

Introduction

Welcome to the Cantonese De-cal!

The Chinese language has many different dialects, Cantonese is one such dialect. It has evolved with time and the addition of new vocabulary and new slang terms. While it is mostly a spoken dialect, newspapers, magazines and other media do make use of the written form of Cantonese, which is made up of a mixture of standard Chinese characters and Cantonese characters. The Cantonese characters, like much of the Chinese written language, are often based on sounds, though not in the way of an alphabet. Cantonese is a tonal language with nine tones, making the differentiation between words often difficult to distinguish to the untrained ear. At the same time, the tonal quality of the language combined with the finite number of pronunciations make this dialect particularly conducive to puns.

Cantonese is widely spoken not only in Guangdong province, but also in Hong Kong and Macau, as well as throughout various Chinese communities in the world. Movies and music in this dialect are a major genre of popular culture particularly in Asian communities. Most notable in this genre dubbed “Canto-pop” are movies and popular music originating from Hong Kong with its own unique character.

Through this De-cal, we hope that you will gain some useful conversational skills and an appreciation for the singular individuality of the Cantonese dialect. Most importantly, we hope that you have an enjoyable experience. Remember, the key to learning a language is confidence and practice; don't be afraid to try out phrases and words learned in class!

Beginning and Intermediate Lessons written by Gary Lee

Pronunciation

The Cantonese pronunciation in this book is romanized using the Yale system, which is one of the main Romanization schemes used for the instruction of Cantonese for foreign students. Below is the layout of the Yale system with the corresponding transcriptions in the International Phonetic Alphabet.

Initial Consonants		Vowels	
Yale	IPA	Yale	IPA
b	p	i	i:
p	ph	yu	e (before ng, k)
m	m	u	y:
f	f	e	u:
d	t	o	o (before ng, k)
t	th	eu	ɛ:
n	n	a (with final)	ɔ:
l	l	a/aa	oe:
g	k	iu	ø (before n, t)
k	kh	eui	ɐ
ng	ŋ	ui	a:
h	h	ei	iw
j	ts	oi	øʷ
ch	tsh	ou	uʷ
s	s	ai	ej
y	j	au	oj
gw	kw	aai	ow
kw	kwh	aaui	ɐj
w	w	aaui	ɐw
			a:j
			a:w

Final Consonants	
Yale	IPA
m	m
n	n
ng	ŋ
p	p
t	t
k	k

Notes: (1) The consonants (except for *ch* and *j*) are identical to their pronunciations in English. (2) The consonant [y] + vowel [yu] → [yu], example: yu 'fish'. (3) The consonants m and ng may also occur as independent syllables.

Tones

Cantonese is a tonal language, which means that a syllable pronounced at different pitches indicates a different word. There are traditionally 9 basic (lexical) tones in Cantonese – 6 distinctive tones and 3 for consonants ending in p, t, or k. In addition, there are contexts in which a word changes its basic tone due to morphological or semantic reasons.

The tones in this book will be marked after the syllable with the numbers 1-6, which denote the respective tones listed in the chart below. Pitch values are based on

the 5-point scale, with 5 being the highest pitch and 1 being the lowest pitch. (Note: For those who may have learned Yale, it traditionally uses accent marks and the letter h instead of numbers; however, this course will use numbers.)

Tones (illustrated with the syllable *si*)

<i>Tone Number</i>	<i>Pitch</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Example Word</i>	<i>English Meaning</i>
1	55	High level	si ¹	Silk
2	35	High rising	si ²	Feces
3	33	Mid level	si ³	To try
4	21	Low level	si ⁴	Time
5	23	Low rising	si ⁵	Market
6	22	Low level	si ⁶	A matter

Tones with p, t, k finals

<i>Tone Number</i>	<i>Pitch</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Example Word</i>	<i>English Meaning</i>
1	5	High level	sik ¹	To know
3	3	Mid level	sit ³	Sit (a surname)
6	2	Low level	sik ⁶	To eat

Changed tones:

Examples:

mun ⁴ 'door'	→	hou ⁶ mun ² 'back door'; chin ⁴ mun ² 'front door'
dip ⁶ 'dish'	→	fei ¹ dip ² 'Frisbee (lit. flying dish)'
geng ³ 'mirror'	→	ngaan ⁵ geng ² 'eyeglasses'
maan ³ 'slow'	→	maan ³ maan ¹ 'slowly (adverb)'

Note: In certain areas such as Guangzhou, there also exists a high-falling tone (53), which is not considered distinct from the Tone 1 (high-level 55), due to free variation among speakers. Therefore, this tone will not be marked in this text.

Pronunciation Variations

Due to ongoing sound change in Cantonese, certain sounds may be pronounced differently depending on speaker. The effect of such changes is leading to the loss of certain sound distinctions. Generally speaking, younger speakers, especially in Hong Kong, tend to have this pronunciation, dubbed "lazy speech". Here is a list of common variations you may encounter:

- 1) Loss of initial *ng-*, example: ngo⁵ 'I' → o⁵
- 2) Initial *n* → l, example: nei⁵ 'you' → lei⁵
- 3) Syllabic *ng* → m, example: ng⁵ 'five' → m⁵ 'five'
- 4) Initial *gw* → *g* before *o* or *u*: gwok³ 'country' → 'gok³', gwo³ 'to pass' → 'go³'
- 5) Final *ng* → *n*, example: saang¹ 'live' → saan¹
- 6) Final *k* → *t*, example: baak³ 'hundred' → baat³

Pronunciation Tips

These tips are meant to be approximations, since actual pronunciation may vary. Remember that Cantonese has dialectal variation*, just as English has dialectal variation. So, even the English used here is not the same with all speakers. Imitating what you hear will be most helpful.

Consonants

Initial consonants are pronounced similarly as they would be in English, with the exception of *j/ch*

Consonants	Sound in English
b	b in <u>bat</u>
p	p in <u>pat</u>
m	m in <u>mat</u>
f	f in <u>fat</u>
d	d in <u>dad</u>
t	t in <u>tack</u>
n	n in <u>no</u>
l	l in <u>low</u>
g	g in <u>game</u>
k	k in <u>kid</u>

Consonants	Sound in English
ng	like ng in <u>sing</u>
h	h in <u>ham</u>
j	ds in <u>dads</u> ; close to j in <u>jeep</u>
ch	ts in <u>rats</u> ; close to ch in <u>cheap</u>
s	s in <u>see</u>
y	y in <u>yes</u>
gw	gu in the name <u>Guam</u>
kw	qu in <u>quite</u> , <u>queen</u>
w	w in <u>wait</u>

Final consonants are also pronounced similarly as they would be in English, that means they aren't released (no puff of air) at the end.

Consonants	Sound in English
p	p in <u>map</u>
t	t in <u>mat</u>
k	k in <u>tick</u>

Consonants	Sound in English
ng	ng in <u>sing</u>
m	m in <u>ram</u>
n	n in <u>soon</u>

Vowels

Vowels are a bit tougher, some sounds are not apparent in English, and some may not exist.

Consonants	Sound in English
i	ee in <u>meet</u>
i (before k ng)	i in <u>tick</u>
yu	like <i>German ii</i> ; make it by rounding ee in meet
u	oo in <u>moon</u>
u (before k, ng)	oo in <u>cook</u>
e	e in <u>end</u>
o	~ o in <i>British Eng</i> <u>pork</u>
ou	ow in <u>row</u>
ai	i in <u>night</u>
aai	i in <u>high</u>
aau	ow in <u>cow</u>

Consonants	Sound in English
eu	~ i in <i>British Eng</i> dirt; make it by rounding e in end
eu before t, n	make it by rounding i in tick
a with final	u in <u>duck</u>
a/aa	a in <u>father</u>
iu	close to <i>English</i> "Eww!" (showing disgust)
eui	-
au	ou in <u>out</u>
ui	-
ei	ey in <u>hey!</u>
oi	oy in <u>boy</u>
ew	-

Pronunciation Practice

Basic Syllables

-a

ba pa ma fa da ta na la ga ka nga ha gwa kwa wa ja cha sa ya

-e

be pe me fe ne le ge ke je che se ye

-i

ni li ji chi si yi

-u

fu gu ku wu

-o

Bo po mo fo do to lo go ko ngo ho gwo wo jo cho so

Finals -p/-t/-k

di dip dit dik

Finals -n/-m vs -ng

din dim san sam sang

Vowels w/multiple pronunciations: -i, -u, -eu Pay attention to bracketed words

si	sip/sit	sim/sin	[sik/sing]
wu	wut	wun	[fuk/fung]
seu	seut	seun	[seuk/seung]

Long vs Short -a: -a/-aa -ai/aa, -au/-aau Long in brackets

sat	[saat]	sang	[saang]	bak	[baak]
sai	[saai]	lap	[laap]	bat	[baat]
jau	[jaau]	kau/gau		[kaau]/[gaau]	

Difficult Vowels

-yu

yu syu jyu jyut tyut syut hyut

-eui

seui jeui keui heui deui teui

-ui

wui gui mui pui bui

-ew

dew jew

Other Vowels

-ou

dou hou mou bei nei sei

-oi

hoi goi noi

-iu

giu miu piu chiu liu

References

Hutton, C., & Bolton, K. (2005). *A Dictionary of Cantonese Slang*. Singapore: Singapore University Press.

Matthews, S., Yip, V. (1994). *Cantonese: A Comprehensive Grammar*. Rutledge: New York.

Numbers

0 Zero	零	ling ⁴	10 Ten	十	sap ⁶
1 One	一	yat ¹	11 Eleven	十一	sap ¹ yat ¹ Lit. <i>ten and one</i>
2 Two	二	yi ⁶	12 Twelve	十二	sap ¹ yi ⁶ Lit. <i>ten and two</i>
3 Three	兩	leung ⁵ (<i>before noun/counter</i>)	20 Twenty	二十	yi ⁶ sap ⁶ Lit. <i>two tens</i>
4 Four	四	sei ⁴		廿	ya ⁶ (<i>colloq short form</i>)
5 Five	五	m ⁵	30 Thirty	三十	saam ¹ sap ⁶ ; sa ¹ a ⁶ <i>colloq</i>
6 Six	六	luk ⁶	100 One Hundred	一百	yat ¹ baak ³
7 Seven	七	chat ¹	1,000 One Thousand	一千	yat ¹ chin ¹
8 Eight	八	baat ³	10,000 Ten thousand	一萬	yat ¹ maan ⁶
9 Nine	零	gau ²		-th	dai ⁶ + (number)
				½ half	bun ³

Numbers from 10 to 99 are formed by multiplying tens, eg. 52 = 5 x 10 + 2

52 fifty two 五十二 m⁵ sap⁶ yi⁶

Short Forms

二十 (20) is commonly pronounced 廿 ya⁶ (or ye⁶) instead of yi⁶ sap⁶, provided it is followed by another number, a measure word, or a noun

十 (10) sap⁶ can be shortened to a⁶ in numbers from 31 to 99, when it is followed by another number or measure word, or a noun.

四十一 (41) sei³ sap⁶ yat¹ or sei³ a⁶ yat¹

Similarly, you can say sa¹ a⁶ for 三十 saam¹ sap⁶ when it is followed by another number, a measure word, or a noun

三十八 (38) saam¹ sap⁶ baat³ or sa¹ a¹ baat³

Numbers and the Tones of Cantonese

Since the tone values of each of the Cantonese Numbers 0-9 are different, they can be used to remember the tones in Cantonese.

Tone	Description	Number w/ corresponding tone
1 st	55 high level	3 – saam¹
2 nd	35 high rising	9 – gau²
3 rd	33 mid level	4 – sei³
4 th	21 low falling	0 – ling⁴
5 th	23 low rising	5 – ng⁵
6 th	22 low level	2 – yi⁶
short tones with -p/-t/-k endings		
1 st	5 high	1 – yat¹
3 rd	3 mid	8 – baat³
6 th	2 low	6 – luk⁶ or 10 – sap⁶

Again, the sequence is **3-9-4-0-5-2**, each representing the tones 1 to 6, and then **1-8-6** for the short tones 1, 3, and 6.

Common Phrases

Hey! wai/wei6 喂	Hello? (on the phone) wai/wei2 喂	Hello (fml.) nei5 hou2 你好
How are you/What's up? dim2 a3? 點呀		
How are you? (fml.) nei5 hou2 ma3? 你好嗎		
How have you been lately? ni1paai4 dim2 a3? 呢排點呀 <i>or</i> jeui3gan6 dim2 a3? 最近點呀?		
How have you been lately? (fml.) ni1paai4/jeui3gan6 gei2 hou2 ma? 呢排/最近幾好嗎		
Good morning jou2san4 早晨	Good night jou2tau2 早啱	
Bye! baai1baai3 拜拜	(fml.) joi3gin3 再見	See you later! chi4di1gin3 遲啲見
See you tomorrow! ting1yat6 gin3 聽日見		
My name is... ngo5 giu3 ____ 我叫 ____		
I'm... years old ngo5 ____ sei3 我...歲		
I'm from... ngo5 hai2 ____ lei4 ga3 我係 ____ 嚟架		
Thank you! m5goi1 唔該 (<i>for a favor/service</i>) do1je6 多謝 (<i>for a gift, huge favors, metaphorically</i>)		
You're welcome m4sai2 haak3hei3 唔使(客氣)		
Have you eaten yet? (a greeting) nei5 sik6 jo2 faan6 mei6 a3? 你食咗飯未呀?		
How do you say __ in Cantonese? __ yung6 gwong2dung1wa2 dim2 gong2 a3? __用廣東話點講呀?		
Do you understand? nei5 ming4 m4 ming4 a3? 你明唔明呀?		
Can you understand (what was said)? nei5 teng1 dak1 ming4 ma3? 你聽得明嗎?		
Sorry! m4hou2 yi3si1/3 唔好意思 (more seriously, at fault) deui3m4jyu6 對唔住		
I don't understand ngo5 m4 ming4 我唔明		
I can't understand (what was said) ngo5 teng1 m4 ming4 我聽唔明		
Any questions? yau5mou5 man6tai4 有冇問題		
Could you speak slower? cheng2 nei5 gong2 maan6 di1 請你講慢啲		
Could you speak louder? cheng2 nei5 gong2 daai6seng1 di1 請你講大聲啲		
Could you say that once again? cheng2 nei5 joi3 gong2 do1 yat1 ci3 請你再講多一次		
Could you please...? cheng2/ma4faan4 nei5.... 請/麻煩你... Please...! m4goi1.! 唔該...!		
Excuse me, I wanna ask... cheng2man6,... 請問,... <i>or</i> m4goi1, ngo5 seung2 man6..., 唔該, 我想問...		

Common Phrases 2

English

Yale Romanization

Characters

[RUNNING INTO A FRIEND...]

What are you up to?	jou ⁶ gan ² mat ¹ ye ⁵ a ³	做緊乜野呀?
Where are you going?	heui ³ bin ¹ dou ⁶ a ³	去邊到呀?
Are you going to class?	nei ⁵ hai ⁶ m ⁴ hai ⁶ heui ³ seung ⁵ tong ⁴ a ³ ?	你係咪去上堂呀?
Are you going home?	nei ⁵ hai ⁶ m ⁴ hai ⁶ faan ¹ uk ¹ kei ² a ³ ?	你係咪返屋企呀?
Do you want to study together?	yat ¹ chai ⁴ wan ¹ syu ¹ hou ² m ⁴ hou ² a ³ ?	一齊溫書好唔好呀?
Let's go grab some dim sum sometime	dak ¹ haan ⁴ cheut ¹ lai ⁴ yam ² cha ⁴	得閒出黎飲茶
Call me!	dak ⁴ haan ⁴ ko ¹ ngo ⁵ / dak ¹ haan ⁴ da ² (din ⁶ wa ⁶) bei ² ngo ⁵	得閒 Call 我/ 得閒打俾我

[COMMENTS & EMERGENCY]

Awesome!	hou ² sai ¹ lei ⁶	好犀利
Put on more clothes (stay warm)	jeuk ³ do ¹ gin ⁶ saam ¹	著多件衫
You look good today	nei ⁵ gam ¹ yat ⁶ hou ² leng ³ wo ³	你今日好靚喎
Hurry up!	faai ³ di ¹ la ¹	快 d 啦
Help!	gau ³ meng ⁶	救命
Where is the nearest restroom?	fu ⁶ gan ⁶ bin ¹ dou ³ yau ⁵ sai ² sau ² gaan ¹ /chi ³ so ² ? 附近邊到有洗手間/廁所	

[BRAGGING ABOUT YOUR CANTO-PROFICIENCY...]

I don't speak Cantonese	ngo ⁵ m ⁴ sik ¹ gong ² gwong ² dung ¹ wa ⁶	我唔識講廣東話
I speak a little Cantonese	ngo ⁵ sik ¹ gong ² siu ² siu ² gwong ² dung ¹ wa ⁶	我識講少少廣東話
I speak Cantonese fluently	ngo ⁵ di ¹ gwong ² dung ¹ wa ⁶ hou ² lau ⁴ lei ⁶ ga ³ !	我 d 廣東話好流利嫁

[SHARING OUR FEELINGS....]

I want to go home	ngo ⁵ seung ² faan ¹ uk ¹ kei ²	我想返屋企
I don't feel well.	ngo ⁵ m ⁴ syu ¹ fuk ⁶	我唔舒服
I am happy	ngo ⁵ hou ² hoi ¹ sam ¹	我好開心
I am unhappy	ngo ⁵ hou ² m ⁴ hoi ¹ sam ¹	我好唔開心
I am angry	ngo ⁵ hou ² nau ¹	我好嬬
I am sleepy	ngo ⁵ hou ² ngaan ⁵ fan ³	我好眼瞓
I want to cry	ngo ⁵ seung ² ham ³	我想喊
I like ___ (sleeping / play video games / a person etc.)	ngo jung ¹ yi ³ ___ (fan ³ gaau ³ /我鍾意 ___ da ² gei ¹ / nei ⁵)	(瞓覺/ 打機/ 你)
I miss _____ (someone e.g. you)	ngo ⁵ hou ² gwa ³ jyu ⁶ _____ (nei ⁵)	我好掛住 _____ (你)

Common Phrases 3

<u>English</u>	<u>Yale Romanization</u>	<u>Characters</u>
[SHOPPING PHRASES]		
How much is it?	gei ² do ¹ chin ⁴ a ³	幾多錢呀?
Cheaper, please?	peng ⁴ di ¹ dak ¹ m ⁴ dak ¹ a ³ ?	平 d 得唔得呀?
So expensive?!	gam ³ gwai ³ ?	咁貴?
Very cheap	hou ² peng ⁴	好平
Is there any other colors?	yau ⁴ mou ⁵ dai ⁶ yi ⁶ (jek ³ / jung ²) ngaan ⁴ sik ¹ a ³ ?	有冇第二(隻/ 種)顏色呀?
What size do you have?	ching ² man ⁶ yau ⁴ mat ¹ ye ⁵ ma ⁵ a ³ ?	請問有乜野碼呀?
Excuse me, where is the fitting room?	m ⁴ goi ¹ , si ³ san ¹ sat ¹ hai ² bin ¹ dou ⁶ a ³ ?	唔該,試身室係邊到呀?

[MEASURE WORD FOR CLOTHING & ACCESSORIES]

Tops (shirt/t-shirt/sweater/jacket/etc.)	gin6	件
Bottoms (dress/skirt/pants/jeans/etc.)	tiu4	條
Accessories (belt/scarf/tie/necklace/underwear)	tiu4	條
Shoes (pair of leather shoes/sandals/boots/high heels)	deui3	對
(if only a single shoe, we use jek3)		
Accessories (socks/gloves/earrings)	deui3	對

[IN THE RESTAURANT]

How many people?	gei ² do ¹ wai ² a ³ ?	幾多位呀?
Table for (# of people), please	m ⁴ goi ¹ (#) wai ²	唔該(#)位
What do you want to eat?	nei ⁵ seung ² sik ⁶ di ¹ mat ¹ ye ⁵ a ³ ?	你想食 d 乜野呀?
It doesn't matter	mou ⁵ so ² wai ⁶	冇所謂
Any recommend dishes?	yau ⁴ mat ¹ ye ⁵ hou ² gai ³ siu ⁶ a ³ ?	有乜野好介紹呀?
I'd like to order...and....	ngo ⁵ seung ² yiu ³ ...tung ⁴ maai ⁴ ...	我想叫...同埋...
May I have a ____?	m ⁴ goi ¹ yat ¹ (go ³) ____.	唔該一(個)____.
Check, please?	m ⁴ goi ¹ maai ⁴ daan ¹	唔該埋單
Let me get the bill	dang ² ngo ⁵ bei ² la ¹	等我俾啦
Don't fight for it (the bill)	m ⁴ hou ² jaang ¹ la ¹	唔好掙啦

[MEASURE WORD FOR FOOD/DRINK]

Bottle	jeun ¹ , ji ¹	樽, 支
Cup, glass	bui ¹	杯
Bowl	wun ²	碗
Dish	dip ⁶	碟
Can	gun ³	罐

[EXPRESSING YOUR FEELING]

Full	baau ²	飽
Hungry	tou ⁵ ngo ⁶	肚餓
Thirsty	hau ² hot ³ / geng ² hot ³	口渴/頸渴

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