working with peers, and is probably the most effective way of proceeding, although it does, of course, consume both time and money.
Material Suitable for Self-Study

There are a number of written courses available, some of which are accompanied by audio cassette tapes, and it is these that will be reviewed for their effectiveness. As a learner with no prior knowledge of Cantonese, I experienced the problems of the complete beginner and have compared the relative faults and merits of some of the material available from a personal perspective. The following assessment of some of the material tested will hopefully be of some use to anyone setting out to learn from such a course. However, it should be remembered that much of the evaluation is subjective, and perceptions might not necessarily be shared by other learners following a similar route.

Published Material to Accompany Taught Courses.

These are somewhat daunting for the independent learner, as they are clearly for use in conjunction with taught courses which rely on a good deal of instructor input. Nevertheless, they contain lot of useful reference material, even if they are not entirely appropriate for self-study.

Speak Cantonese by Parker Po-Fei Huang and Gerard P. Kok (1963).

This is a popular and widely used three volume course, and the beginning learner will probably be directed to this in book shops. There are three volumes, consisting of grammar, drills and explanations, and all the serious and motivated learner is ever likely to want to know about Cantonese is here. The language used is, however, somewhat dated, according to native-speaking informants. As mentioned above, this programme introduced the now common Yale Romanization. Tape materials can be ordered, but are not generally sold with the books, and for this reason it is considered more suitable for reference, or the basis for an extended taught course.

Elementary Cantonese by Sydney Lau (1977)

This was a widely used course in Hong Kong government departments, but it is now showing its age. It uses the Lau Romanization system, which was used until recently on a number of other taught courses including the YMCA, although the latter has recently adopted Colloquial Cantonese, which uses Yale. Again, this course is monumental in size and scope, with three
volumes devoted to grammar and exercises and two of supplementary
glossary material. Tape material can be ordered, but is not generally available
in book shops. Like the Yale course, it is rather daunting for the independent
learner, although a sound if somewhat uninspiring basis for a traditional
taught course.

Self-study Materials

Linguaphone Courses (1970)

Linguaphone is a famous name in language learning, and there are
courses available in many of the world’s languages, including Cantonese. An
older one of their courses, no longer marketed by Linguaphone, was found to
be based on Teach Yourself Cantonese by R. Bruce (1970). This consists of two
tapes of approximately 30 minutes each. The first tape has an extensive set
of model tones and phonemes and the first six of 20 dialogues which are
completed on the second tape. Accompanying the tapes are the Teach Yourself
book and a tape-script, which consists entirely of extracts from the book.
The book is written around the tape dialogues, and grammatical notes are
presented as footnotes to the dialogues, along with vocabulary, drills and
further practice. The final 60 pages or so consist of the text of the dialogues
in Chinese characters and an English-Cantonese glossary.

The ordering of material is reasonable and the explanations are clear and
straightforward. The main disadvantage is the unsatisfactory Romanization
used - yet another system. Both 'i' and 'ts' are used for what are surely the
same phoneme. There may be a case for distinguishing allophones in
different phonetic environments, but in some cases this is not the case. For
example, 'je' (knowledge) and 'te' (character) may once have been distinct,
but now appear to be homophones apart from the tone. The sound 'a' as in
'ga'm is confusingly represented as 'gun', while 'a' is reserved for syllables with
final vowels such as 'fa'. Tones are represented by diacritic marks, which are
iconic to a certain extent, with high falling and high rising represented by
grave and acute accents respectively, and mid level and low level by single and
double horizontal lines. However, as there is no significant distinction made
between high falling and high level in today's usage, the high tone in this
situation would be better left unmarked. The low rising and low falling are
represented by a half-circle and chevron respectively, which are not iconic, and besides are almost indistinguishable as presented in text of this size.

The tapes are actually very good, and have the unusual feature that, apart from the first series of sound drills, there is little repetition and almost all the language spoken is in Cantonese. Learners can thus follow the dialogues, try to interpret, study the text and listen again without the annoying English instructions which so quickly become redundant on tapes of this kind. The only English spoken in fact is superfluous, an announcement of the lesson number in English. The recordings are clear, and the grading sensible, going more slowly in the first few lessons, and progressing to more normal speed. Very simple dialogues are followed by progressively more complex content. The language is perhaps a little formal, more suited to the written rather than spoken form according to native-speaker informants. If Krashen's notion of 'comprehensible input' is really as important as he suggests (1983), this tape is the one to choose. One small complaint is that only two people have been employed to read the conversations, which makes it a little confusing when the situations involve three or more participants. The new version of Teach Yourself Cantonese by Hugh Baker is eagerly awaited.

More recently, a somewhat more substantial Linguaphone course, apparently based on the American Foreign Services course (Boyle 1970), was available. The main drawback of these courses is their outrageous price - I was quoted a price of nearly $5000 for the first set of lessons and over $5000 for the follow-up set, although, perhaps not surprisingly, hefty discounts were quickly offered when reluctance to pay up became apparent. Because of the enormous outlay required, I did not pursue these further.

Cantonese for Beginners by Margaret Yeung (1980)

The tape material consists of 23 'lessons', which are in fact readings in Cantonese of vocabulary lists on the first side and brief dialogues on the second side, with an accompanying tape-script. There are no English cues or prompts, so it is difficult to learn from listening alone - one must read along. The vocabulary lists deal with some useful items such as pronouns, food, transport and so on, along with some which seem more suitable for reference only, such as extensive lists of hotels or Chinese traditional festivals. The dialogues are situational, and cover shopping, asking for directions, ordering food, developing films etc. Each conversation is said once very slowly, followed by a second reading at more normal speed. The first reading is
perhaps a little too slow, and for some reason there is a very long pause between each lesson, giving the feeling that the whole tape needs speeding up a bit.

Unfortunately, the booklet accompanying the tape is woefully inadequate. The Romanization used is the outdated Meyer-Wempe system, and there appear to be a lot of misprints in the tone diacritics. There is no explanation whatsoever of what the symbols mean, nor any background as to how various words are used. The only means at a learner’s disposal to find out more would be to check the microscopic Chinese characters in a dictionary. Although there is a rough translation of the phrases in the dialogues, there is no indication as to which word means what. Grammatical structures are introduced willy-nilly, and again meaning is totally ignored. The chances of encountering exactly the same dialogues as devised here are extremely small. Any divergence will leave the learner helpless.

This is a pity, as the tape does have some strengths. Above all, the voices are pleasant to listen to, a factor which seems to have been ignored in some other courses. The voices are soothing and gentle and induce a positive attitude in the listener. Pronunciation is very clear, and the tones are pronounced in a way suitable for beginning learners to pick up the distinctions. Perhaps with a better accompanying booklet and a revised series of situations, this could have potential as a first introduction.

Everyday Cantonese by Chik Hon Man (1980)

No-one can complain that the tapes accompanying Everyday Cantonese go too slowly; the dialogues and drills rush along with scarcely a pause between them. The dialogues are intentionally delivered at a normal conversational speed, and prospective learners are warned in the introduction to the tape that, while the speed may seem dauntingly fast, ‘it’s the only way that you can pick it up’. Learners following the course are exhorted to ‘listen through and through to the cassettes, in the car, in the bath ... until the rhythms, tones and patterns of real Cantonese speech seep into your brain’.

The material, produced jointly by the Chinese University and RTHK consists of a book divided into 26 lessons accompanied by dialogues and drills on four cassettes. The tapes appear to be the primary resource, and the book provides a written tape-script, along with glossaries and some extra grammatical information. The comments which follow mainly refer to the
material on the tapes. After two introductory lessons dealing with tones and phonology, each lesson begins with a dialogue on a specific topic, introducing new vocabulary and grammatical structures. The story line features a Singaporean businessman and his family, friends and colleagues, and there is some attempt at narrative development from chapter to chapter. Following the dialogues are new vocabulary items and then a number of drills, namely pyramid drills, substitution drills, translation drills and question-and-answer drills. A Chinese-character text of the dialogue is presented along with some grammar notes. The treatment is sensible and the situations, such as food, taxis, hiring flats, polite conversation and so on, are relevant to the lives of expatriates in the territory. However, there are a number of shortcomings.

Firstly, as mentioned above, the pace is very fast. This may be useful to a certain extent for learners who may be able to master slowly delivered citation forms but still find extreme difficulty when faced with a real life conversation. However, the speed may be a little too fast in the earlier lessons. Some of the dialogues appear to be gabbled through at the maximum possible rate, and are very difficult to decipher, even after repeated listening. This could be so discouraging that learners would soon abandon the task. The quality of the sound on my copy of the tapes made listening even more difficult. It is true that the dialogue can be deciphered by looking at the script, and the following pyramid drills help with syllable boundaries, but a more controlled speed in the earlier dialogues would be preferable.

Secondly there are a number of what are annoyances rather than serious deficiencies. One is the amount of time taken by the English-speaking presenter. He is certainly an accomplished Cantonese speaker, and his pronunciation of the Cantonese phrases is an encouragement to those setting out to learn. However, the jovial comments and dramatically rolled R's can become intrusive. Since the learner is exhorted to listen to the tape over and over, some of the explanations are far too long and would be better left as footnotes in the book. For example, the long explanation of the derivation of names of department stores from their Japanese written equivalents is interesting once, but is tedious to listen to over and over again. Other asides, for example guidance on when to use the phrase ‘could you say that again please’ and attempted witticisms could be left out altogether. This would leave more time for native speaker models and for pauses after English phrases in the translation drills. In these, the correct answer follows the English expression without a pause, leaving no time to think unless the tape recorder is constantly switched on and off. Another slightly confusing
problem is the fact that the vocabulary lists following the dialogues sometimes have the English word first followed by Cantonese, while in other lessons, the order is reversed. In the early stages of listening, it may not be clear which word refers to which.

Also confusing is what exactly one is supposed to do with the question-and-answer drills. There appears to be no learner input into these 'drills' apart from listening. Is there something else we are supposed to do with them? This was possibly explained in the RTHK radio programmes, which I have not heard, but on the cover of the book on sale in book shops, there is no indication that this is anything other than a self-contained course. Some of the phrases selected for translation are somewhat strained ('I too have bought several shirts for my manager') or use quasi-English expressions, such as 'at my convenience', but admittedly it is difficult to devise stimulating content in the early stages of drilling. Some of the English in the book seems to have suffered from interference from Cantonese syntax, such as the chapter entitled 'With the parent'. A final irritant is the traditional Chinese music signaling the separation of the drills and lessons. While this is pleasant enough, the same repetitive sequence is presented ad nauseam throughout the four tapes. Surely a varied selection of extracts of traditional Chinese music could have been used instead.

Thirdly, there are a number of more substantive problems. Throughout the tapes, the presenter gives an equivalent meaning followed by a 'literal' meaning. Sometimes these allegedly literal meanings are not really a literal translation of the Chinese, and may be a little confusing. It might be more legitimate to draw the learner's attention to a morpheme by morpheme equivalent, which already exists in the Chinese-character translations. These could perhaps be given a larger type and greater prominence. There is a problem too with the English to Cantonese translation drills, probably the most important of the drills, as they indicate whether the learner has really mastered the content of the lesson. While the book devotes considerable space to printing the pyramid drills in full, occupying several lines where the final line alone is really adequate, it fails to include a Cantonese translation of the translation drills. This is especially missed when answers appear to include words not already mentioned in the lessons. Also confusing is the fact that the vocabulary items presented after the dialogues are given alternately by two native speakers, one male and one female. Since they have different natural pitch ranges, it is harder for the listener to recognize the tones, especially of monosyllables, than if they had been presented by a single
speaker. The dialogues, as indicated, proceed very fast, followed by vocabulary from the dialogues and then drills. From the point of view of the listener (as opposed to the reader), it might be more useful if this order was changed. I would suggest the vocabulary first, with the English expression presented first followed by a pause to prompt recall, then pyramid drills and substitution drills to show the items in use, and then the dialogue as a listening exercise. The translation drills could then be presented as a check on how well the lesson had been learned.

Having spent a good deal of time listening to these tapes - the first I seriously examined - I may have made rather more criticisms than I would otherwise have done, and this should not obscure the usefulness and general high quality of the course. Moreover, those whose study habits include more reading than listening may find some of the criticisms irrelevant. The 26 lessons would fit quite neatly into a year's study, allowing a generous 2 weeks per lesson. Those motivated to follow the course to the end would achieve a very good basic grounding in the language in that time.

*Barefoot Cantonese - RTHK.*

Apparently produced during the early eighties, this is broadcast over radio periodically, and not available commercially. It is a very good introduction to the Cantonese language, consisting of light-hearted exchanges between a sympathetic Cantonese teacher and a genial but bumbling *gwailo* Everyman learner. It goes at a gentle pace through a number of situational conversations, and takes pains not to complicate the issue with grammatical jargon. However, a little explanation of tone would be welcome, as the learner is always admonished to 'watch his tones' without any further explanation of how this is possible.

There are a number of minor criticisms. The dialogue is rather vacuous and the expatriate learner does rather too much of the modelling, frequently getting it wrong. While it may give a certain amount of wry satisfaction to see other learners having difficulty, it would be better pedagogically to have more of the native-speaker as a model. However, the subject matter is useful and practical, dealing with such topics as transport, food, greetings and weather. There is enough repetition of common phrases to make them stick.
Cantonese in 100 hours by Lung Sing (1991)

While Everyday Cantonese focuses on the tapes, with the book as an adjunct, Cantonese in 100 hours is just the opposite: the tapes refer constantly to the book and consist mainly of readings illustrating pronunciation of items in the book. The tone is stern and serious, as the book's author energetically goes through the routines. The tapes are not really easy to listen to casually, as there are constant references to the text, and these skip around from page to page out of order. Quite a lot of the tape, in fact, is taken up with this laboriously enunciated place marking (Exercise 1, drill 2, page Roman numeral 22...). Combined with the fact that most phrases or vocabulary items are said twice, the length of the tapes could probably be greatly reduced. Some of the drills are useful, though, for example the collections of tone sequence pairs (e.g. low falling, followed by high rising), illustrating how tones sound when spoken in succession.

The most serious drawback with the tapes is their lack of variety. The learner is not engaged in any constructive or thought-provoking activity. Even recall is not required, merely listening and repeating the tone, word, phrase or dialogue. The first hour is almost exclusively concerned with tone drills, and it seems doubtful if many independent learners would proceed beyond this. Many of the exercises give instructions such as 'practise this with your teacher or other students', and it seems that the book and tapes have been designed for use with a teacher. Some university courses do in fact use it as a course text.

The book I have is described as the '11th edition, 1991', but there does not appear to be any updating of the prefaces, and one assumes that these were really re-printings. For example, the preface makes no mention of the work of Sydney Lau when referring to available dictionaries. Similarly, some of the content appears to be outdated, for example the section on hiring a rickshaw is of dubious usefulness. There are one or two typos which appear to have escaped 11 generations of proof-reading, such as the discrepancy between what is on the tape and the text on p. xxii.

The tones in the tone drills appear to be somewhat exaggerated. The range between the bottom of the low tones and the top of the highs is as much as one octave, which is considerably more than in normal conversational speech. Pronunciation of the vocabulary too appears to involve citation forms rather than those used in real everyday speech,
especially the high falling tones. However, in the dialogues, it seems to cover a more natural range. Even so, one misses the naturalistic feel of *Everyday Cantonese*.

*A Cantonese Book* by Chan Kwok Kin and Betty Hung (1994)

This curiously titled course actually consists of a book and four study tapes. In spite of its unassuming title, the book is most attractively produced. It uses the Yale Romanization system and contains eighteen lessons, each consisting of a conversation, vocabulary, pyramid and substitution drills and review and listening exercises. The format is very similar to that of *Everyday Cantonese*, so similar, in fact, that one wonders if it was modeled on it. There are a number of pleasing features. Chinese characters which have the rare virtue of being big enough to read feature prominently in the conversations and vocabulary. This will be extremely useful for non-Cantonese-speaking Asian learners and others who already know how to read some Chinese. These characters can soon be recognized in rough outline and act as a useful learning prompt even for English-speaking learners who have no interest in learning how to read and write. The appendices at the back of the book contain, in addition to English-Cantonese and Cantonese-English glossaries, a list of Putonghua equivalents, which takes account of the fact that many learners have an interest in both Cantonese and Mandarin. New vocabulary items are marked with an asterisk. Another interesting feature is a list of Cantonese slang, drawing attention to impolite items which should not be used. Illustrations of grammatical structures are easily located by their pink shaded boxes. Throughout the book there are interesting snippets of cultural information, and the situations chosen are relevant to the contemporary Hong Kong resident.

The tapes are wonderfully clear, unlike some of the other material available. This is appreciated in the first section of phonological drills, for example distinctions between difficult pairs of initial sounds. However, it might be better if a single speaker enunciated both, rather than an alternation between speakers as on the tape. As with *Cantonese in 100 Hours*, the drills include tone pair sequences, which are also useful.

The main problem with the tapes, in spite of their clarity and general usefulness, is their lack of engagement with the listener. Like *100 hours*, the main activity is listening, and apart from brief substitution exercises, there are no interactive drills requiring recall or reconstruction from prompts. There
are no English cues for the translations, and the tapes merely act as a spoken version of what has already been studied in the written text. The pyramid drills, useful in Everyday Cantonese to sort out a dialogue spoken at conversational speed, are less useful here, as the vocabulary has already been clearly enunciated. Again, the pyramid drills are printed out in full in the text, which appears an unnecessary use of space. The tapes, then, may be a useful adjunct to vary the activities in class lessons, but leave something to be desired as stand-alone learning aids.

Another minor annoyance is that the English, although wisely kept to a minimum in the text, is not very accurate. Headings such as 'Making order in McDonald' and 'Table manner', and expressions such as 'sorry of being late' and 'action at recent past' do not inspire confidence in the language teacher. More significantly, headings for grammatical points such as 'people qualifying people' and 'specifying people' are rather strange and hardly helpful for the learner. It might have been advisable for a native English speaker to proof-read the text before final publication. There are a few typographical errors such as 'rulgar' on p.20 and minor confusions, such as the announcement of the next station on the MTR as 'hah go jadm haih ... whereas in fact the more formal variant 'hah yat jadm haih ... is heard on the trains.

Colloquial Cantonese by Keith S.T. Tong and Gregory James (1994)

This is a most attractive offering, with a well laid out and logically organized course book using Yale Romanization, and clear, interesting tape material which complements the book, but can also be used on its own. The tapes stress listening for meaning, which would seem an obvious activity, but is, surprisingly, not a feature of many of the tapes currently available. Learners are asked to listen for specific information before the brief dialogues, and answers are given afterwards.

Colloquial Cantonese is a most useful addition to the resources available. The tapes are beautifully clear and are presented in a polished, professional manner, which makes them easy to listen to. Throughout, the focus is on listening, often with the aid of situational dialogues which have a list of things to find out at the beginning. This focus on listening is welcome, but the learner can easily be seduced by the secondary aim of finding the 'right' answer. After hearing these drills once or twice the right answer is known and thus there is the danger that the instructions can become irrelevant or tedious. Another criticism is the amount of English on the tape. Surely the
most economical use of tape resources is to have as much Cantonese spoken as possible, to expose the learner to correct pronunciation and build up patterns to acquire in a logically graded sequence, as Bruce's *Teach Yourself Cantonese* succeeded admirably in doing.

The initial section detailing the tones, which can be so tedious in some other course, is thankfully kept to a brief 5-minute introduction, with one or two rather arbitrarily selected tone pairs to demonstrate the relative pitch. Since 'ideal' tone paradigms have proved to be an unreliable guide to actual practice in other courses, it is far better to get straight into the words in actual use than to spend too much time on sterile tone drills. One small puzzle about the models is that the drill representing high followed by low falling appears to be one octave apart, surely a greater range than any normal speaker would use, and the low falling does not seem to fall. Admittedly these are citation forms, which often differ from normal spoken conversation. However, a more useful exercise might have been for the listener to pick out one of a number of possible words differing only in tone. This could usefully aim to get across the very basic idea that tone has lexical meaning, a very difficult concept for speakers of non-tone languages to master, and one for which little communicative instructional material appears to have been devised.

The book follows the style of others in the Routledge Colloquial Language series, and is well laid out and easy to use. After a brief introduction to the grammar and phonology of Cantonese, the fifteen chapters follow a similar pattern. The vocabulary used in the lesson is highlighted and the dialogues appear below. A tape symbol indicates the material appearing on the tapes. Details of idioms and structures then appear, along with comments and discussion of grammatical features as they arise. The language used is concise and generally clearly comprehensible to the non-linguist. Further exercises follow, mainly those appearing on the tape, and a final section deals with a few carefully selected Chinese characters for recognition.

*The Musical Approach* by Edward Woo, Patrick Ng and Y.S. Fu (1995)

This package consists of four slim booklets and two 60-minute tapes. The four booklets comprise 1) an account of phonetics and tone, 2) a series of glossaries, 3) a 'vocabulary bank' i.e. a brief English-Cantonese dictionary and 4) the tape-script of dialogues together with vocabulary and some brief
grammatical explanation. The full title of the course is *The Musical Approach: Introducing a new concept to learn Cantonese*. This intriguing prospect is made more alluring by some of the claims on the cover: 'a magic formula which makes Cantonese-learning extremely easy. All it takes is 30 seconds every day. Within weeks the tonal problem will be completely solved!' Is this the breakthrough we have been waiting for, to enable learners to master the language with minimum effort?

Alas, it is not. What is claimed to be a 'musical approach' is in fact no more than relentless drilling of tone sequences. Tones are indicated by superscript numbers very like the Lau system, but, confusingly, the order is changed, with 4 representing low rising, 5 low level and 6 low falling. This six-tone sequence is used as the basis for pronunciation practice. There is no explanation of why only one high tone is used rather than the high level and high falling tones used in some other systems. The numbering is perhaps more logical than the Lau system, as it proceeds naturally from high to low. However, given the present state of confusion over Romanizations, the last thing we need is a different system, especially one that offers little apparent advantage over the others. The learner is advised to listen and master the sounds of the finals, and an unbelievably unwieldy procedure for producing whole syllables is described, whereby the learner locates the correct tone from a long list of finals and adds the initial consonant. All this is given on the first tape, which is so heavy that it is almost impossible to listen to for any length of time. The aim of the initial exercises, which continue for longer than most learners are likely to persist, is the perfect reproduction of sounds that the learner does not understand at all. This is rather a surprising approach considering our present state of knowledge of communicative teaching methodology.

Just in case we forget that this is a Musical Approach, there is a continual background of popular classical pieces for the piano, guitar or string ensemble, as if the magic of the music will somehow spirit these tones and vocabulary items through our language acquisition devices. There is some evidence that musical relaxation does have a serious role in language acquisition if it is properly done, for example by optimizing 'affective' conditions for learning (Krashen 1982). Indeed it has formed a central principle of some approaches, such as the 'suggestopedia' of Loucanov (1979). In this case, however, I find the musical overlay distracting and annoying, as though a radio station is incorrectly tuned with heavy
interference from another wavelength, and a hindrance to learning rather than a help.

There is, unfortunately, a rather more serious shortcoming, which concerns the way the sounds are interpreted in terms of English equivalents. The authors seem to misuse or confuse the terms syllable, pitch, tone, intonation, stress and vowel, and give some very dubious illustrations for appreciating Cantonese sounds in terms of familiar English ones. For example, the 'high pitch' is said to be equivalent to the sound of the word 'bean' in English, presumably because it contains what is sometimes described as a 'high vowel'. The English 'long and short tones' referred to on p. 4 should be long and short vowels. On page 10, tone is equated with stress, for example the low falling tone in Cantonese is equated to the unstressed syllable in the word 'London', ignoring the variety of intonations possible in different contexts in English. Some of the phonemic equivalents are also highly misleading, for example the final 'ak' is equated with 'duck', 'aang' with 'found' and 'ung' with 'lonely'. The citation form of 'aak' has a clearly aspirated ending, in spite of the fact that it is supposed to be an unreleased stop. The learner interested in Cantonese phonology would be advised to consult one of the courses which uses linguistic terms accurately.

Fortunately the second tape, consisting of a series of dialogues, vocabulary lists and listening exercises is somewhat more useful. Typically, a situational dialogue is presented in English first, then translated into Cantonese. Now at last the learner can listen to accurately pronounced and meaningful Cantonese material. At least it would be possible were it not for that music, which accompanies every exercise on the tape. This is a great pity, as the recordings are clear and technically well-produced apart from this. Even so, there is little in the dialogues, situations or vocabulary which is not a duplication of material in existing courses.

A great deal of effort has evidently gone into the production of this course, and it is unfortunate that the authors did not pay more attention to learners' needs or check on the accuracy of the linguistic terminology used. What is claimed as a new and radical method is in fact nothing of the kind; the only real innovation is an unnecessary re-ordering of the numbers representing the tones. This order is even copyrighted, and a whole page is devoted to the authors' intellectual property rights over this 'new' system and dire warnings of the consequences of copyright violation. Given the
shortcomings of the course and the confusion it creates, a flood of litigation would appear unlikely.

**Street Cantonese** by Betty Hung (1995).

Published in late 1995, this appears to be a follow-up to *A Cantonese Book*. Although not specifically stated on the cover, the preface indicates that this is the second in a series, and reference is made to the earlier work for further details of abbreviations, Romanization, etc. Assuming a knowledge of basic Cantonese from *A Cantonese Book*, we are informed that in this work, the lessons become ‘increasingly conceptual’. Again, the needs of Asian learners are catered for, and as well as Chinese characters to accompany Romanized text, there are glossaries in English, Mandarin and Japanese. Since the author was a committee member of the Linguistic Society of Hong Kong Romanization Scheme it might have been expected that this book would try out the new improved system on a pedagogic work, but unfortunately this is not the case, and the Yale version is used again. This may, however, have been a decision of the publisher rather than the author, as it is a follow-up to a successful book using the Yale system.

The course consists of a booklet and two 60-minute audio cassette tapes. The booklet is divided into 20 lessons and finishes with the brief glossaries. Each lesson follows the same pattern, with a conversation followed by a ‘vocabulary’ section and in some cases extra vocabulary in the same semantic field called ‘more to learn’. The vocabulary contains no grammatical explanation, in fact there is none to be found anywhere in the book. This could be interpreted as either a shortcoming or a virtue, according to taste. Instead of technical explanation of grammar there is a translation of terms used in the conversations and example sentences or phrases illustrating these terms in use. The subject matter is overwhelmingly preoccupied with food. Much of the vocabulary and dialogues is concerned with cataloguing a spectacular array of just about every kind of cooked and uncooked food one is ever likely to encounter in Hong Kong.

The accompanying tape simply follows what is written in the book from beginning to end. The quality is good, with the voices clear and enunciation adequate, even though the conversations proceed quite fast. Everything is read in Cantonese, including the lesson numbers and so on, which is also useful for the learner, who is thereby forced to continue to think in Cantonese rather than be continually distracted by English instructions as in
other courses. It is rather disappointing that there is no relief from the unrelenting modelling of the written text, which makes the tapes rather dull, and somewhat unstimulating if listened to repeatedly. Some involvement or interaction with the listener such as providing cues for learner responses would make the tapes rather more engaging. The highly motivated learner who is prepared to sit down with the book open and the tape recorder running may well get some benefit from the extra audio dimension, although there is little original or new in the tapes to excite the independent learner.

Other Text Sources

A number of other text sources may be of use for the independent learner. These include dictionaries, grammars and academic texts about the Chinese language. There are a few dictionaries available, which provide a useful aid for any learner. Some include written characters, while others are based on Romanizations. In the process of attempting to learn Cantonese I have found that some reinforcement from written symbols is extremely useful. This view may not, however, be shared by all learners, many of whom may dismiss as too time consuming any attention to written characters. It is only recently that a comprehensive grammar of Cantonese has appeared, but there are several established texts on the Chinese language which have relevance to the learner of Cantonese as well as Mandarin.

A Practical Cantonese-English Dictionary by Sydney Lau (1977)

This is a large, heavy volume containing some 3600 entries arranged in alphabetical order according to the Lau Romanization. The major advantage it has is that the typeface is big enough to read the Chinese characters easily, something not shared by many other similar publications. Entries are followed by definitions and lists of compounds, which are extremely useful. Compounds starting with the headword are given, but not with the headword in any other position, which is one limitation. For example jau2 dim3 can be found under jau2 but not dim3. However, it is a useful resource for any serious learner.


This tiny dictionary is apparently still a best-seller from HKUP in spite of its date (first published in 1914) and an unusual Romanization system. It is
useful as a finder list of characters from pronunciation, and also has characters arranged by patterns, which is interesting but rather too difficult for a beginning learner.

**The Right Word in Cantonese** by Kwan Choi Wah (1989)

This is a small phrase book or rather a collection of glossaries organized around a number of semantic areas which can be used for reference. The text uses Yale Romanization, and no Chinese characters are used. It contains a lot of practical information which is useful for specific purposes, e.g. sports, food or family relationships. However, it is not really appropriate for use as a dictionary, as there are omissions of common words such as 'is', 'goodbye', 'bring' and 'with', while including rather obscure entries such as 'scanner unit' (medical) and 'Academic Aptitude Test'. A newer and enlarged edition, to which some of these limitations may not apply, has apparently appeared recently.


In this work, the Cantonese is also written entirely in Yale without the use of Chinese characters. It is a very useful dictionary, small enough to carry around easily, but large enough to contain almost any word a learner is likely to want to know. After a brief introduction to phonology and Cantonese grammar (which contains a useful table comparing the Yale, Lau and Meyer-Wempe systems with the International phonetic alphabet), the main section consists of some 500 pages of English to Cantonese equivalents. The headwords are supplemented with various compounds, and there are various items of explanation to make clear which meanings of the English words are intended. The usual cautions about translations relying on dictionaries naturally still apply, and this is to be considered as a supplement rather than a learning tool in its own right.

**Learn Chinese Characters In Hong Kong** by Chan Kwok Kin and William Crewe (1992)

This is not a dictionary, but is a very nice little introduction to Chinese characters. Those who feel frightened off by the complexity of Chinese writing would do well to look at this attractively produced volume, which is interesting and informative and is illustrated with familiar examples from the streets of Hong Kong. For each character, the tone is indicated graphically.
by a mark to the right indicating the general pitch contour, and a number of common examples of the use of the character are given. The sequence of strokes for writing the character is also illustrated. The book has a page devoted to each of the hundred odd characters arranged in order of number of strokes, and there are many more characters included in the examples of use. This is a book to dip into and enjoy rather than make a serious effort to learn, but probably as much useful information is likely to be acquired nevertheless, and it is highly recommended to almost any foreigner with an interest in the local language and culture who will be in Hong Kong for more than a few weeks.

*Phrases in Cantonese* by Betty Hung (1996).

This is a slim, easy-to-carry paperback, which, in spite of its title, does not consist mainly of phrases, but words, in the form of an English-Cantonese finder-list. The alphabetical list of English words is accompanied by brief translations in the Yale Romanization, followed by the Chinese characters. At the end are about 55 pages of glossaries, of which 40 pages are devoted to food.

**Academic Studies**

Although the courses above probably contain as much linguistic detail as most learners would wish for, some who have a background in linguistics may wish to delve further into aspects of Cantonese phonology, syntax, semantics or socio-linguistics. The most useful source for the linguist is the *Comprehensive Grammar of Cantonese* by Matthews & Yip (1994). This is an invaluable asset for the serious learner or linguist, but probably a bit technical for the average beginning learner. It is nevertheless a useful reference for phonology and syntax, and surprisingly is the first comprehensive grammar of Cantonese to be published in English. It should finally silence those who perpetuate the myth that Cantonese has no grammar. Other studies by Kwok (1971) and Bolton and Kwok (1990) may also be of interest to the specialist linguist. Some more popular studies of the Chinese language which contain useful insights for the learner of Cantonese include Forrest (1973), DeFrancis (1984), Newnham (1987), Norman (1988) and Ramsey (1987).
Discussion

There is no doubt that a wealth of instructional materials exists for anyone who wishes to learn Cantonese. This is in marked contrast to the situation a few decades ago, when learners were very much on their own. For those who are not constrained by time or money, enrolling on one of the many available taught courses is no doubt the best way to proceed. Different teaching styles appeal to different learners, and there is the specific factor of the alleged difference between Chinese and Western styles to consider, although there is evidence that a good deal of mythology surrounds the issue (Gu 1994). Anyone setting out on a taught course would do well to find out about teaching styles, methods and materials from someone who has attended that particular course.

For the majority of us, more or less severely constrained by considerations of time and money, one of the learning packages discussed above could be an effective way of setting about acquiring the language. Of the courses reviewed above, those which have stimulating tape accompaniments and clear text are especially recommended. Tong and James' Colloquial Cantonese and Chik Hon Man's Everyday Cantonese are particularly good in this respect, although the latter is showing its age a little, and the tapes are not as clear as more recent publications. I found too that some attention to the written character is a valuable aid to learning, and Lau's Practical Cantonese English Dictionary and Chan and Crewe's Learn Chinese Characters in Hong Kong are useful in this respect. For those who do not speak Cantonese but know some written Chinese, Chan and Hung's A Cantonese Book and the follow-up Street Cantonese are probably the best starting points.

The field seems wide open for video material, and a five volume video course compiled by the Ohio State University (Christiansen and Jiang, forthcoming) is in preparation. The first parts are said to be complete, but I have not so far had access to a copy.

It is unfortunate that there is such a confusing range of written representations of Cantonese. The written representations of Hong Kong place names are often idiosyncratic and misleading, and add further confusion to the picture. The Lau system and Yale system are both phonemic, unlike the older Meyer-Wempe system, and either of these would make a useful standard. The Linguistic Society of Hong Kong's recently adopted /jŋt șiŋ3/ system is probably the best currently available, but less well known. Ideally,
one system will eventually be adopted as a universal standard, which would make learning a good deal easier.

One way of learning a language without recourse to expensive tuition is to arrange a conversation exchange of the kind currently being promoted among students by the University of Hong Kong's English Centre and other tertiary institutions. Such an arrangement is essentially symbiotic, whereby a learner of Cantonese finds a Cantonese speaker interested in improving competence in the learner's native language. Since large numbers of native Cantonese speakers are motivated to take further courses to improve English and some other languages such as French, German and Japanese, finding a partner should not be too difficult for speakers of these languages. Learners with more obscure native languages may find the demand for their product somewhat less. Conversation exchanges are less suitable for complete beginners, and there is the possibility of unproductive use of time if partners do not co-operate well, but there have been encouraging reports of progress using this arrangement.

Conclusion

A selection of material for independent learning has been discussed, and the motivated learner need not be short of sources of inspiration. Learning material, however well produced, is, of course, no guarantee of successful acquisition. What is needed is the motivation to persist and a realistic expectation of what can be achieved. In general, slow, steady progress is to be recommended over a burst of activity followed by discouragement and failure. Joining a course with fellow learners, or arranging conversation sessions with native speakers will provide variety and extra motivation. For those with a medium- to long-term commitment to Hong Kong, the aim of learning a little bit new each month, however small, would seem a realistic goal.

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