

## Morpho-phonological Variation in Cantonese

Zheng-sheng Zhang

San Diego State University

It is a well-known fact that for the same meaning, there are different ways of saying it in Cantonese. This can take the form of the literary and colloquial reading of the same morpheme/character, such as *meng* or *ming* for 名 ‘name’; it can also take the form of different morphemes, such as 不 and 唔 for ‘not’.

Although this phenomenon is quite well-known, it seems not to have received sufficient attention in the linguistic and pedagogical literature. In some textbooks and pedagogical resources, the different variants are not mentioned. In reference dictionaries, there are also discrepancies in the inclusion of the different variants. Some basic issues also seem not to have been addressed. For example, can there be true free variation between the two kinds of readings for some lexical items, as seemed to be suggested by the differences between reference works? Also, between literary and colloquial readings, which has greater distribution in terms of the number of lexical items? Can literary readings undergo change of tone (变音), which seems possible with colloquial readings? Lastly, is there any relationship, in terms of the conditions of occurrence, between the literary-colloquial reading distinction and the alternation between different morphemes/characters for the same meaning, as both are related to the distinction between Cantonese vernacular and standard language?

Furthermore, although the forms of the variants are quite clear, the same cannot be said about the conditions under which the variation occurs. Invoking the formal/literary vs. informal/colloquial distinction clearly cannot adequately account for all cases. As pointed out by Hashimoto 1972, literary reading of a character can well be found in colloquial vocabulary, such as 醒目 *singmuk* ‘smart looking’, where 醒 *sing* has the literary reading (colloquial reading=*seng*). It is not possible to attribute the alternation between 不 vs. 唔 to the distinction between Mandarin vs. Cantonese either, as 不 clearly occurs in colloquial Cantonese words such as 不如. Nor does it seem that the variation can be accounted for by etymological history alone. Some words of seemingly modern (standard language?) origin clearly use the colloquial reading (領 *leng* in 藍領、白領; literary reading=*ling*). While some variation seemed to be lexically determined, for example the reading of 嶺 (*leng* vs. *ling*), in 粉嶺, 調景嶺 and 嶺南, it seems unlikely that lexical marking needs to be appealed to as the last resort in all cases. Some variants seem to be dictated by the type of genre and situation of use. For example, literary readings seem to be used in personal names and song lyrics exclusively.

While providing no definitive answers, the paper will raise a range of questions to highlight the relevant issues, in the hope that more and better accounts will be forthcoming.