Lesson 1: Introductions I

Dialogue 1

Yale Romanization
A: nei⁵ hou¹!
B: nei⁵ hou¹!
A: nei⁵ giu³ mat’ye⁵ meng² a³?
B: ngo⁵ giu³ John. nei⁵ ne¹?
A: ngo⁵ giu³ Mary.

English Translation
A: Hello!
B: Hello!
A: What is your name?
B: My name is John. How about you?
A: My name is Mary.

Vocabulary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Yale Romanization</th>
<th>Part of Speech</th>
<th>English Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>nei⁵</td>
<td>PN</td>
<td>You</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hou²</td>
<td>Adj</td>
<td>good, fine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>giu³</td>
<td>V</td>
<td>to call</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mat’ye⁵</td>
<td>QW</td>
<td>what?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>meng²</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>name</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a³</td>
<td>Part.</td>
<td>[question particle]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ngo⁵</td>
<td>PN</td>
<td>I, me</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>giu³</td>
<td>Part.</td>
<td>[question: what about?]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ne¹</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Dialogue 2

Yale Romanization
Mark: ching’man⁶, nei⁵ gwai³ sing³ a³?
Jenny: ngo⁵ sing³ Chan⁴. nei⁵ ne¹?
Mark: ngo⁵ sing³ Wong⁴. ngo⁵ giu³ Mark. nei⁵ giu³ mat’ye⁵ meng⁶ a³?
Jenny: ngo⁵ giu³ Jenny.

English Translation
Mark: May I ask, what’s your surname?
Jenny: My surname is Chan. And you?
Mark: My surname is Wong. My name is Mark.
What is your name?
Jenny: My name is Jenny.

Vocabulary

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<tr>
<td>ching’man⁶</td>
<td>Expression</td>
<td>May I ask, Excuse me…?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gwai³ sing³</td>
<td>Expression</td>
<td>honorable surname</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sing³</td>
<td>V</td>
<td>to have the surname…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chan⁴, Wong⁴</td>
<td></td>
<td>Chan, Wong (common surnames)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Dialogue 3

Yale Romanization
John: wai⁶ David!
David: wai⁶ John! ni¹ paai⁴ dim² a³?
John: gei² hou² a³, nei⁵ ne¹?
David: m⁴ cho³ a¹.
John: dang⁵ ngo⁵ gaai³ siu⁶-ha⁵, ni¹ go³ hai⁵ ngo⁵ go⁵ pang⁵ yau⁵, Mary.
Mary: nei⁵ hou²!
David: nei⁵ hou²! ngo⁵ hai⁶ a³ David!

English Translation
John: Hey David!
David: Hey John! How have things been going?
John: Pretty good, how about you?
David: Not bad.
John: Allow me to introduce. This is my friend Mary.
Mary: Hi!
David: Hi! I’m David.

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<tr>
<td>wai⁶/wei⁶</td>
<td>Expression</td>
<td>Hey!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ni¹ paai⁴</td>
<td>Time Word</td>
<td>recently; lately</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dim²</td>
<td>QW</td>
<td>how?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
gei^2 (+adj.)  Adv.  quite
m^4  Neg.  not; do not
m^4 ch^o^3  Expression (adj.)  not bad
a^9/a^1  Part.  [statement particle]
dang^2  V (imperative)  Let/Allow...
gaa^i siu^6  V  to introduce
ni^1  Particle  this
go^3  Dem.  measure for person or thing
hai^6  MW  to be
pang^4 yau^5  V  friend
a^3  N  prefix added to names

Supplementary Vocabulary

Yale Romanization  Part of Speech  English Meaning
keui^5  Pronoun  he/she
-dei^6  suffix  plural for pronouns
jeui^3 gan^6  Time Word/Adv  recently; lately
gan^6 paai^2  Time Word  recently; lately
fei seung^4(ji^1)  Adv  extremely
hou^2 (+adj.)  Adv  very
tung^4 hok^6  N  classmate

Grammar

1) Cantonese Word Order
The general word order of Cantonese is Subject-Verb-Object.

ngo^5  giu^3  John
S  V  O
l am  called  John
keui^5  jung^1 yi^3  ping^4 gwo^2
he/she  likes  apples

2) Pronouns

Singular  Plural
1st  ngo^5  I, me  ngo^5 dei^6  We, us
2nd  nei^6  You  nei^6 dei^6  You
3rd  keui^5  He/she/him/her  keui^5 dei^6  They, them

Pronouns in Cantonese do not distinguish masculine and feminine, so gender is determined from context. The plural marker only applies to pronouns and fixed expressions, i.e. yan^5 dei^6 'others'.

3) Question Particles a3 and ne1
The question particle a^3 is used for neutral questions, generally to soften the tone.

nei^5 go^3 pang^4 yau^5 giu^3 mat^1 ye^5 meng^2 a^3?  What is your friend’s name?

The question particle ne^1 is used in follow questions based on previous context (what about…/how about…?), or to indicate a sense of wonder, like when one thinks to oneself.

keui^5 ne^1?  What about him?
gam¹ yat¹ (today) tin¹ hei³ (weather) dim² ne¹?
(I wonder) how’s the weather today?

4) Verb hai⁶
The verb hai⁶ connects nouns and noun phrases, but unlike English, it cannot be used to link a noun and an adjective in a general statement.

ngo⁵ hai⁶ hok⁶ saang¹. I am a student.

*ngo⁵ hai⁶ hou² lek¹ (smart) a³. I (really) am very smart.
(As a general statement, this is ungrammatical. Cases in which is this is grammatical will be introduced later)

5) Adjectives in general
In Cantonese, there are cases in which the adjectives may function as a verb. As such, they do not use the verb to be in forming sentences as English does. However, if they are used in the predicate (the portion of the sentence that contains the verb), then they usually must be preceded by some sort of modifier.

ni¹ go³ hou² gwai³ a³! This one is (very) expensive.

ngo⁵ ni¹ paai⁴ gei² hou²! I’m doing quite well lately.

6) Asking how one is doing
The use of nei⁵ hou² ‘Hello!’ and nei⁵ hou² ma³? ‘How are you doing?’ is typically used between strangers or in a formal polite setting. Between friends and close acquaintances, a speaker will use wai⁶ followed by the person’s name to greet the listener and dim² a³? ‘How are you doing?’

Example:

wai⁶ a³ John! jeui⁶ gan⁶ dim² a³?
Hey John! How have you been doing (recently)?