



Department of
Linguistics and Modern Languages

語言學及現代語言系

Language Variation and Bilingualism in Hong Kong: Insights from Sibilant Production in Cantonese and English

Prof. Jonathan HAVENHILL
The University of Hong Kong

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Venue: Lecture Theatre 4, Lee Shau Kee Building,
The Chinese University of Hong Kong



Abstract

In this talk, I present new articulatory and acoustic data that sheds light on the issues of language acquisition, contact, and change among Cantonese-English bilinguals in Hong Kong. The focus is on the production of the Cantonese sibilants /s, ts, ts^h/ and the English sibilants /s, ʃ, tʃ, dʒ/. Descriptive work has long suggested that Cantonese /s, ts, ts^h/ exhibit vowel-conditioned and/or interspeaker variability, although there remains no consensus on the precise quality of these variants. Earlier experimental work finds some evidence for speaker-specific and vowel-specific variation, but of a gradient rather than categorical nature. In contrast, several sociolinguistic studies propose that younger Cantonese speakers produce distinct alveolar [s, ts, ts^h] vs. alveolo-palatal [ç, tç, tç^h] allophones, ostensibly as a result of contact with English. While the English and Cantonese sibilants exhibit partial phonetic and phonological overlap, the cross-linguistic mapping between the two has not been empirically established, a gap which this work aims to address.

Native Cantonese speakers with varying levels of English proficiency were recorded using high-speed ultrasound tongue imaging along with synchronized audio and lip video. Participants recited a Cantonese word list containing /s, ts, ts^h/ and an English word list containing /s, ʃ, tʃ, dʒ/ in a range of vowel contexts. Dynamic acoustic and articulatory measurements were analyzed using generalized additive mixed models (GAMMs). Vowel height and rounding are both found to influence the place of articulation for L1 Cantonese /s, ts, ts^h/. However, the degree of vocalic influence varies extensively on a speaker-specific and segment-specific (/s/ vs. /ts/ vs. /ts^h/) basis, accounting for disparities between earlier descriptions. Further, discrete allophones for /ts, ts^h/ are observed for some speakers, while contextual variation for /s/ is confirmed to be gradient. Speakers likewise exhibit a range of articulatory strategies in L2 English, particularly depending on whether their L1 variants are categorical or gradient. These findings are considered with respect to their implications for theories of bilingual phonological representation and of contact-induced change. Articulatory study of sociophonetic variables in multilingual communities is necessary not only to understand how speakers categorize the distinctive units of multiple languages, but also to understand how language contact motivates the introduction and spread of new linguistic variants.

Speaker

Dr. Jonathan Havenhill is Assistant Professor of Linguistics at the University of Hong Kong. His work involves the use of laboratory and experimental methods to examine the articulatory, acoustic, and perceptual patterns that underlie language variation and change. Using ultrasound tongue imaging, he has conducted a series of studies investigating interspeaker variability in the production of American English vowel contrasts, including fronted variants of the high back vowels /u, u, o/ and the low back vowels /ɑ, ɔ/. His research interests extend to the role of visual perceptibility in misperception-based sound change and in the use of articulatory methods to account for typologically rare sounds, including occlusivized laterals in Hakka and doubly articulated fricatives in the Bantu languages Setswana and Sebirwa.

All Are Welcome

Enquiries

Department of Linguistics and Modern Languages, CUHK.

Tel: (852)3943 7911 Fax: (852)2603 7755 E-mail: lin@cuhk.edu.hk