

LESSON NOTES

All About #3

Cantonese Grammar

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VOCABULARY PHRASE USAGE

廣東話, *gwong2 dung1 waa6*2* ("Cantonese' language")

There are a few terms for the "Cantonese language" used in Cantonese. One is 廣東話 (*gwong2 dung1 waa2*) as we mention in this lesson. Other terms include 粵語 (*jyut6 yu5*) and 白話 (*bak6 waa2*).

GRAMMAR

The Focus of This Lesson is the Basics of Cantonese Grammar

Grammar Pep Talk

When learning a language, grammar can be overwhelming. Well, the good news is that, compared to learning about Cantonese characters, we have good news for you! Cantonese grammar is a lot simpler than grammar in many other languages. If you hate conjugating verbs, or trying to wrap your head around the idea that words have genders, or you can't roll your "r's," Cantonese is the language for you.

Here is your 'head start' to Cantonese grammar. It's not a long, drawn-out, technical explanation of grammar that won't help you speak Cantonese any faster anyway. Instead, it's a quick start that will teach you what you need to know right off the bat to give you a jump-start on Cantonese.

Cantonese Verbs

Maybe one of the best things about Cantonese grammar is that Cantonese verbs are not inflected, meaning that they don't change form. Only one form of each verb exists; there is no conjugation. It doesn't matter who is talking, when they are talking about, or who they are talking to, the verb is the same. Now that is a breath of fresh air for language students!

Word Order

Since there is no conjugation of verbs in Cantonese, it means that other things will tell us the things that verb conjugation normally tells us. In Cantonese, this is something that is very important: word order. It's a pretty big deal, as word order is often your only clue to figuring out who is doing what. In normal Cantonese declarative sentences, proper word order is the same as that used in normal English declarative sentences, being:

subject - verb - object

For Example:

1. 我學廣東話。
ngo5 hok6 gwong2 dung1 waa2.
"I study Cantonese."

Negation of Verbs

Negation occurs before the verb and any prepositional phrase. So, in the above example, to make the sentence negative, you just add a negation word, 唔 (*m4*), in front of the verb.

For Example:

1. 我唔學廣東話。
ngo5 m4 hok6 gwong2 dung1 waa2
"I don't study Cantonese."

Expressing Tense

Now, don't get tense. Usually the thought of verb tenses is enough to warrant an immediate trip to the Cantonese masseuse to calm us down. Relax! Cantonese verbs don't change "tense." Rather, we use time words to indicate whether something will happen tomorrow, is happening now, or happened yesterday. The Cantonese language relies heavily on the use of adverbs to communicate what English and many other languages do with different verb tenses.

Let's take the word "to go" for example-in Cantonese this is '去' (*heoi3*). Rather than messing around with the verb itself, Cantonese just adds adverbs to let you know when an action was, is, or will take place.

For Example:

1. 我去公園。
ngo5 heoi3 gung1 jyun2.
"I go park." (literally)

Now we get the essence of what is going on here, right? I...to go...park. It is the context here that tells us about the time. In Cantonese, it's really easy to make it clear that the events take place in the future...just add a time word. Maybe you will go tomorrow? Then you simply add "tomorrow."

For Example:

1. 聽日我去公園。
ting1 jat6 ngo5 heoi3 gung1 jyun2.
"Tomorrow I go park." (literally)

To emphasize that this is happening now? You just add "now."

For Example:

1. 而家我去公園。
ji4 gaa1 ngo5 heoi3 gung1 jyun2.
"Now I go park." (literally)

And if I went yesterday?

1. 尋日我去公園。
cam4 jat6 ngo5 heoi3 gung1 jyun2.
"Yesterday I went to the park."

Now of course life gets more complicated than this, and there are other ways of expressing tense in Cantonese, such as expressing past experience and such things. These will come later, but we promise they're not much harder than this!

Measure Words / Classifiers

Given that verbs are so easy to handle, you can't hold measure words against the Cantonese. In fact, in English, we sometimes count in units as well; we just don't notice.

For Example:

1. a pair of socks

2. two loaves of bread
3. three cases of beer

In Cantonese, however, we must use these measure or "counting" words when enumerating objects, whether it's just one person or 1.3 billion people.

For Example:

1. 一本書
jat1 bun2 syu1
"one book/a book"
2. 四個朋友
sei3 go3 pang4 jau5
"four friends"
3. 嗰(一)張紙
go2 (jat1) zeong1 zi2
"that (one) piece of paper"

Generally the format is number + measure word + object. When the number is "one," however, it's okay to omit the number.

Note that if you just say 一書 (*jat1 syu1*) or 四朋友 (*sei4 pang4 jau5*) it's incorrect.

The challenge with measure words is that there are a lot of them, and certain ones go with certain nouns. Sometimes they follow a rhyme or reason, like the measure word we learned here, 張 (*zeong1*); it is frequently paired with flat objects. But don't stress: in time, you will get used to the more commonly heard measure words.

And here's a little measure word bonus: there is one measure word used far more than the others. It is 個 (*go3*). It can be your little "measure word crutch" as you can use it for practically everything until you know the more specific measure word. 個 (*go3*) is thus a kind of "fall back" measure word. It's better to use *go3* than nothing at all, so when you're at a loss for a measure word, 個 (*go3*) will often do the trick.

Pronouns

Pronouns are that small class of words found in many languages that are used as replacements or substitutes for nouns and noun phrases. Things like: I, you, he, this, etc. Cantonese has first, second, and third person pronouns. They have singular (I, you, he, she, and it) and plural forms (we, you, and they). We use the same pronouns for subject, object, possession, etc. So the word for 我 (*ngo5*) doesn't change, but it can mean either "I" or "me" depending on its position in the sentence or context. To make a pronoun plural, you simply add the suffix 哋 (*dei6*) to the pronoun.

Gender isn't reflected in the spoken language. However, the written form of the word has a slight difference that tells you if the person referred to is male or female. Here are some of the pronouns in Cantonese:

1. 我 (*ngo5*) - "I"
2. 我哋 (*ngo5 dei6*) - "we," "us"
3. 你 (*nei5*) - "you"
4. 你哋 (*nei5 dei6*) - "you" - plural
5. 佢 (*keoi5*) - "he/she/it"
6. 佢哋 (*keoi5 dei6*) - "they"

Pluralizing Nouns

In the vast majority of situations, nouns in Cantonese don't change when they are plural.