

LESSON NOTES

Pronunciation #3

Cantonese Tone Change Rules

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GRAMMAR

The Focus of This Lesson is an Overview of the Tone-Change Rules in Spoken Cantonese.

Tone Change Rules

Tone change in spoken Cantonese occurs as a result of phonological, morphological, semantic, and grammatical environments. Generally speaking, there are some basic rules or general guidelines on where and how such a change would occur. But those rules are not hard and fast ones, and there are always exceptions to the rules. It is habitual usages that really matter.

Uplifting of Low Tones for Phonological Reasons

The second syllable of a two-syllable compound, if pronounced in a tone of the lower register (tones 3 to 6), would most likely undergo a lifting to tone 1 or 2 in the upper register.

For Example:

1. tones 3, 4, 5, 6 → 1 -- 夠派 [paai3*1], 荷蘭 [laan4*1], 少奶 [naai5*1], 角落 [lok6*1]
2. tones 3, 4, 5, 6 → 2 -- 鞋帶 [daai3*1], 英文 [man4*2], 草蜢 [maang5*2], 笑話 [waa6*2]

The character 一 : When we take the character 一 out from between two identical classifiers, nouns, verbs, adjectives, or adverbs, the first identical character might acquire a tone 2.

For Example:

1. 一個一個 (jat go3 jat go3)
becomes
一個個 (jat go3*2 go3)

2. 試一試 (*si3 jat si3*)
becomes
試試 (*si3*2 si3*)
3. 賣到貴一貴 (*maai dou gwai3 jat gwai3*)
becomes
賣到貴貴 (*maai dou gwai3*2 gwai3*)

The Tone Changes for Morphological Reasons

I. To get a sense of rhythm.

II. Reduplicated kinship terms: the first syllable is dipped to tone 4, while the second syllable is lifted to tone 1 or 2.

For Example:

1. 爸爸 [*ba1*4 ba1*], 哥哥 [*go1*4 go1*]
2. 弟弟 [*dai6*4 dai6*2*], 妹妹 [*mui6*4 mui6*2*]

III. Non-reduplicated kinship terms: most have changed tone on the second syllable only.

For Example:

1. 家姐 [*gaa1 ze2*1*], 姑奶 [*gu1 naai5*1*], 表妹 [*biu1 mui6*2*]

The Tone Changes for Semantical Reasons

The change of tone from lower register to tone 2 will convey a modified meaning from the original.

For Example:

I. Obvious:

1. 相 [soeng3] - "appearance" changes to → [seung3*2] - "photograph"
2. 糖 [tong4] - "sugar" changes to → [tong4*2] - "candy"
3. 皮 [pei4] - "fur" changes to → [pei4*2] - "fur coat"

II. Less obvious:

1. 面 [min6] - "physical 'face'" changes to → [min6*2] - "abstract 'face'"
2. 頭 [tau4] - "head" changes to → [tau4*2] - "boss"
3. 對 [deoi3] - "pair" changes to → [deui3*2] - "couplet"

The Tone Changes for Grammatical Reasons

For many verbs and a few adjectives and classifiers, a modification to tone 2 would also change the words into nouns.

For Example:

I. Objects

1. 鉗 [kim4] "to grip" → [kim4*2] "pincers"
2. 掃 [sou3] "to sweep" → [sou3*2] "broom"
3. 袋 [doi6] "to pocket" → [doi6*2] "a pocket"

II. Humans

1. 販 [faan6] "to peddle" → [faan6*2] "peddler"
2. 犯 [faan6] "commit crime" → [faan6*2] "criminal"

Pronunciation Tip

We reflect the tone changes in the oral pronunciation of the tones only. The written *Jyutping* form still reflects the original tone of the character, so don't get confused!