Ultimate Cantonese Pronunciation Guide S1 #9
Tone Change in Cantonese

 # 9

Hi everyone.

Welcome to The Ultimate Cantonese Pronunciation Guide.

In this lesson, you'll learn about tone changes in Cantonese.

You'll need to be familiar with Cantonese tones before starting this lesson. If you haven't mastered them yet, go back to our previous lesson to learn about the tones in Cantonese.

When two or more characters are next to each other, the original tonal pronunciation of some characters may change.

Jyutping is quite useful for transcribing Cantonese, but it isn't a perfect system. Jyutping only reflects the original tone of a character, so it normally doesn't account for any tone changes. Keep in mind that we'll represent the tone change in Jyutping, but only for demonstration purposes.

Are you ready? Then let's get started!

UPLIFTING OF LOW TONES IN 2 SYLLABLE COMPOUND WORDS

This rule applies to two-syllable compound words, and is by far the most common of all tone change rules.

First, consider these two examples.

角落 (gok3 lok6)

The first character is pronounced with the third tone, a mid tone,

角 (gok3)

while the second is pronounced with the sixth tone, a low tone.

落 (lok6)

These two characters can form a two-syllable compound word, so let's put them together.

角落 (pronounce incorrectly - gok3 lok6)

Unfortunately, this pronunciation is incorrect. If the second character in a two-syllable compound word is a low tone, it will typically be uplifted to one of the higher tones, either tone 1 or 2.

In this scenario, the correct pronunciation for this compound word requires us to change the tone of the second character, from a low tone, tone 6, to a higher tone, tone 1.

角落 (pronounce correctly - gok3 lok1)

What about these two characters?

荷蘭 (ho4 laan1)

Together, they form a compound word.

荷蘭 (incorrectly - ho4 laan4)

Factoring in the tone change rule will give us the correct pronunciation for the word "Holland" in Cantonese.

荷蘭 (pronounce correctly - ho4 laan1)

UPLIFTING OF LOW TONES TO MODIFY MEANING

Tone changes are sometimes made to modify the meaning of concepts that are alike.

咁大 (gam3 daai6)

Changing a low tone to tone 1, can add an inferior quality to the original concept

咁大 (gam3 daai1)

Or sometimes a trivial quality...

靚仔 (leng3 jai2) "handsome guy"

靚仔 (leng1 jai2) "(naughty) teenage boy"

Changing a low tone to a tone 2, will alter the meaning of the original concept slightly.

糖 (tong4) "sugar"

糖 (tong2) "candy"

皮 (pei4) "skin"

皮 (pei2) "leather"

頭 (tau4) "head"

頭 (tau2) "chief"

Familial nouns

Tone changes also occur to familial nouns.

Familial nouns require you to change the tone of both characters.

The first syllable dips to tone 4, while the second syllable is lifted to either tone 1 or 2.

爸爸 (incorrectly - baa1 baa1)

爸爸 (baa4 baa1)

哥哥 (incorrectly - go1 go1)

哥哥 (go4 go1)

弟弟 (incorrectly - dai6 dai6)

弟弟 (dai4 dai2)

妹妹 (incorrectly - mui6 mui6)

妹妹 (mui4 mui2)

CHANGING WORDS INTO NOUNS

And here's the final tone change you'll learn in this lesson.

For many verbs and a few adjectives and classifiers, changing to tone 2 will change the word into a noun.

話 (wa6) - to tell

話 (wa2) - speech

掃 (sou3) - to sweep

掃 (sou2) - broom

犯 (faan6) - to commit a crime

犯 (faan2) - criminal

In this lesson, you learned about tone changes in Cantonese.

In the next lesson, we'll review by testing you on the material that we covered in this series.

Which tone change is the most difficult for you? Please comment and share your thoughts!

See you in the next Ultimate Cantonese Pronunciation Guide lesson!