PRONUNCIATION PROBLEMS DIFFERENT AND SIMILAR AMONG CANTONESE AND MANDARIN SPEAKERS

by Mo-Shuet Lee

Time and again teachers of foreign languages are reminded of the importance of being aware of the difference between languages, for differences constitute learning problems. The advice is certainly wise and sound. However, the same advice should be carried a step further. Teachers of foreign languages should also be reminded of the importance of being aware, if possible of the nature of the native dialects of their students. Different dialects even of the same language create different learning problems. When Chinese students are taught English, they are thought of as one faceless mass. Too often it has been assumed that they invariably have the same difficulties. The assumption is far from being justifiable, for there are many dialects in the Chinese language.

The major modern Chinese dialects may be divided into the following six groups: Mandarin, Wu, Kan-Hakka, Min, Canton and Hsiang. The Mandarin group may be further divided into three sub-groups: Northern, Southern and Southwestern. The Northern subgroup is spoken in Manchuria, north China proper, Sinkiang, Kansu and parts of Hupeh, Anhwei, and Kiangsu provinces. The dialect of Peking is the best-known member of this sub-group. The Southern subgroup is spoken along the lower Yangtze region in parts of the provinces of Anhwei, Kiangsu, and Hupeh. The Southwestern subgroup is spoken in Szechuan, Yunan, Kweichow, and parts of Hupeh and Kwangsi provinces. The Wu group, which includes the dialects of Shanghai, Wenchow, and Soochow, is spoken in Kiangsu, Chekiang, and eastern Kiangsi provinces. The Kan-Hakka group is spoken in southern Kiangsi provinces and parts of Kwangtung provinces. The Min group, which includes the dialects of Foochow, Amoy, and Swatow, is spoken in northern Fukien and eastern Kwantung provinces, Hainan Island, and Leichow Peninsula. The Cantonese group is spoken principally in Kwangtung and Kwangsi provinces. The Hsiang group is spoken principally in Hunan province. Besides these major groups, there are certain isolated dialects spoken in southern Anhwei, Hunan, and northeastern Kwansi provinces (See Shou-Jung Chan, *Elementary Chinese,* 2nd Edition, Stanford: Stanford University Press), p. xiii.) These dialects are quite different from one another and speakers of different dialects may not be able to understand one another at all. If there were not the same written language, there would be little reason why these dialects should not be recognized as different languages—just as French is a different language from Italian or Spanish.

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The interest of this paper lies mainly with Cantonese and Mandarin. This is an attempt to highlight some of the similarities and differences between Cantonese and Mandarin with might in turn have an important effect on the language acquistion process of speakers whose native dialects are Cantonese and Mandarin.

One major difference between Cantonese and Mandarin is that Cantonese has preserved the final consonant -p, -t, -k of ancient Chinese, but Mandarin has dropped them. Both Cantonese and Mandarin have stops in their consonants, but whereas Cantonese has these stops both in the initial and in the final positions of a syllable (these stops are unexploded when in the final position) Mandarin only has them in the initial position. In the final position of a Cantonese

syllable, either a vowel, or a nasal or an unexploded /-p/-t/-k/ may occur. The nasal may be either a bilabial /m/, dental-alveolar /n/ or a dorsal-velar / ŋ /. In the final position of a Mandarin syllable, only a vowel or a nasal may occur. The nasal can only be either a dental-alveolar /n/ or a dorsal-velar / ŋ /. Notice that the bilabial /m/, though active in the initial position of a Mandarin syllable, does not occur in the final position. The /n/ in Mandarin is also considerably further back than the Cantonese dental /n/. The combination within a Cantonese syllable, particularly the nature of the syllable final, tends to give Cantonese a rather harsh and staccato characteristic, as compared with the mellow and soft effect produced by Mandarin. Foreigners have often suggested that Cantonese sounds more like German while Mandarin sounds more like French. Compare the following:

C V		Cantonese			Mandarin		
Stop+ Vowel	/ ta/	打	'to hit'		/ t'a/	打	'to hit'
C V							
Stop +Diphthong	/ tou/	倒	'upside down'		/ tau/	到	'until'
C V C							
Stop+Vowel+Nasal	/ t'im/	添	'to add'				
	/ t'in/	天	'heaven, sky'		/ t'an/	貪	'to be greedy'
	/ t'i /	停	'to stop'•		/ t'a /	湯	'soup'
C V C							
Stop+Vowel+Stop	/ tap/	答	'to answer'				
	/ pat/	八	'eight'				
	/ pak/	百	'hundred'				
C V C							
Nasal+Vowel+Nasal	/ nam/	男	'male'				
	/ nan/	難	'difficult'		/ nan/	男	'male'
	/ man/	蠻	'barbarous'		/ man/	蠻	'barbarous'
	/ ma /	盲	'blind'		/ ma /	忙	'(be) busy'
	/ an/	眼	'eyes'				

Also, a velar nasal /ŋ / occurs both in the initial and final positions of a Cantonese syllable, but it never occurs in the initial position of a Mandarin syllable, only in the final position.

As a result of these differences in the format of a syllable in their own dialects, Cantonese and Mandarin speakers are faced with dissimilar problems when they are trained to master the English language. Since Cantonese speakers are used to having stops in syllable final positions, they have no difficulty in the initial acquisition of the pronunciation of stops in syllable final position in English. However, as the stops in syllable final position in Cantonese are unreleased, it is impossible to produce a voiced-voiceless contrast. Therefore the speakers of Cantonese are conditioned not to perceive or produce this important contrast in English. The habit of the unreleased stop automatically preceded by a short vowel transferred to English produces many homophones: "rope" and "robe" are often pronounced [rop]; "mate" and "maid" are pronounced [met]; "dock" and "dog" are pronounced [dok]. This habit is undoubtedly the most prominent feature of Cantonese English: it characterizes the speech of many and is the hardest to overcome. Others may have better control with the English diphthongs in front of the stops, but nonetheless still show difficulty in perceiving or producing the voiced-voiceless contrast in the syllable final position.

On the other hand, Mandarin speakers are faced with a totally different language habit when they find stops in the syllable final position. As has been explained, stops only occur in the syllable initial position in Mandarin, before a vowel. Their natural reaction to the new language is one of the following two. They either tend to miss out the stops altogether if there are nasals preceding the stops as in "wind" and "bank"—"wind" [wɪnd] resembles [wɪn or [wɪŋ], and "bank" resembles [bæn] or [bæŋ]. Or they add /ə/ to all the stops. For example, they will pronounce "map" [mæp] as [mæpə]; "Jude" [dʒu d] as [dʒu də]; and "coke" [kouk] as [koukə]. When the syllable final is an [m] in English, the Mandarin speakers might substitute it with an [n], e.g. "sum" [səm] as "sun" [sən].

The second major difference between Cantonese and Mandarin is that Cantonese does not have any retroflexed articulation, but Mandarin does. The absence of the retroflexed articulation in Cantonese results in the speakers' inability to perceive the /l—r/ contrast in English as in "loyal", "royal"; "collect", "correct"; "play" and "pray". Even when they can perceive the contrasts, they have difficulty showing the contrasts when they attempt the pairs. The English /r/ is often replaced by an /l/. In this respect, the Mandarin speakers have an advantage. They have retroflexed articulation in their native dialect. For instance, [ˊren] 人 'a man'; [run] 潤 'moist' and [ˊrou] 柔 'soft, gentle'.

Cantonese and Mandarin also differ in that Cantonese has one fricative fewer than Mandarin. Cantonese only has the dental-alveolar fricative /s/; Mandarin has both the dental-alveolar fricative /s/ and the palato-alveolar / /.

Cantonese			Mandarin		
/s/ [sam]	三	'three'			
[san]	山	'hill'	[san]	三	'three'
[sa]	生	'to give birth to: be unfamiliar with'	[sa]	喪	'funeral'
			[an]	山	'hill'
			[a]	商	'commerce, trade'

Consequently, Cantonese speakers encounter difficulty in separating in perception and production such pairs as "see", "she"; "parcel", "partial". "Sugar" [ʃʊgə] is ever so often mispronounced as [sʊ:gə]. Even after perception improves, there is difficulty in articulating these contrasts. Mandarin speakers, naturally, are fortunately spared another burden generally suffered by Cantonese speakers.

In spite of the disparities already described between Cantonese and Mandarin, there is nevertheless some common ground where Cantonese and Mandarin speakers fight the same battle. It has been pointed out that Cantonese has one fricative less than Mandarin, but still there are several more fricatives that English has which both Cantonese and Mandarin do not have. Cantonese has the labio-dental voiceless /f/, dental-alveolar voiceless /s/ and the glottal /h/; Mandarin has the labio-dental voiceless /f/, dental-alveolar voiceless /s/; palato-alveolar voiceless /ʃ/ and the glottal /h/. English, however, has both the voiced and voiceless labio-dental /v/ and /f/; voiced and voiceless interdental /ð/ and /θ/; voiced and voiceless dental-alveolar /z/ and /s/; voiced and voiceless palato-alveolar /ʒ/ and /ʃ/ and also the glottal /h/. Both Cantonese and Mandarin speakers therefore are inclined to replace fricatives in English absent intheir own dialects with those that are present. They often replace /v/ and /θ/ by /f/; and /s, z/—for Cantonese speakers also /ʃ/—by /s/. Because of the dental quality in the Cantonese and Mandarin [t], /ð/ is often replaced by the unaspirated /t/. /ʒ/ is often replaced by a retracted variety of /s/ which

is very close to /s/. Also interesting to notice is that the voiced labio-dental /v/ is not only substituted by its voiceless version of /f/; it is also frequently substituted by the semi-vowel /w/, so that no distinction is preceived or produced between such pairs as "vest", "west"; and "vain", "wane".

Cantonese and Mandarin also share the similarity that they do not have voiced stops in their dialects, such as /b,d,g/ in English. They are aspirated and unaspirated /p,t,k/ instead. With English stops, aspiration is not phonemic, but determined by the phonetic context. In the initial position of a syllable, /p,t,k/ are generally aspirated as in "pin" [p'in], "tin" [t'in], "kin" [k'in] and "akin" [ə k'in]. No aspiration occurs when the voiceless stops /p,t,k/ are preceded by /s/, e.g. "spin" [spin], "sting" [stiŋ] and "skin" [skin]. In Cantonese and Mandarin, the aspiration in /p,t,k/ is phonemic, as shown in the following minimal pairs:

Cantonese				Mandarin			
[p]	/ pi /	兵	'soldier'	/ pa /	幫	'to help'
[p']	/ p' /	拼	'to struggle'	/ p'a /	膀	'swollen'
[t]	/ t /	丁	'a male'	/ ta /	當	'to act as'
[t']	/ t' /	聽	'to hear'	/ t'a /	湯	'soup'
[k]	/ k /	經	'to pass by'	/ ka /	剛	'firm and strong'
[k']	/ k' /	傾	'to incline'	/ k'a /	康	'health'

Since /b,d,g/ do not exist in Cantonese or Mandarin, the speakers often substitute unaspirated /p,t,k/ for these phonemes. The unaspirated /p/ in "spring" [spriŋ] and the voiced /b/ in "bring" [briŋ] are indistinguishable to the Cantonese and Mandarin speakers.

The English dark /l/ is also a common problem for both Cantonese and Mandarin speakers. The English phoneme /l/ has the two allophones of clear [l] and dark [ɬ]. The use of the allophones is determined by the phonetic environment. Clear /l/ is used when /l/ occurs initially or in an intervocalic position, and dark /ɬ/ for final positions or followed by another consonant. The /l/ in Cantonese and Mandarin, on the other hand, is always a clear /l/. It is a sound which does not occur finally in Cantonese or Mandarin. Therefore, the Cantonese speakers and Mandarin speakers often have difficulty in articulating the final /l/'s in English words. They often replace the dark /l/ by a clear /l/ or a variety of /u/ because of the acoustic affinity of [u] and [ɬ], both being produced with the back of the tongue raised towards the velum.

Finally, length and tension are not phonemic in both the Cantonese and Mandarin vowels. Consequently, speakers of both dialects tend to be unable to perceive and recognize the difference between long and short vowels in English. Much too often, they pronounce as homophones the following pairs in English: "fill", "fell"; "sit", "seat"; "wick", "weak".

In summation, it should not be assumed that all Chinese native speakers have the same learning problems with English. Chinese is a language with many dialects and some dialects may differ as much from some other dialect as do some languages from some other language. For example, it is not unusual for Cantonese and Mandarin speakers to converse in English in order to be mutually intelligible. Cantonese and Mandarin are vastly different in several areas, though similar in some others. It is advisable for the teacher of English to be aware of this fact and thus be better quipped to help these students.