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Top 5 Mistakes to Avoid in Cantonese

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Traditional Chinese

我本書喺邊?
佢係邊個?
你食緊咩啊?
我去咗.
我去過.
我唔食.
我有食。
我唔唱.
我有唱.

Jyutping

ngo5 bun2 syul hai2 bin1?
keoi5 hai6 bin1 go3?
nei5 sik6 gen2 mel a3?
ngo5 heoi3 zo2.
ngo5 heoi3 gwo3.
ngo5 m4 sik6.
ngo5 mou5 sik6.
ngo5 m4 coeng3.
ngo5 mou5 coeng3.

English

Where is my book?
Who is she?
What are you eating?
I went.
I have been before.
I don't eat.
I didn't eat.
I don't sing.
I didn't sing.

Grammar Points

The Focus of This Lesson is Common Errors That Learners of Cantonese Make

Common Error #1: Incorrect Word Order when Forming Questions

English speakers tend to use English word order when forming questions with question words like "what," "where," "who," etc. In English, the question word comes at the beginning of the sentence. Cantonese is different. The question word comes at the end of the sentence.

Correct:

1. 我本書喺邊?
ngo5 bun2 syul hai2 bin1?
"Where is my book?" (Literally, "My book at where?")

Incorrect:

1. 喺邊我本書?
hai2 bin1 ngo5 bun2 syul?
"Where is my book?" (Literally, "At where my book?")

More Examples:

1. 佢係邊個?
keoi5 hai6 bin1 go3?
"Who is she?" (Literally, "She is who?")
2. 你食緊咩啊?
nei5 sik6 gen2 mel a3?
"What are you eating?" (Literally, "You eating what?")

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Common Error #2: Making Verbs Past Tense – Getting the Particles 咗 and 過 Mixed Up

Put in a simple way, we use 咗 for a completed action. We use 過 to indicate previous experience.

For Example:

1. 我去咗.
ngo5 heoi3 zo2.
"I went."
2. 我去過.
ngo5 heoi3 gwo3.
"I have been before."

Common Error #3: Negating Verbs – Getting the 唔 and the 冇 Mixed Up

Put in a simple way, we use the 唔 to negate action verbs in the present or future or when speaking about habitual actions. We use 冇 when the action either did not happen (so past tense) or isn't complete yet.

For Example:

1. 我唔吃.
ngo5 m4 sik6.
"I don't eat."
2. 我冇吃。
ngo5 mou5 sik6.
"I didn't eat."
3. 我唔唱.
ngo5 m4 coeng3.
"I don't sing."
4. 我冇唱.
ngo5 mou5 coeng3.
"I didn't sing."



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Common Error #4: In an Attempt to Be Polite, Using too Many Words

A lot of Cantonese learners, in an attempt to translate what is polite in their own language, end up confusing their Cantonese listener with too many words. The Cantonese are very direct in speech, and it is not considered rude just to state something plainly. There is not a lot of need for extra "pleases" and flowery sort of softening words. Listen to how a Cantonese person who is learning English tends to speak English, and aim to follow that pattern in Cantonese. Then you will sound more "Cantonese-y."

Common Error #5: Being So Afraid about Having a Standard Accent or the Correct Tones That You are too Afraid to Speak

The best remedy for a bad accent or bad tones is more practice. So don't be afraid, just keep talking. You will improve!

