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A synchronic and diachronic analysis of potential *dāk* 得 in Cantonese

Abstract: The morpheme *dāk* 得 has a broad range of functions in modern Cantonese, including being used as a particle introducing an adverbial construction, as a particle introducing the so-called ‘potential complement’ (we refer to this as the ‘long potential’) and as a verbal (quasi-)suffix (the ‘short potential’), which indicates that the state of affairs denoted by the verb may happen. In this paper, we first offer a general introduction on *dāk* 得 in modern Cantonese, which we then compare with Mandarin *de* 得 and parallel acquisitive modals in Lao, Vietnamese, and Zhuang, also with a focus on their modal meanings. We will then provide a diachronic overview of Cantonese *dāk* 得 based on a sample of texts from the 19th and early 20th century written in Cantonese by Western scholars, missionaries, and officers. The historical Cantonese data will be analyzed and compared to the development of the cognate morpheme *de* 得 in mainstream Chinese written sources: because of the limited diachronic depth of Cantonese data, this is necessary to delve further into the history of this item and of the related constructions. We will argue that: a. all the contemporary Cantonese (and Mandarin) uses seem to derive from the attainment sense of postverbal *de/dāk* 得; b. the vast majority of possible word order configurations were attested at some point in the recorded history of Chinese, but there appear to be also some patterns which could be specific to Cantonese; c. there seems to be a (partial) structural and semantic split between the ‘short’ potential and the ‘long’ potential; d. the adverbial construction probably had a more straightforward development.

Keywords: Cantonese *dāk* 得; manner complement; negation; potential complement; resultative

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1 Introduction

The morpheme *dāk*¹ 得 is used in modern Cantonese with a broad range of functions: a. as a verb meaning ‘to get’ or ‘to obtain’ but also ‘to be alright, ‘to be OK’; b. as a postverbal particle introducing an adverbial construction indicating manner; c. as a postverbal particle introducing a focalized quantity or duration; d. as a quasi-lexicalized postverbal suffix meaning that the action of the verb is worth doing; e. as an adjectival suffix to denote ‘to be skilled at’; last but not least, f. as a potential particle with different collocations and connotations.

Indeed, in its potential usage *dāk* can appear in various patterns, following or preceding the main predicate: a. it can be a postverbal particle introducing the so-called ‘potential complement’ (hereafter referred to as the ‘long potential’); b. it can be a verbal (quasi-)suffix (the ‘short potential’), indicating that the state of affairs denoted by the verb may happen, or denoting ability, when adverbs like *hóu* 好 or *gēi* 幾 modify the verb; c. it can follow an adjective with the sense of possibility, permission or allowance; d. it can be placed between the existential *yáuh/móuh* 有/冇 and a verb to denote possibility or impossibility; e. it can occasionally appear preverbally, after a preposition, denoting possibility;

The short and especially the long potential *dāk* 得 constructions are quite peculiar because their word order becomes uncommonly fluid when they appear in negative and interrogative phrases, or when an object is added. Furthermore, an in-depth analysis of the earliest texts describing the Cantonese language shows an even more complex situation, with several options for the use of potential *dāk* and the positions of other phrase constituents.

How can this variety be explained synchronically and diachronically, and in relation to other Sinitic and Mainland Southeast Asian Languages? Is this related to the semantics of *dāk* 得? Can anything similar be observed when *dāk* 得 introduces an adverbial construction?

¹ This paper uses the Yale transcription for Cantonese and *Hanyu pinyin* for Mandarin. Tone changes are not marked as they are not relevant for the present study. Traditional Chinese characters are used as a default, but simplified characters are used when required for consistency with the source. The glosses follow the general guidelines of the *Lepizing Glossing Rules*. Additional glosses include: ACQ = acquisitive verb; COLL = collective; DAK = Cantonese *dāk* 得; DE = Mandarin *de* 得; DEL = delimitative; MOD = marker of modification; ORD = ordinal; PRT = particle; SFP = sentence final particle. Elsewhere in the paper and in the tables, we use: A = adjective; C = complement; NEG = negation; O = object; PREP = preposition; V = verb.

In this paper, we will first provide a general introduction on the use and functions of *dāk* 得 in modern Cantonese. We will then offer a comparison with patterns of usage of acquisitive modals in Mandarin and in three other languages belonging to the Mainland Southeast Asian Area (Enfield 2003), namely Lao, Vietnamese, and Zhuang,² also with a focus on the types of modal meaning which may be expressed by means of these constructions. We will then move to the core of the present research, i.e. the historical development of *dāk* 得: we will examine its recorded usages in a selection of texts from the 19th and early 20th century compiled in Cantonese by Western scholars, missionaries, and officials with the assistance of native speakers. The focus will be on the different negation patterns for potential *dāk* 得 (both long and short), on the position of the object and on the interrogative forms. We will then discuss the diachronic data on *dāk* 得 in relation to the history of its cognate *de* 得 in ‘mainstream’ Chinese,³ and we will thus try to reconstruct the historical development of *de/dāk* 得. Based on our diachronic analysis, we will argue that: a. all the contemporary Cantonese (and Mandarin) uses of the particle *de/dāk* 得 seem to derive from its ‘attainment’ sense; b. the vast majority of possible word order configurations were attested at some point in the recorded history of Chinese, but there appear to be also some patterns which could be specific to Cantonese; c. there seems to be a (partial) structural and semantic split between the ‘short’ potential and the ‘long’ potential; d. the adverbial construction apparently had a more straightforward development.

2 *Dāk* 得 in modern Cantonese

The morpheme *dāk* 得 in modern Cantonese has a broad range of lexical meanings and grammatical functions. In this Section, we provide examples for each of its main uses, as described in the literature, based also on consultations with native speakers.

2.1 *Dāk* 得 as a verb

² For the sake of simplicity, here we refer to ‘Zhuang’ in the singular, as a language. However, there is actually no single Zhuang language, but rather a fairly homogeneous cluster of Tai-Kadai varieties which are collectively referred to as ‘Zhuang’ (Luo 2008).

³ Here we use ‘mainstream Chinese’ as a convenience label for the written forms of Chinese until about the early 20th century, when the process of codification of the current written standard began. The adjective ‘mainstream’ is meant to distinguish it from written forms of dialects.

As a verb, *dāk* 得 can be used with the meaning of ‘to get’ (Mandarin *dé* 得), as in the popular sentence (1), or as in (2). It can also mean ‘it is alright’, ‘it’s ok’ (Mandarin *xíng* 行, *chéng* 成), often in tag questions, as in (3):

(1) 阿媽，我 得 咗 啦！

amā, ngóh dāk jó lā!

mom 1SG DAK PRF SFP

‘Mom, I got/made it!’

(2) 啲 難民 得 咗 一 個 怪 病。

dī nàahn mǎhn dāk jó yāt go gwaai bihng.

CLF refugee DAK PRF one CLF strange disease

‘The refugees have got a strange disease.’

(Tang 2002: 266)

(3) 你 考試 得 唔 得？

néh háausih dāk m̃h dāk?

2SG take.exam okay NEG okay

‘Was your exam ok?’

(Matthews and Yip 2011: 279)

2.2 *Dāk* 得 to introduce manner

Dāk 得 can also be used as a postverbal particle introducing an adverbial construction indicating manner. This is what Cheung (2007: 131) calls *mùhsé bóuyúh* 描寫補語 ‘descriptive complement’ (Mandarin *zhuàngtài bǔyǔ* 狀態補語 ‘state complement’). In this case, *dāk* is followed by an adjective or an adjectival phrase or a verb + complement:

(4) 嗰 啲 先生 教 得 幾 好 啲。

gó dī sīnsāang gaau dāk géi hóu wo.

those CLF teacher teach DAK quite well SFP

‘Those teachers teach pretty well.’

(Matthews and Yip 2011: 204)

2.3 *Dāk* 得 to introduce a focalized quantity or duration

In postverbal position, *dāk* 得 can introduce a focalized quantity or a duration meaning ‘only’:

(5) 朵 花 紅 得 兩 日。

dó fāa hùhng dāk léuhng yaht.

CLF flower red DAK two day

‘The flower was red only for two days.’

(Tang 2002: 274)

2.4 *Dāk* 得 as verbal suffix

As a quasi-lexicalized postverbal suffix, *dāk* 得 indicates that the action of the verb is worth doing:

(6) 呢 部 電影 都 幾 睇 得。

nī bouh dihnyíng dōu géi tái dāk.

this CLF movie also quite watch DAK

‘This movie is also worth watching.’

(Cheung et al. 2018: 95)

2.5 *Dāk* 得 as an adjectival suffix

In modern Hong Kong Cantonese, it is quite popular to find *dāk* 得 after an adjective preceded by the adverb *hóu* 好, in the pattern 好 + A + 得 (+ O) to convey the meaning of ‘to be good at, to be skilled at’ or, in case of inanimate subjects, ‘to possess the necessary attributes for’, as in: *hóu yíht dāk* 好熱得 ‘good at standing the heat’; *hóu dong dāk* 好凍得 ‘good at enduring the cold’; *hóu ngoh dāk* 好餓得 ‘good at sustaining hunger’. The negative counterpart is *mhhaih* 唔係 + 好 + A + 得 (Chiu 2010: 190–191).

2.6 *Dāk* 得 as a potential marker

As pointed out in the Introduction, *dāk* 得 can have a potential function, which is the focus of the present study. Potential *dāk* 得 can be found after a verb, an adjective, a preposition, or an existential expression. It can be followed by a complement or not. In the negative and interrogative form or when an object is present, more than one pattern is possible, and this is often related with its semantic connotations.

2.6.1 *Dāk* 得 in the long potential

Dāk 得 can be used as a postverbal particle introducing the so-called *nàhngsing bóuyúh* 能性補語 ‘potential complement’ (Mandarin *kěnéng bǔyǔ* 可能補語) in a structure referred to as ‘long potential’. It means that ‘it is possible to do something’, or in the negative form that ‘something cannot be done’. Therefore, it implies possibility (sometimes ability) but never permission, unlike the ‘short potential’. The basic pattern for the long potential is V + 得/唔 + C:

- (7) 食 得 飽 / 食 唔 飽。
sihk dāk báau / sihk m̃h báau.
eat DAK full eat NEG full
‘Can eat to satisfaction/ cannot eat to satisfaction.’

- (8) 行 得 入 去 / 行 唔 入 去。
Hàhng dāk yahp heui / hàhng m̃h yahp heui.
walk DAK enter go walk NEG enter go
‘Can go in /cannot go in.’
(Cheung 2007: 126)

However the negative form can also follow a different pattern: 唔 + V + 得 + C, which can either convey the meaning of impossibility as in (9), or can indicate prohibition (Mandarin *bù kěyǐ* 不可以) as in (10).

(9) 唔 食 得 飽。
m̄h sihk dāk báau.
 NEG eat DAK full
 ‘Cannot eat to satisfaction.’

(10) 唔 出 得 去!
m̄h chēut dāk heui!
 NEG exit DAK go
 ‘(You) can’t go out!’

According to Yang (2005: 321–322) in examples like (9) the negation refers to the entire structure V + 得 + C; whereas in (7) and (8) the negation refers mainly to the complement.

Another (nowadays rarer) pattern is V + 唔 + 得 + C for impossibility, as in (11):

(11) 瞓 唔 得 着。
fan m̄h dāk jeuhk.
 sleep NEG DAK succeed
 ‘Can’t fall asleep.’
 (Cheung 2007: 126)

In the long potential, the object can either follow the complement, as in (12), or it can be topicalized, as in (13). However, in the negative form there is also an alternative word order when the object is a personal pronoun and can be placed between the verb and the negative V + O + 唔 + C, as in (14):

(12) 你 一 個 人 湊 唔 掂 三 個 仔。
néih yāt go yàhn chau m̄h dihm sāam go jái.
 2SG one CLF person care NEG manage three CLF child
 ‘You can’t manage three children by yourself.’
 (Matthews and Yip 2011: 282)

(13) 呢 啲 資料 唔 信 得 過。
nī dī jīliu m̄h seun dāk gwo.

this CLF data NEG believe DAK pass

‘These data cannot be trusted.’

(Matthews and Yip 2011: 278)

- (14) 我 叫 佢 唔 醒。
ngóh giu kéuih m̀h séng.
1SG call 3SG NEG awake
‘I can’t wake him up.’

(Matthews and Yip 2011: 282)

The interrogative form can either simply have a sentence final particle, like for example *a* 呀 or an interrogative pronoun, or can present the pattern V + 唔 + V + 得 + C in the affirmative-negative form, as in (15). The Mandarin counterpart V + 得 + C + V + 唔 + C is reported as not in use by Cheung (2007: 26), although it can be found in the earlier *Cantonese Primer* by Chao (1947: 59). The interrogative can have the negative *meih* 未 at the end.

- (15) 你 買 唔 買 得 起 先?
néih máaih m̀h máaih dāk héi sīn?
2SG buy NEG buy DAK rise first
‘But can you afford it?’

(Matthews and Yip 2011: 278)

- (16) 入 得 嚟 未 呀?
yap dāk làih meih a?
enter DAK come NEG SFP

‘Can I come in yet?’

(Matthews and Yip 2011: 277)

2.6.2 *Dāk* 得 in the short potential

Dāk 得 can also be used as a predicate (quasi-)suffix (or ‘root modal’ as in Cheng and Sybesma 2004: 2), indicating that the state of affairs denoted by the predicate may happen (permission) as in

(17). However, pending on the context, it can also denote possibility/ability, as in (18). It is mainly used after a verb, V + 得, although the predicate can also be an adjective, A + 得 (see further on).

- (17) 佢 搵得 呢 架 車。
kéuih jāa-dāknī gaa chē.
 3SG drive-DAK this CLF car
 ‘S/he can [is permitted to] drive this car.’
 (Cheng and Sybesma 2004: 2)

- (18) 呢 個 人, 唔 玩 得。
nī go yàhn, m̃h wáan dāk.
 this CLF person NEG have.fun DAK
 ‘This person can’t enjoy himself.’
 (Cheung 2007: 127)

The Mandarin equivalent would be the preverbal modals *néng* 能 and *kěyǐ* 可以. A trace of post-verbal *dāk* 得 in Mandarin can be found in verb compounds like *rènde* 認得 ‘to recognize’, *jìde* 記得 ‘to remember’, etc. with their negative form being either *rèn bù de* 認不得 ‘can’t recognize’, *jì bù de* 記不得 ‘can’t remember’ or *bù rènde* 不認得 ‘can’t recognize’, *bù jìde* 不記得 ‘can’t remember’. However, here *de* is practically lexicalized and has lost its potential meaning (Cheung 2007: 127; Tang 2005: 319–320).

As for the negative form of the short potential, with or without object, the pattern is usually NEG + V + 得 (+ O):

- (19) 佢 唔 駕 得 呢 架 車。
kéuih m̃h ga dāk nī ga chē.
 3SG NEG drive DAK this CLF car
 ‘S/he cannot drive this car.’
 (Cheng and Sybesma 2004: 3)

In the Cantonese communities of Singapore and Malaysia, it is also possible to hear the negative form: NEG + 得 + V. This would be the negation of an earlier preverbal *dāk* 得 that was already

used for several centuries BC (Cheng and Sybesma 2004: 5; Wang 1980: 370) and was still quite common in the 19th century (see Section 3).

When *dāk* 得 is added to a transitive verb it can also indicate feasibility, “yielding an effect like the morpheme *-able* in the English *doable*” (Sybesma 2008: 29). However, the negative form in this case takes the pattern V + NEG + 得:

- (20) 個 蘋果 食 (唔) 得。
go pihnggwó sihk (m̃h) dāk.
 CLF apple eat (NEG) DAK
 ‘This apple is (in)edible.’
 (Sybesma 2008: 31)

When adverbs like *hóu* 好 or *géi* 幾 modify the verb, postverbal *dāk* 得 can also denote ability:

- (21) 呢 個 女仔 好 打 得 㗎。
nī go néuihjái hóu dá dāk ga.
 this CLF girl very fight DAK SFP
 ‘This girl really knows how to fight.’

The alternative affirmative-negative form for the short potential is V + 唔 + V + 得 or V + 得 + 未, denoting either possibility or permission, depending on the context:

- (22) 食 唔 食 得 呀?
sihk m̃h sihk dāk a?
 eat NEG eat DAK SFP
 ‘Can we eat (or not)?’
 (Cheung 2007: 28)

- (23) 食 得 飯 未?
sihk dāk faahn meih?
 eat DAK food NEG
 ‘Can we eat yet?’
 (Cheung 2007: 28)

2.6.3 *Dāk* 得 after an adjective

Modern Cantonese can have both the long and the short potential *dāk* 得 construction placed after an adjective to indicate possibility. In this construction the adjectives do not denote state but ‘process/change’. So, for example, *hóu dāk* 好得 would mean ‘can get better’ and its negative counterpart *mh hóu dāk* 唔好得 means ‘cannot get better’. An example of long potential could be *hóu dāk fāan* 好得返 ‘can recover’. According to Chiu (2010), unlike in the past (see Section 4), it is also possible today to have potential *dāk* 得 after an adjective in predicative position with a sense of allowance (*wáhnhéui* 允許) or permission (*hóyíh* 可以), while its negation indicates prohibition (like Mandarin *bié* 別).

The affirmative pattern is A + 得 (+ C) and the negative is NEG + A + 得 (+ C):

- (24) A: 啲 湯 熱 得 翻 (佢) 未?
A: *dī tōng yíht dāk fāan (kéuih) meih?*
A: CLF soup hot DAK turn (3SG) NEG
B: 熱 得 翻 (佢) 啦。
B: *díht dāk fāan (kéuih) lāa.*
B: hot DAK turn (3SG) SFP
‘A: Is it possible to warm up the soup? B: Yes, it is.’
(Chiu 2010: 189)

- (25) 唔 濕 得 佢。
mh sāp dāk kéuih.
NEG wet DAK 3SG
‘Don’t make it wet.’
(Chiu 2010: 189)

2.6.4 *Dāk* 得 – preverbal uses

Lastly, *dāk* 得 may be found before the main verb in two circumstances: 1. when placed between the existential *yáuh* 有 or its negative counterpart *móuh* 冇 and the predicate (26) or 2. after a preposition (27). In both cases it denotes possibility or impossibility:

(26) 就嚟 有 得 食 喇。
jauhlàih yáuh dāk sihk la.
soon exist DAK eat SFP
‘(We) can eat [get to eat] soon.’
(Matthews and Yip 2011: 280)

(27) 我 唔 同 得 你 結婚。
ngóh m̀h t̀hng dāk néih gitfān.
1SG NEG with DAK you marry
‘I can’t marry you.’
(Matthews and Yip 2011: 71)

The potential uses of *dāk* 得 can be summarized as in Table 1. Please notice that the table does not include the very common option of having the object in topic position, unless it is the only option. The rare forms are preceded by an asterisk. NEG is used when more than one adverb of negation is acceptable in that position.

Table 1: Patterns for potential *dāk* 得 in modern Cantonese.

Affirmative form	Affirmative + O	Negative form	Negative form + O	Interrogative	Interrogative + object
V + 得	V + 得 + O	NEG + V + 得	NEG + V + 得 + O	V + 唔 + V + 得	V + 唔 + V + 得 + O
		V + NEG + 得	O + V + NEG + 得	V + 得 + 未	V + 得 + O + 未
		*NEG + 得 + V			
V + 得 + C	V + 得 + C + O	V + 唔 + C	V + 唔 + C + O	V + 唔 + V + 得 + C	V + 唔 + V + 得 + C + O
		NEG + V + 得 + C	V + O + 唔 + C	V + 得 + C + 未	V + 得 + C + O + 未
		*V + 唔 + 得 + C			
A + 得	A + 得 + O	NEG + A + 得	NEG + A + 得 + O	A + 唔 + A + 得	A + 唔 + A + 得 + O
				A + 得 + 未	A + 得 + O + 未
A + 得 + C	A + 得 + C + O	NEG + A + 得 + C	NEG + A + 得 + C + O	A + 唔 + A + 得 + C	A + 唔 + A + 得 + C + O
				A + 得 + C + 未	A + 得 + C + O + 未
有得 + V	有得 + V + O	冇得 + V	冇得 + V + O	有冇得 + V	有冇得 + V + O

PREP + 得		NEG + PREP + 得		PREP + 唔 + PREP + 得	
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3 *Dāk* 得, *de* 得 and acquisitive modals in MSEA languages

As touched on in the introduction, many of the uses of *dāk* 得 in Cantonese discussed in this paper are found also in other Sinitic and non-Sinitic languages in the region. Indeed, *dāk* 得 is part of an areal cluster of ‘acquisitive’ modals, i.e. modals deriving from a verb meaning ‘to acquire, get, come to have’ (van der Auwera et al. 2009), which spans over most of China and Mainland Southeast Asia (henceforth: MSEA; Enfield 2003; Sparvoli 2017; Sybesma 2008). As pointed out by Enfield (2001: 268):

[m]ost languages of MSEA have one verb-like morpheme which shows a strikingly similar and overlapping range of lexical and grammatical functions: a transitive verb ‘come to have’; a preverbal modal/aspectual marker (typically ‘get to’, or ‘have to’); a postverbal modal/aspectual marker (typically ‘potential’ or ‘completive’); a marker of complex descriptive complement constructions such as resultative, adverbial, and potential expressions. I refer to this element as ACQUIRE.

Due to historical reasons, Cantonese is one of the Sinitic languages which has the closest resemblances with Tai-Kadai and other languages of the MSEA region (see e.g. Ansaldo 2010; Bauer and Matthews 2017, among others). Thus, when we discuss Cantonese, we must always take into consideration both intra-familial connections with other Sinitic languages and areal connections, as both contributed to shaping the language. In this Section, we compare Cantonese *dāk* 得 with its Standard Mandarin Chinese cognate *de* 得 and with parallel acquisitive verbs in some representative non-Sinitic MSEA languages: namely, Lao, Vietnamese and Zhuang (following Enfield 2001; Sybesma 2008).

3.1 Cantonese *dāk* 得 vs. Mandarin *de* 得

Mandarin is the standardized variety which emerged from the mainstream Chinese literary tradition which we are going to discuss in the second part of this paper (Section 5). In Section 2, we already

highlighted some of the main differences between *dāk* 得 and *de* 得: here we shall propose a summary, and we shall elaborate further on their differences.

First of all, both *dāk* 得 and *de* 得 can be used as independent verbs meaning ‘to get, to obtain’ (although in Mandarin the verb bears the second tone, *dé*), but their syntax and semantics are somewhat different: for instance, while a sentence as (2) would use *dé* 得 in Mandarin, this is not the case for (3), as already pointed out in Section 2.1. In their use in the manner construction (Section 2.2), *dāk* 得 and *de* 得 have pretty much the same behaviour in the two varieties, in terms of the types of complements allowed and word order; when negated, both in Cantonese and in Mandarin the negator (*mh* 唔 and 不 *bù*, respectively) is located between *dāk/de* 得 and the complement.

However, the other uses of *dāk* 得 introduced in Sections 2.3–2.5, including marking focalized quantity or duration, indicating that the action of the verb is worth doing, and conveying the meaning ‘to be good at, to be skilled at’, are unavailable for Mandarin *de* 得. Generally speaking, postverbal uses of *de* 得 in Modern Mandarin seem to be lexicalized and unproductive, i.e. there appears to be no synchronically productive pattern in which *de* is found on the right side of a verb or adjective, which is different from Cantonese. This entails that the Cantonese short potential construction does not exist as such in Modern Mandarin. As already pointed out earlier (Section 2.6.2), there are remnants of a postverbal bound *de* 得 in some verb compounds as *rènde* 認得 ‘to recognize’ and *jìde* 記得 ‘to remember’, in which *de* 得 has no potential meaning. Also, it is sometimes possible to add *de* 得 to certain verbs and actually obtain a potential reading, especially in the negative form 不得 *bude* (web example):⁴

- (28) 这 种 交 易 做 不 得。
zhè zhǒng jiāoyì zuò bu de.
this CLF transaction do NEG DE
‘This transaction cannot be completed.’

From the semantic point of view, this construction may convey feasibility (compare [20] above). As already pointed out in Chao (1968: 454–457), this is not allowed with just any verb; moreover, some of these constructions develop lexicalized meanings (as seen in Section 2). The fact that this

⁴ <https://www.audit.gov.cn/n6/n40/n1546/c103311/content.html> (last access: 25/2/2022).

pattern is not fully productive is proven also by the fact that some of the positive forms do not exist at all, while others are created as backformations from the negative form.

As for the long potential construction, despite the use of a cognate particle (*de/dāk*) and the surface similarity of some patterns, there are several crucial differences between the two, mainly (but not exclusively) concerning word order and negation patterns. As a matter of fact, Mandarin allows only one possible word order in the potential construction, both in the affirmative and in the negative form, which is identical to the ‘basic’ Cantonese pattern (except for the choice of the negator) shown in (7):

- (29) 吃 得 飽 / 吃 不 飽。
chī de bǎo / chī bù bǎo.
 eat DE full eat NEG full
 ‘Can eat to satisfaction/ cannot eat to satisfaction.’

This also entails a difference in terms of scope: just as in the parallel Cantonese construction, here only the result is negated. As said earlier (Section 2), the other option available in Cantonese, namely placing the negator before the verb, implies that the whole verb complement construction is negated. Note that the difference lies also in the semantics of the construction: while in Mandarin what is negated is always the possibility of obtaining a certain result state, in Cantonese, if the negator is placed before the verb, the whole construction may convey a sense of (negated) permission, rather than possibility, as shown in (10). As pointed out in Section 2, the Cantonese short potential construction may also be used to convey both the sense of ‘permission’ (17) and that of ‘possibility/ability’ (18): in Mandarin, normally, specific modals are needed to convey the latter (but cf. below).

The position of the object in the potential construction is also more constrained in Mandarin than in Cantonese. While, as said earlier, in the latter the object may be placed either after the complement (12) or, if the object is a personal pronoun, between the verb and the negator in the negative form of the construction (14), in Modern Mandarin only the first order is allowed (constructed example):

- (30) 我 搬不動 這 個 東西。
wǒ bān-bù-dòng zhè gè dōngxi.
 1SG move-NEG-move this CLF thing

‘I can’t move this thing.’

Again, the situation with respect to this parameter was different in earlier stages of the language, as we shall see in the next Section.

The preverbal uses of *dāk* 得 introduced above (in [26] and [27]) are also generally unavailable for Mandarin *de* 得. However, *dé* 得, in the second tone, can be used in Mandarin in the negative form (*bùdé* 不得, but not the same as the toneless complement *bude* 不得 seen above) to negate permission or, in some cases, probability (but not possibility; constructed example):

- (31) 所有 的 訪客 不 得 入 內。
suǒyǒu de fǎngkè bù dé rù nèi.
all MOD visitor NEG can enter inside
‘No visitors allowed (lit. ‘all visitors cannot go inside’).’

It is important to stress that this is formal usage, generally found in writing (often, in legal language; Chao 1968: 741) and mostly limited to the negative polarity: as said before, permission is usually conveyed in Mandarin by specific modals. However, Mandarin also has a modal verb, *děi* 得, which is sometimes seen as another phonetic realization of *de/dé* 得 (Sun 1996: 130), or as etymologically related to it (Chao 1968: 742): it expresses obligation, or also strong possibility (epistemic). This does not match any of the Cantonese functions for preverbal *dāk* 得.

Lastly, Mandarin *de* 得 is used also in the so-called extent(/result) complement construction, expressing ‘the extent reached by the action (or state)’ (Lamarre 2004: 85–86; see also Yue-Hashimoto 1993):

- (32) 吵 得 人家 睡 不 着。
chǎo de rénjiā shuì bù zháo.
make.noise DE people sleep NEG RES
‘Make so much noise that others cannot sleep.’

In the same construction, Cantonese rather uses the particle *dou* 到 (arguably related to the verb *dou* 到 ‘to arrive; until’; Matthews and Yip 2011: 175).

Thus, to sum up, the usages of *dāk* 得 in Cantonese seem to be much more varied than those of *de* 得 (and *dé* 得) in Modern Mandarin. While nearly all the Mandarin patterns appear to be allowed in Cantonese, the opposite clearly does not hold: Cantonese shows considerable variation in word order patterns (especially in negated constructions) and the range of modal (and non-modal) meanings which may be conveyed is broader. Indeed, *de* 得 in Mandarin is nowadays productively used virtually only to express possibility (i.e. a potential *sensu strictu*), and the related verb *dé* 得 is used as a defective modal in limited contexts to express permission. Also, *děi* 得 may express obligation, or epistemic possibility.

3.2 A comparison with acquisitive modals in MSEA languages

A comparison between *dāk* 得 and other acquisitive modals in MSEA languages has been carried out by Enfield (2001), Sybesma (2008) and Sparvoli (2017). Sybesma (2008) analyses the use of acquisitive verbs in Zhuang (a Tai-Kadai language of China), Cantonese, Vietnamese (Austro-Asiatic) and Lao (Tai-Kadai); Enfield (2001) also includes Standard Mandarin and Southwestern Mandarin, but not Vietnamese, in his comparison. Enfield (2001) and Sybesma (2008) use somewhat different category labels and distinctions, but their results are comparable. Based on their taxonomy and analysis, and also on the categories we used in the previous section, we identified as many as nine distinct constructions for acquisitive modals (besides their lexical use as verbs meaning ‘to acquire’; see [1] and [2]):

- a. The preverbal modal construction
- b. The manner construction
- c. The extent construction
- d. The long potential construction
- e. The short potential construction
- f. The ‘feasible’ short potential construction (with preverbal object)
- g. The ‘okay’ construction
- h. The quantity/duration complement
- i. The aspectual achievement marker

As for the preverbal modal construction, Sybesma (2008) identifies the functions of conveying deontic modality, an ‘aspect-like’ (result of prior event) reading, and a benefactive passive reading.

The Mandarin modal *děi* 得 is in line with the use of acquisitive modals e.g. in Lao to express deontic obligation; however, the best match is Cantonese preverbal *dāk* 得 when used to mean ‘to get to’ which, as already mentioned earlier (26), falls within the semantic category ‘result of prior event’ (“expressing that the event denoted by the verb it precedes can only have come about due to a prior other event”; Sybesma 2008: 231). This usage is found in Vietnamese, Lao, and Zhuang, but not for Mandarin *děi* 得. The manner construction involves the use of an acquisitive modal for all the languages considered, whereas for the extent construction Cantonese (as said in the previous section) and Lao both use a morpheme meaning ‘until’, unlike Vietnamese and Zhuang (and Mandarin; see [32]).

Constructions d., e., f., and g. are the most relevant for our discussion, as they fall within the scope of the *stricto sensu* potential meaning of acquisitive modals. Sybesma (2008) introduces a more fine-grained semantic typology for postverbal acquisitive markers, distinguishing the ‘potential proper’ (i.e. non-epistemic, circumstantial possibility; see Sparvoli [2017: 40–41, 43] and cf. Table 3) reading, the feasibility reading, the ability reading, and the ‘okay’ reading, as in (33) (Zhuang example; see also [3]):

- (33) *De gangj vah Yeznanz hix ndaej.*
 3SG speak language Vietnam also ACQ
 ‘He can also speak Vietnamese (= that he speaks Vietnamese is also okay).’
 (Sybesma 2008: 246)

However, note that in the ‘okay’ reading the acquisitive item acts as the main verb, and may not be regarded as a modal (Sybesma 2008), thus falling outside the scope of the ‘family’ of potential constructions.

The possibility reading is found in the equivalent of the long potential construction, at least in Cantonese (see [7]–[9]) and Zhuang. In Lao, the acquisitive modal *daj4* usually appears at the end of the sentence, and it mostly accepts the ability and the ‘okay’ reading; a potential reading is available when the predicate is telic, but not in the same construction as the long potential, as *daj4* is most naturally found in the sentence-final position (although the verb - *daj4* - complement construction is not impossible; see Sybesma 2008: 250). Indeed, while in Lao, as well as in Vietnamese, the sentence-final position is perfectly normal for the acquisitive modal, in Zhuang, just as in Cantonese, the acquisitive modal is normally adjacent to the verb (although the negator may appear between verb and modal).

According to Sybesma (2008), among the languages of his sample, only Lao and Vietnamese also accept the ability reading for postverbal acquisitive modals (and Zhuang makes limited use of *ndaej* to express ability; see Sybesma 2008: 245). In Section 2.6.2, we distinguished between two possible (sub-)constructions which fall under the general label of the short potential in Cantonese: the one indicating permission, exemplified in (17), and the one indicating that something is feasible (20), which follows a different negation pattern. Zhuang, Lao and Vietnamese appear to have the latter construction: interestingly, in the negative form of the equivalent constructions in Zhuang and Lao, the negator is also placed between the verb and the acquisitive modal (see [28] and [29] in Sybesma 2008: 240). Note, again, that the Lao construction is not structurally equivalent to the Cantonese short potential, since *daj4* is located in the sentence final position; Vietnamese is somehow in between Cantonese (and Zhuang) and Lao, since different orders are possible (Sybesma 2008: 254). Also, we believe that an ability reading is possible too for the Cantonese potential, as argued above (Section 2.6.2 [18], [21]).⁵

In the ‘feasible’ construction, the (logical) object of the transitive verb is normally treated as a topic, and as such it is placed before the verb (just as in Cantonese; see [20]). Deontic (permission) meaning may also be expressed by acquisitive verbs in Zhuang, Lao and Vietnamese; however, in these languages the modal is placed in the preverbal position. Also note that, according to Sybesma

⁵ Sybesma (2008) does provide Cantonese (and Zhuang) examples with *dāk* 得 having an ability reading. However, he suggests that this ability reading is in fact derived from the potential meaning:

- (i) 佢 跳 得。
kéuih tiu dāk.
 3SG jump DAK
 ‘S/he can jump.’

(adapted from Sybesma 2008: 255)

According to Sybesma’s analysis, *tiu* 跳 in (i) has no overtly expressed result, but “it does have a typical, projected end point: up in the air” (Sybesma 2008: 255–256). Hence, in Sybesma’s view, the ability reading derives from the potential reading, even though the projected result is only implicit: in other words, he sees those cases as ‘shortened’ versions of the long potential, pointing out that (i) could be turned into a potential construction by adding a complement, without any relevant changes in meaning. However, such an analysis seems untenable for sentences like (18): here, there appears to be no implicit endpoint for the verb *wáan* 玩 ‘to have fun’ (compare [21]). Thus, we suggest that Sybesma’s (2008) claim could be reformulated as such: for the Cantonese short potential, the permission reading is always available, while the ability reading is not the default reading, and depends on the context.

(2008: 233), *ndaej* is used in Zhuang almost only to express permission denial, in the negative form.⁶

Sybesma suggests that there is an ‘achievement flavour’ whenever *được* appears between the verb and a quantity expression in Vietnamese, as in (34):

- (34) *tôi ăn được bốn bát cơm.*
1SG eat ACQ four bowl rice
‘I can eat four bowls of rice.’
(Sybesma 2008: 254)

This achievement sense is not available for Cantonese *dāk* 得 in the short potential; however, sentences like (34) are somehow reminiscent of the use of *dāk* 得 to express a focalized quantity seen earlier (5). Indeed, as mentioned earlier, Sybesma (2008) points out that in Zhuang, Lao, and Vietnamese the acquisitive modal may be used with an aspectual function, marking achievement. See the following Zhuang example:

- (35) *Ngoenzneix gou cawx ndaej song duz bit.*
today 1SG buy ACQ two CLF duck
‘Today I bought two ducks.’
(Sybesma 2008: 241)

We pointed out before that this usage for *de* 得 is found also in Early Mandarin (and see below, Section 5), as well as in some other modern Sinitic varieties, but not in Modern Mandarin or Cantonese. Note that in Lao and Vietnamese, perhaps unexpectedly, the acquisitive modals *daj4* and *được* when used to mark achievement may be found both after the object and between the verb and the object: thus, once again, in these two languages the acquisitive modal need not be adjacent to the verb.

Lastly, through her comparison of acquisitive modals in Mandarin, Cantonese, Lao and Vietnamese, Sparvoli (2017) refines the modal taxonomy for this class of items. She makes use of

⁶ It is unclear to us whether postverbal acquisitive modals in Zhuang, Lao and Vietnamese examples also allow the same permission reading which is available for the Cantonese short potential: the ‘okay’ reading could be argued to cover the meaning of permission, in a sense, but we already pointed out that its grammatical status appears to be that of a main verb, rather than a modal auxiliary.

a general framework (based on van der Auwera and Plungian 1998) distinguishing between epistemic and non-epistemic modalities; the latter may in turn be divided into participant-external (deontic) and participant-internal (dynamic) modalities. Interestingly, she makes use of a further distinction between ‘learned ability’ (i.e. what we termed ‘ability’ in the rest of this paper), ‘circumstantial’ and ‘deontic’: while (learned) ability falls entirely within participant-internal modality, and deontic falls entirely within participant-external modality, ‘circumstantial’ is split between the two. Specifically, the subcategory ‘success(/failure)’, depending on the subject (like ability), but also on the situation, is participant-internal, while the subcategory ‘feasibility(/impossibility)’, depending on the situation only, is participant external. In short, ‘success(/failure)’ typically involves a ‘result-directed action/event’ and a result state, and “expresses the contingent ability to handle a situation often, despite difficulty” (Sparvoli 2017: 41): this is the typical modal value of the Cantonese long potential; ‘feasibility(/impossibility)’, on the other hand, is truly participant-external as it is fully dependent on the situation. The latter can also be expressed by the Cantonese long potential, but also by the short potential (20), as already mentioned earlier. As hinted at earlier, Sparvoli (2017) analyses the Mandarin manner complement construction as an expression of learned ability; we suggest that this can be extended also to the Cantonese manner complement construction, which is marked by *dāk* and is virtually identical to its Mandarin equivalent (see Table 3). More generally, Sparvoli (2017: 54) remarks that “the modalities in the *can*-cluster are characterized by hyponym relations, emerging in the negative forms, where permission denials, failure and inability can be considered a subtype of the general idea of impossibility”.

3.3 Summary

To sum up, there are plenty of similarities, but also many differences, in the use of acquisitive modals in Cantonese and in the MSEA languages considered by Sybesma (2008). Sybesma’s data provide further evidence that Cantonese is closer to Zhuang than to Lao and Vietnamese, just as said above for Enfield’s (2001) data: this is visible, first and foremost, in the close structural parallels between the long and short potential constructions in Cantonese and Zhuang, which have the same word order and mostly share the same semantic subtypes. In Table 2, we summarize the main features of acquisitive verbs (both preverbal and postverbal) in Mandarin, Cantonese, Lao, Zhuang and Vietnamese in terms of structural and functional features; in Table 3, we propose a tentative classification of their modal values, based on Sparvoli’s (2017) taxonomy.

Table 2: Structural and functional features of acquisitive verbs in Mandarin, Cantonese and other MSEA languages.

Functions	Features				
	<i>Lao</i>	<i>Vietnamese</i>	<i>Zhuang</i>	<i>Cantonese</i>	<i>Mandarin</i>
Preverbal modal	Yes	Yes	Yes	Only after existential verb/ preposition	Yes (<i>děi</i> 得 or <i>dé</i> 得, only negated)
Manner construction	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Extent construction	No	No	Yes	No	Yes
Long potential construction (with result state)	Yes	Yes	Yes (always adjacent to the verb)	Yes (always adjacent to the verb)	Yes (alw. adjacent to the verb)
Short potential construction (postverbal object)	Yes	Yes	Yes (always adjacent to the verb)	Yes (always adjacent to the verb)	Limited (alw. adjacent to the verb)
‘-able’ short potential construction (preverbal object)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Limited
‘Okay’ marker	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Quantity/duration complement	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes (meaning ‘only’)	No
Aspectual achievement marker	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No

While Table 2 cannot do justice to the complexity of the situation, given the many differences highlighted above among these constructions in the languages at issue (including word order,

semantics, etc.), some general trends are anyway apparent. What seems to emerge from this comparison is that the differences somehow reflect some clear areal trends: Lao and Vietnamese, the languages located further to the south (in the ‘core’ of the MSEA area) are strikingly similar, and Mandarin, located further to the north (and away from the ‘core’) stands out as being more different from the three non-Sinitic languages considered. As mentioned earlier, Zhuang is somehow in between Lao/Vietnamese and Cantonese, having developed in very close contact with the latter; with respect to the parameters examined here, Cantonese most often patterns with non-Sinitic MSEA languages, rather than with its sister language Mandarin.

Let us now compare the trends which emerge from Table 2 with the modal values that the different instantiations of the acquisitive modals may convey in the languages considered here: for the sake of simplicity, we do not include necessity modal values here.

Table 3: Modal values conveyed by acquisitive verbs in Mandarin, Cantonese and other MSEA languages.⁷

	POSSIBILITY				
	NON-EPISTEMIC				EPISTEMIC
	DYNAMIC		DEONTIC		
	Participant internal		Participant external		
	Learned ability	Circumstantial		Deontic	
	<i>Ability / Inability</i>	<i>Success / Failure</i>	<i>Feasibility / Impossibility</i>	<i>Permission / Permission denial</i>	<i>Probability / Improbability</i>
Lao	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Rare
Vietnamese	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Zhuang	Limited	Yes	Yes	Yes (negative only)	No?
Cantonese	Limited	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Mandarin	Limited (manner complement)	Yes	Yes (potential complement, postverbal <i>bude</i> 不得)	Limited (preverbal <i>bùdé</i> 不得)	Limited (some uses of preverbal <i>děi</i> 得)

What seems to emerge from the data in Table 3 is that acquisitive modals in these languages may generally express circumstantial possibility, albeit with some differences (related to the

⁷ Table 3 roughly follows the structure of Table 1 in Sparvoli (2017: 41), with the addition of Lao, Vietnamese, Zhuang, and Cantonese data.

construction types involved). The expression of ability(/inability), on the other hand, shows some variation. Lao and Vietnamese, perhaps unexpectedly, are very similar for this parameter, having a productive construction to express ability based on an acquisitive verb; Zhuang and Cantonese are also similar, as the ability reading is available for constructions with *ndaej* and *dāk* 得, but it has limitations (depending on the linguistic and extralinguistic context and/or on the predicate type). Mandarin stands out in having only the manner construction which, as mentioned earlier, may be analysed as expressing ability: note, however, that using the manner complement implies some descriptive judgment, while the ‘neutral’ way to express plain ability (as in *I can speak English*) is by using a preverbal modal (*hui* 會 in Mandarin, *sɪk* 識 in Cantonese, and *rox* in Zhuang).

Deontic modality may be expressed with an acquisitive modal in all the languages considered, but with structural differences: Lao and Vietnamese are again strikingly similar, as they both productively use preverbal modals to express permission; the same construction appears to be mostly limited to the negative polarity in Zhuang, and this is the case also for Mandarin, in which it is also stylistically marked. On the other hand, the Cantonese short potential construction appears to be fully productive, but it stands out as being the only case in which the acquisitive modal is used in the postverbal position to convey deontic values (permission).

The expression of epistemic modality also varies considerably: Cantonese and, perhaps, Zhuang (we found no reliable indication as to whether *ndaej* may express epistemic meaning, hence the question mark) do not use acquisitive modals with this meaning; Vietnamese does, while in Lao this constitutes rare and marked usage, and in Mandarin it appears to be a non-default reading for *děi* 得. Note that, according to the semantic map proposed in van der Auwera and Plungian (1998: 111), the modal value ‘epistemic possibility’ (i.e. probability) should derive from participant-external possibility, which may also evolve into deontic possibility. Van der Auwera et al. (2009: 297) point out that “participant-external acquisitive modals may but need not develop epistemic meanings”; they also highlight that the epistemic function for acquisitive modals is much rarer than participant-external non-epistemic modalities in South and Southeast Asia. Sparvoli (2017: 52) also points out that “the epistemic class is a target modality of grammaticalization”. Thus, we may suggest that the epistemic reading may arise contextually for ‘can’-type verbs and, needless to say, this development does/did not necessarily occur in all the languages sharing acquisitive modals.

All in all, what emerges from this brief comparative overview of Cantonese, Mandarin, Lao, Vietnamese, and Zhuang is that acquisitive modals in the area at issue tend to express a wide range of modal meanings, mostly in the non-epistemic domain. Zhuang, Cantonese, and Mandarin, which

are spoken mainly in China, tend to show many structural and semantic similarities in this respect; however, there appears to be a much stronger degree of overlap between Zhuang and Cantonese, which is easily explained by the historical circumstances of their development. In Lao and Vietnamese, acquisitive modals are not necessarily always adjacent to the verb, and their features and distribution overlap to a very high degree, but often differ from the other three languages in the sample. As expected, Mandarin is the language which differs the most from the others (see Table 2), which is in line with its ‘hybrid’ areal typology (being a Northern Sinitic language).

It is important to stress that the mapping of the modal meanings presented in Table 3 onto specific constructions is quite complex, especially for Cantonese. For instance, as already pointed out earlier, while the Cantonese short potential may be used to express permission, ability and feasibility, the individual constructions for each of those modal values are structurally distinct (see [17], [18], and [20]). We will bring into focus those form-meaning (or, better, structure-meaning) connections in Section 5.

4 The historical development of *de/dāk* 得: potential *dāk* 得 in Early Cantonese texts

An analysis of the recorded usages of *dāk* 得 in a selection of texts from the 19th and early 20th century can help in retracing its historical development. As a matter of fact, the earliest materials to describe, teach and learn Cantonese were compiled in those years by Western scholars, missionaries and officials, with the assistance of native speakers. In order to meet their communicative needs, they began to present and translate Cantonese language in grammars, dictionaries, primers and phrasebooks, also devising Romanization systems to transcribe its sounds. These texts have already proven helpful in several studies, because they contain huge amounts of data on grammar, lexicon, phonology, writing (both characters and transcriptions) etc., for synchronic and diachronic analyses of Cantonese language (Cheung 1997; Chiu 2010; Lee 2005; Paternicò 2019; Yue-Hashimoto 2004b).

4.1 Affirmative form

A screening of the selected texts (a list is provided in the *Primary sources* Section of the bibliographical references) reveals that the long postverbal potential V + *dāk* 得 + C, although already appearing in the earliest ones to express possibility, is comparatively less used in its

affirmative form (36), while the short potential V + *dāk* 得 is the most recurrent to express possibility (37), feasibility (38), permission (39) and sometimes also ability (40):⁸

- (36) 你 幾時 做 得 完?
néih géisìh jòuh dāk yùhn?
2SG when make DAK finish
'When can you get it done?'
(Legge 1841: 37)

- (37) 我 重 做 得 乜嘢 添?
ngóh chùhngjòuh dāk māt'yéh tīm?
1SG also do DAK what more
'What more can I do?'
(Legge 1841: 41)

- (38) 紅蘿蔔 要 焗 得 一 點 鐘
hùhnglòhbaahk yiu saahp dāk yāt díng jūng
carrot must boil DAK one hour precisely
正 食 得。
jeng síhk dāk.
proper eat DAK
'Carrots require boiling a full hour before they become fit to be eaten.'
(Bridgman 1841: 161)

- (39) 我 留 得 佢 幾耐?
ngóh làuh dāk kéuih géinoih?
1SG keep DAK 3SG how.long
'How long may I keep it?'
(Legge 1841: 81)

⁸ In the following examples, the original transcriptions have been omitted and substituted by Yale for consistency's sake. In some cases, like for Legge's *Lexilogus*, the characters for Cantonese have been added according to the transcriptions provided in the original source.

- (40) 醫 得 病。
yī dāk behng.
 cure DAK disease
 ‘Can cure disease.’
 (Bonney 1853: 27)

For feasibility, a later source (Leblanc 1910: 73–74) writes about the necessity of having *dāk* 得 followed by *ge* 嘅, as in *fān dāk ge* 分得嘅 ‘divisible’ or *mh gin dāk ge* 唔見得嘅 ‘invisible’.

In the long potential, the object usually appears after the complement. However, in a few cases it appears immediately after *dāk* 得:

- (41) 禾草 *整 得 紙 出。⁹
*wòhchou *jìng dāk jí chēut.*
 straw make DAK paper exit
 ‘Paper can be made out of straw.’
 (Legge 1841: 85)

Chiu (2010: 187) claims that examples of affirmative potential *dāk* 得 after an adjective can be found as early as 1842. A manual search of the texts selected for the present study has not retraced any occurrence of A + *dāk* 得 (+ C) in 1842. The following example (42) comes from Bonney (1853), and is considered by Chiu a case of A + *dāk* 得 + C.¹⁰ However, the sentence could also have a non-potential reading:

- (42) 過 幾 年 熟 得 嘅。
gwo géi nìhn suhk dāk sāai.
 pass some year familiar DAK completely
 ‘After several years you can understand it perfectly.’
 (Bonney 1853: 66)

⁹ * = not clear in the original.

¹⁰ This is inferred by who writes, because Chiu does not provide any example for his claim, but only counts 3 occurrences of A + 得 + C in Bonney (1853).

Bonney's (1853) original reading is indeed potential; however, this sentence is listed in a phrasebook without context, therefore it could also be understood as 'After a few years (you) are very familiar (with it)'.

4.2 Negative form

Potential *dāk* is definitely more used in the negative form and appears earlier, already from 1828 onwards for the pattern NEG + V + *dāk* 得; from 1841 for the patterns V + *m̄h* 唔 + C and NEG + V + *dāk* 得 + C, to indicate impossibility/inability:

- (43) 蒜頭 大 唔 入 得 罌。
syuntàuh daaih m̄h yahp dāk āang.
 Garlic big NEG enter DAK jar
 'When garlic bulbs¹¹ are big, they can't go into the jar.'
 (Morrison 1828, np)

- (44) 我 成 夜 都 瞓 唔 着。
ngóh sìhng yeh dōu fan m̄h jeuk.
 1SG whole night all sleep NEG succeed
 'I could not sleep for the entire night.'
 (Bridgman 1841: 159)

- (45) 我 唔 出 得 起。
ngóh m̄h chēut dāk héi.
 1SG NEG exit DAK rise
 'I can't afford it.'
 (Legge 1841: 49)

¹¹ Morrison (1828) here translates *syuntàuh* 蒜頭 as 'onions', although the word means 'garlic'.

Another (less recurrent) negative pattern includes the modal verb *nàhng* 能 to reinforce the potential meaning of *dāk* 得 expressing impossibility in the pattern: NEG + *nàhng* 能 + V + *dāk* 得 (+ C), as in (46):

- (46) 我 唔 能 醫 得 你 咯。
ngóh m̀h nàhng yī dāk néih lo.
 1SG NEG can cure DAK 2SG SFP
 ‘I cannot cure you.’
 (Devan 1847: 138)

This was probably due to the influence of Mandarin or of the formal written language (as we can see in Stedman [1888: 11] where we find *bāt nàhng hit dāk* 不能歇得 ‘cannot stop’, with *bāt* 不 instead of *m̀h* 唔).

In later materials another negative pattern appears: V + NEG + *dāk* 得 (+ C) as in (47).

- (47) 話 唔 得 / 講 唔 得。
wá m̀h dāk / gong m̀h dāk.
 say NEG DAK speak NEG DAK
 ‘It cannot be said i.e. it is useless to say more.’
 (Lobscheid 1864b: 60)

As for the position of the object, it can appear immediately after *dāk* 得 even when a complement is present (although its most common position is after C), in the pattern NEG+ V + *dāk* 得 + O + C:

- (48) 我 唔 分 得 佢 開。
ngóh m̀h fān dāk kéuih hōi.
 1SG NEG divide DAK 3SG open
 ‘I can’t tell them apart.’
 (Legge 1841: 61)

A rarer position of the object is immediately after the verb, in the pattern V + O + *m̀h* 唔 + C:

- (49) 尋 佢 唔 着。
chàhm kéuih m̀h jeuk.
 search 3SG NEG succeed
 ‘Cannot find him.’
 (Devan 1847: 47)

The earliest appearance of potential NEG + A + *dāk* 得 in the selected texts can be dated 1874; it indicates impossibility:

- (50) 佢 唔 好 得 嘅 咯。
kéuih m̀h hóu dāk ge lo.
 3SG NEG good DAK PRT SFP
 ‘S/he can’t get better.’
 (Dennys 1874: 193)

4.3 Interrogative form

The pattern for the affirmative-negative interrogatives is not crystalized. The earliest attestations (1841), and quite common also in later sources, have V + *dāk* 得 + C (+ O) + NEG + V + *dāk* 得 as in (51):

- (51) 寫 得 出 唔 寫 得 呢?
sé dāk chēut m̀h sé dāk nē?
 write DAK exit NEG write DAK SFP
 ‘Are (you) able to write (them)?’
 (Bridgman 1841: 8)

Other patterns appear in later sources; without object or complement: V + *dāk* 得 + *m̀h* 唔 + V + *dāk* 得 as in Bonney (1853); with object but without complement: V + *dāk* 得 + O + NEG + V + *dāk* 得 as in Lobscheid (1864b); or simply ending in *m̀h nē* 唔呢 or *m̀h dāk* 唔得 as in Dennys (1874):

(52) 入 得 唔 入 得?
yahp dāk m̄h yahp dāk?
 enter DAK NEG enter DAK
 ‘Can (we) enter or not?’
 (Bonney 1853: 45)

(53) 你 起 得 身 唔 起 得 呢?
néih héi dāk s̄an m̄h héi dāk nē?
 2SG raise DAK body NEG raise DAK SFP
 ‘Are you able to get up?’
 (Lobscheid 1864b: 60)

(54) 你 替 我 做得 呢 的¹² 唔 呢?
néih tai ngóh jough-dāk nī dī m̄h nē?
 2SG for 1SG do-DAK this CLF NEG SFP
 ‘Can you do this for me?’
 (Dennys 1874: 31)

(55) 你 睇 得 見 嗰 個 山 唔 得?
néih tái dāk gin gó go s̄aan m̄h dāk?
 2SG look DAK see that CLF mountain NEG SFP
 ‘Can you see the mountain?’
 (Dennys 1874: 37)

4.4 Pre-predicate

In the earliest texts, it is not rare to find *dāk* before the predicate, both verbal and adjectival. The affirmative form *dāk* 得 + V (+ C) is rarer (56), while the negative form NEG + *dāk* 得 +

¹² This character in modern Cantonese would be 啲.

A/V (+ C) is common (57), with both a connotation of impossibility and prohibition (as the original translations reveal). In the interrogative form (58), the affirmative-negative pattern is *dāk* 得 + V + NEG + *dāk* 得. However, pre-predicate *dāk* 得 does not always appear to have exclusively a potential reading, but also that of ‘acquisition/attainment of a state’ (59).

- (56) 得 搬去 棺材。
dāk būnheui gūnchòih.
 DAK move.away coffin
 ‘Can carry away the coffin.’
 (Bonney 1853: 45)

- (57) 唔 得 出 來
m̃h dāk chēut lòih
 NEG DAK come out
 ‘Cannot come out!’
 (Bonney 1853: 47)

- (58) 得 穩 唔 得?
dāk wán m̃h dāk?
 DAK safe NEG DAK
 ‘Is it safe?’
 (Devan 1847: 100)

- (59) 未 得 熟。
meih dāk suhk.
 NEG DAK ripe
 ‘Not yet ripe.’
 (Bonney 1853: 20)

Preverbal *dāk* 得 of this sort is not present in the selected sources between 1864 and the early 20th century. Its use must have become rarer. In Cowles (1915: 111, 118–119) a difference is made between *sāang dāk* 生得 ‘can produce (as a fruit); can spring up (as a plant)’ and *dāk*

sāang 得生 ‘can attain to life’ and the negative *mh dāk sāang* 唔得生 is translated as ‘cannot live; cannot attain to life’.

As for preverbal *dāk* 得 preceded by the existential *yáuh/móuh* 有/冇, it appears also quite early with the meaning that something can/cannot be done or that something is doable (or not):

- (60) 唐人 舖頭 怕 冇 得 賣 呀。
Tòhngyàhn poutáu pa móuh dāk maaih a.
 Tang.people shop fear NEG.exist DAK sell SFP
 ‘I fear the Chinese shops have none for sale (that can be sold).’
 (Wells Williams 1842: 92)

Finally, there are no traces of *dāk* 得 after a preposition, with the exception of *yàuh dāk kéuih* (*jouh*) 由得佢(做) ‘let him do as he pleases’ (Bonney 1853: 34) where the predicate is omitted. This expression (with the omission of the predicate) is still in use nowadays with a meaning of ‘it’s up to...’.

4.5 Summary

To summarize, in the selected texts, the short potential *V + dāk* 得 is the earliest and most recurrent pattern of potential *dāk* 得. *V + dāk* 得 + C also appears quite early but is less used. *A + dāk* 得 (+ C) is rare; *PREP + dāk* 得 was only found once. The earliest and most common negative form is *NEG + V + dāk* 得, also in the extended version (+ C + O). As for the pattern *V + dāk/mh* 得/唔 + C, most scholars agree that it entered the language at a later stage because of the influence of Mandarin, or simply of the Cantonese formal written language which uses *bù/bā* 不 instead of *mh* 唔 (Yang 2005: 319; we will get back to this below, Section 6). However, its presence is quite established starting from 1841. Preverbal *dāk* 得 + V (+ C) and the negative *NEG + dāk* 得 + A/V (+ C) is present in earlier texts but with a traceable trend towards disappearance. Please refer to Table 4 for a summary of the earliest occurrence of each form as witnessed in the analysis of the sources.

Table 4: First occurrences of potential *dāk* 得’s different patterns.

YEAR	POSITIVE	NEGATIVE	INTERROGATIVE
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1828		NEG + V + 得	
1841	V + 得		V + 得 + C (+ O) + NEG + V + 得
	V + 得 + C (+ O)	NEG + V + 得 + C (+ O)	
		V + 唔 + C (+ O)	
	V + 得 + O + C	NEG + V + 得 + O + C	
1842		冇 + 得 + V	
		NEG + 得 + A	ending in 唔曾呢
1847		NEG + 能 + V + 得 (+ C)	得 + V + NEG + 得
1853	冇 + 得 + V		
		V + O + NEG + C	V + 得 + 唔 + V + 得
	A + 得 + C		
	得 + V	NEG + 得 + V (+ C)	
	PREP + 得		
1864		V + NEG + 得	V + 得 + O + NEG + V + 得
1874		NEG + A + 得	ending in 唔呢
			ending in 唔得
1883		V + NEG + 得 + C	

5 The historical development of *de/dāk* 得: *de* 得 in mainstream Chinese

There is little doubt that the lexical meaning(s) of acquisitive verbs like *dé/dāk* 得 and the modal meanings and grammatical functions they developed in Sinitic, as well as in other MSEA languages, have a strong diachronic connection: specifically, they appear to have developed from the ‘attainment’ / ‘achievement’ sense deriving from the ‘to get to’ lexical meaning of these acquisitive verbs. The point has been stressed time and again in the relevant literature. For instance, Enfield (2001: 285), focusing on postverbal uses of acquisitive modals, proposes the following pathway of evolution:

‘V-and-acquire’ > ‘V-and-succeed’ > ‘can V-and-succeed’ > ‘can V’

In a nutshell, Enfield’s (2001) hypothesis is that the V₁-V₂ resultative constructions found in many languages of the MSEA area are open to two interpretations: ‘V₁ and as a result V₂’ and ‘can/would V₁ with the result V₂’. Thus, when the acquisitive modal appears as a resultative V₂, it may be interpreted as a marker of attainment (‘succeed’, i.e. V₁-and-succeed); however, in this context it

may also develop a non-finite interpretation, i.e. that the process described by V₁ *can* lead to the result, and the acquisitive V₂ thus becomes only a marker of potential (in the domain of non-epistemic possibility). Eventually, this acquisitive modal may just become a modal verb meaning ‘can’, in Enfield’s (2001) proposal: this is what happens e.g. in the Cantonese short potential construction. We will elaborate below on the connection between this pathway of development and the long potential construction. Needless to say, the use of the English verb ‘can’ in Enfield’s proposal somehow blurs the distinctions between modal values in the non-epistemic area which may be expressed by those verbs, as discussed in Section 3.

Interestingly, a pathway of evolution similar to Enfield’s (2001) was proposed already in Ōta (1987 [1958]: 214; our translation) for *dé/de* in mainstream Chinese:

‘To obtain, to get’ > realization > potential

These three stages may be exemplified by the following Medieval Chinese sentences (adapted from Sun 1996):

- (61) 賣 得 數 斗 米。
mài dé shù dòu mǐ.
 sell obtain several *dou* rice
 ‘Sold (the hair) and got several *dou*¹³ of rice in return.’
 (*Shi Shuo Xin Yu*, 5th cent. CE; Sun 1996: 115)

- (62) 視 得 一 老 狸。
Shì dé yī lǎo lí.
 look attain one old raccoon
 ‘(One) saw an old raccoon.’
 (*Lie Yi Zhuan*, 3rd cent. CE; Sun 1996: 116)

- (63) 田 為 王 田 買賣 不 得。
tián wéi wáng tián mǎimài bù dé.
 field be royal field trade NEG possible
 ‘The field is royal field and cannot be traded.’

¹³ *Dou* is a traditional Chinese unit of measure, equal to 10.354688 litres.

(*Hou Han Shu*, 5th cent. CE; Sun 1996: 116)

According to Sun's (1996) analysis (see also Ōta 1987 [1958]), *mài dé* 賣得 'sell obtain' in (61) is a V₁-V₂ sequence in which each verb conveys its proper lexical meaning; here *dé* 得 could be argued to be the expression of the result of the action *mài* 賣 'to sell'. In (62), the sense of attainment for *dé* clearly emerges, since *shì* 視 'to look' is a perception verb. The semantic abstraction of *dé* 得 as an expression of potentiality is apparent in (63), as shown in the English translation. Note that the negator here appears between the main verb and *dé* 得, just as in the Modern Mandarin example seen above (28), although it is unclear whether the two express the same subtype of modal meaning: for (63), we may argue that the relevant modal notion is that of permission or feasibility (thus, in the participant-external deontic domain). Indeed Sun (1996: 147) suggests that (63) is ambiguous between an ability and permission reading, but perhaps here 'ability' is best understood as circumstantial possibility. Also, generally speaking, up to the 12th century some V + *dé* 得 (+ O) constructions were ambiguous between a realization and a potential meaning, which is in line with Enfield's (2001) proposal: it has been claimed that the potential reading arose when the action depicted by the first verb was not yet realized, as e.g. in interrogative sentences (Lamarre 2004: 116).

Following Sun (1996), we may summarize the main steps in the development of postverbal *dé* 得 as follows:

- a. Between 200 and 700, the V + *dé* 得 potential construction emerged
- b. Between the 7th and 9th century, the V + *dé* 得 + V long potential construction and the V + *dé* 得 + S(entence) extent construction developed
- c. By the 10th century, the V + *dé* 得 sequence had developed the meaning of 'completion'
- c. By the 13th century, the V + *dé* 得 + A/V_{stative} manner construction had fully developed
- d. After the 15th century, the V + *dé* 得 construction declined in usage

While there appears to be general agreement on the early stages of the evolution of the (broadly defined) 'potential' meaning for *dé* 得, much more can be said on the development of the many different construction in which it has been used throughout the history of Chinese. Indeed, in the literature, we may find several detailed accounts of the development of *dé* 得 in mainstream Chinese (e.g. Ōta 1987 [1958]; Shi 2002; Sun 1996; Yang 1990), as well as some works on the

diachrony of Cantonese *dāk* 得 (Yang 2005; Yue 2004a). This is a topic which deserves much more space than we can reasonably afford to devote to it here: in what follows, we will try to provide a concise overview of the most relevant aspects which emerge from the perusal of the literature: this will enable us to analyze our historical Cantonese data in the broader context of Sinitic and of its premodern development.

5.1 Preverbal *dé* 得

When discussing the development of *dé* 得, we must mention that while it first grammaticalized as the second verb in a V₁-V₂ sequence, *dé* 得 was originally used with a modal value preceding the main verb, rather than following it. As mentioned in Section 3, acquisitive modals in modern MSEA languages may be found in the preverbal position, mainly conveying deontic modality and a ‘result of prior event’ reading. As for mainstream Chinese, see the following example:

- (64) 不 得 與 之 言。
bù dé yǔ zhī yán.
 NEG obtain with 3SG speak
 ‘Did not get to speak with him.’
 (*Lunyu*, 3rd cent. BCE; Yue 2004a: 248)

Hong (2005: 102) describes the modal value of *dé* 得 at this stage as “possible due to objective circumstances”, which we may understand as circumstantial possibility; he adds that preverbal modal *dé* 得 later developed the meaning ‘subjectively necessary or appropriate’. Sun (1996) quotes examples from the same historical stage in which *dé* 得 is used for permission; by the 15th century, preverbal *dé* 得 appears to be used only for deontic meanings (possibility and necessity, i.e. permission and obligation), much like Modern Mandarin (see [31]). Interestingly, as mentioned earlier, a similar construction is attested in Early Cantonese (57), conveying possibility, but also attainment; it is also a marginal pattern Modern Cantonese, conveying both impossibility and prohibition.

5.2 The V + *dé* 得 construction

We already mentioned that the V + *dé* 得 construction developed its potential meaning in the period between the third and the eighth century CE, through a stage in which it conveyed the meaning of ‘realization’ (62). Its ‘potential’ meanings here may be located in the area of feasibility and permission. By the 10th century, it had also developed the meaning of ‘completion’, related to the perfective aspectual meaning mentioned earlier:

- (65) 自從 過得 石橋 後。
zìcóng guò-dé shí-qiáo hòu.
 since pass-DE stone-bridge after
 ‘After (someone) had passed the stone bridge.’
 (*Zutangji*, 10th century; Sun 1996: 120)

Ōta (1987 [1958]) suggests that this meaning also derives from the ‘realization’ meaning developed by postverbal *dé* 得; this is also akin to the parallel Zhuang structure seen earlier (35), and something similar is found also in Lao and Vietnamese.

While, as mentioned in the previous section, by the 15th century preverbal *dé* 得 was basically limited to deontic meaning, postverbal *dé* 得 was generally associated with (circumstantial, non-deontic) possibility, at least in the affirmative form: however, in the negative it also developed deontic meaning, thus covering a broader spectrum of modal meanings than its preverbal counterpart (Sun 1996: 151). Indeed, the affirmative and negative versions of the V + *dé* 得 potential construction had a somewhat different development: according to Ōta (1987 [1958]), *bùdé* 不得 was used in the potential sense earlier than the affirmative *dé* 得, which somehow retained its lexical meaning: as mentioned just above, V + *dé* 得 (+ O) constructions up to the 12th century could sometimes be ambiguous between a realization and a potential meaning (Lamarre 2004: 116).

What about the negation patterns for the V + *dé* 得 construction? While Ōta (1987 [1958]) seems to suggest that the negator always appears between the main verb and *dé* 得 (63), just as in Modern Mandarin, and like the negation pattern of the short Cantonese potential conveying feasibility (20). However, Yue (2004a: 251) also mentions the pattern NEG + V + *dé* 得 + O, i.e. the negation pattern of the Cantonese short potential conveying permission or ability (19), which was reportedly available around Tang and Song times. With a cursory search, we also found an example

of NEG + V + *dé* 得, with an object in the sentence-initial topic position, in the *Zhuzi Yulei* (a 13th century text):

- (66) 小人 如何 不 去得?
xiǎorén rúhé bù qù-dé?
 lowling how NEG rid-DE
 ‘How can we not get rid of the lowlings?’

Yue (2004a: 248) also proposes only one example of NEG + V + *dé* 得 in Archaic Chinese (*wú jiàn-dé* 無見得 ‘did not get to be seen’), but without a potential reading. She also shows that, in Archaic Chinese, there was a NEG + V₁ + V₂ construction, in which the two verbs were in a coordination relation. However, it is unclear whether the Cantonese NEG + V + *dé* 得 short potential can be regarded as derived from these constructions.

As for the position of the object in the V + *dé* 得 potential construction, several patterns are attested: the object could be placed in the topic position, as in (63), it could also be placed between the verb and *dé* (including the negative pattern V + O + *bùdé* 不得), or after *dé* 得, but apparently never between the negator and *dé* 得 (Yue 2004a). Note that until the 10th century, the object was always before (NEG +) *dé* 得, while later on (NEG +) *dé* 得 could be directly attached to the verb, with no object occurring between them (Ōta 1987 [1958]: 216); after that, the object was generally placed after the whole V + *dé* 得 construction, a fact which may be interpreted as a sign of the fusion/integration of the verb and potential *dé* 得. Lastly, as mentioned earlier, according to Sun’s (1996) account, after the 15th century the V + *dé* 得 construction declined in usage in mainstream Chinese.

5.3 The V + *dé* 得 + V potential construction

While, according to Sun’s (1996) account, the V + *dé* 得 potential construction, the V + *dé* 得 + V potential construction, the extent construction and the manner construction developed at slightly different times, they appear to have a very strong diachronic connection among themselves, and even overlap to some degree. Also, as mentioned earlier, all of these constructions are tightly connected to the development of the resultative construction, which provided the ‘mould’ for the

grammaticalization of *dé* 得. Indeed, the potential construction has often been seen as a subtype of the resultative construction in the literature (see e.g. Ōta 1987 [1958]; Shi 2002; Yue 2004a).

Interestingly, just as seen above for the V + *dé* 得 construction, it appears that the affirmative and negative long potential also had different pathways of development. Ōta (1987 [1958]) already pointed out that a sequence as *chī-bu-liǎo* 吃不了 ‘eat-NEG-finish’ is a negative potential in Modern Mandarin, i.e. ‘cannot finish eating’, but until about Tang times it was the negation of the construction *chī-liǎo* 吃了 ‘eat-finish, finish eating’: in other words, *chī-bu-liǎo* 吃不了 was to be understood as ‘did not finish eating’, rather than as a negative potential. Thus, the early examples of the verb complement potential construction were in the affirmative only; also, they were often ambiguous between a potential reading and a plain resultative reading. Yue (2004a) argues that the negative form of the long potential construction appeared no earlier than the 5th-6th century, but V + *dé* 得 short potential constructions of the form V + O + *bùdé* 不得 may be found already in the 1st century, several hundred years before.

Indeed, Shi (2002) proposes that the affirmative and negative potential are both instantiations of the (separable) resultative construction, but they developed from different constructions. The development of the resultative construction is a notoriously complex and thorny issue (see Basciano [2010] for a concise overview), and we cannot discuss it here. In a nutshell, Medieval Chinese had a separable resultative construction, made of two verbs in an action-result relation, in which the verbal constituents had a loose syntactic relation and objects or adverbs could be placed between them, as in the following example:

- (67) 喚 江郎 覺!
huàn Jiāng-Láng jué!
call Jiang-Lang awake
‘Wake up Jiang Lang (lit. call Jiang Lang awake)!’
(*Shi Shuo Xin Yu*, 5th century; adapted from Shi 2002: 49)

This construction type (or just a subset; see Xu [2006]) has been seen as the possible source for Modern Mandarin resultative compounds (as e.g. *kǎn-duàn* 砍斷 ‘chop-break, cut in two’). A necessary precondition for the evolution of the separative resultative construction into resultative compounds is the ‘fusion’, or bonding, of V₁ and V₂, with nothing intervening between them. We mentioned above that, by the 10th century, the object of the V + *dé* 得 construction was generally placed after the whole construction, which may be interpreted as a sign of the fusion/integration of

the verb and potential *dé*; we then see V + *dé* 得 constructions followed not only by an object, but also by a(nother?) result verb, as in the following example:

- (68) 不 知 怎生 喚得 它 醒?
bù zhī zěnsēng huàn-dé tā xǐng?
 NEG know how call-DE 3SG awake
 ‘I don’t know how to wake him up (lit. call him awake)’
 (*Zhuzi Yulei*, 13th century; Shi 2002: 88)

According to Shi’s (2002) analysis, this is evidence of the fact that V + *dé* 得 was already an inseparable syntactic constituent, which was used just as a V₁ in the separable resultative construction. After the 13th century, the resultative V₂ began to appear right after the V + *dé* 得 complex, with the object appearing after the resultative constituent: this is the order which is still in use in the potential construction of Modern Mandarin and Cantonese (12). However, judging also from the translations offered in Shi (2002), in an example like (67) the potential meaning is still not well established. Indeed, Ōta (1987 [1958]) cites 10th century examples which are ambiguous between a resultative (realization) and a potential meaning, and he argues that the potential meaning emerges more clearly when there is no object, while when an object is present the resultative meaning is more prominent:

- (69) 十三 學得 琵琶 成。
shísān xué-dé pípa chéng.
 thirteen study-DE *pípa* complete
 ‘Mastered the *pípa* at thirteen.’
 (*Pipa Xing*, 9th century; Ōta 1987 [1958]: 217)

We mentioned before that for the V + *dé* 得 construction the potential reading emerged in contexts in which the action described by the main verb was not yet realized; the same claim has been put forward for the V + *dé* 得 + V construction, which in early Míng times could still be used to express the achievement of a result or the possibility of reaching a result, depending on the status of the action described by the first verb, without any formal difference in the construction (Yang 1990).

On the other hand, the negative potential construction, according to Shi's (2002) account, developed from the construction $V_1 + O + bù \text{ 不} + V_2$, in which, again, V_2 is the resultative constituent:

- (70) 便 攔 他 不住。
biàn lán tā bù-zhù.
 then block 3SG NEG-stay
 'Then cannot block him.'
 (*Zhuzi Yulei*, 13th century; Shi 2002: 89)

In this scenario, the negator did not replace *dé*; rather, the negative construction 'merged' with the affirmative potential, after a parallel development within the domain of resultatives. Just as for the affirmative potential construction, after the 13th century the negative construction underwent a shift to a post-resultative object (i.e. $V_1 + bù \text{ 不} + V_2 + O$), which again is the Modern Mandarin order (30), and one of the possible orders in Cantonese (12): in this case, it is the negator which gets fused with the resultative constituent, differently from what happened for the affirmative potential.

Interestingly, Shi (2002: 117–119) shows that, in the 13th-century text *Zhuzi Yulei*, the negative potential is most often used with *dé* as a resultative constituent (meaning 'to be unable to do'), and that it is in combination with this specific item that the negative potential construction first allowed the $V_1 + NEG + V_2 + O$ order, later extended to all negative resultatives (by the 14th century). We dare to suggest that this overlaps with the $V + dé \text{ 得}$ construction discussed above (Sections 5, 5.1), both because of the meaning it conveys (again, circumstantial possibility and, perhaps, permission) and because of its structural features: as said earlier, around Song times the object in the negative $V + bù \text{ 不} + dé \text{ 得}$ potential construction began to appear after *dé 得*, which fits in the timeline sketched by Shi (2002).

Thus, both the short $V + dé \text{ 得}$ and the $V + dé \text{ 得} + V$ potential construction seem to have undergone a similar development, with the fusion of V and *dé 得* in the affirmative, and the fusion of *bù 不* and *dé 得* in the negative; needless to say, in the case of the long potential construction the slot occupied by *dé* became open to any result constituent. The grammaticalization of the long

potential construction appears to depend on the reanalysis of *dé 得* from a result constituent to a linking particle between the main verb and another result constituent (Lamarre 2004).¹⁴

5.4 The V + *dé 得* + A/V_{stative} manner construction and the V + *dé 得* + S extent construction

As mentioned above, the V + *dé 得* + S extent construction developed during the same period as the V + *dé 得* + V potential construction, while the manner construction came to maturity a bit later, with the diffusion of adjectives(/stative verbs) in the V₂ position (Sun 1996). In fact, there are examples of the manner construction already in the Tang period (Ōta 1987 [1958]), but they are still rare, and they may be ambiguous between a potential and a manner reading. The extent construction already appeared even before Tang times, but at that stage its dominant meaning was conveying the result of the action described by the first verb: in essence, it still mostly overlapped with the (separable) resultative construction (67), the basis on which it developed its extent meaning. The extent construction retained the sense of realization of the source resultative construction, while the manner construction developed the potential sense (i.e. being able to V in an A/V_{stative} way).

Interestingly, the position of the object in the manner and extent constructions shows a similar evolutionary trajectory as the potential construction: in the early examples, the object was placed between the V + *dé 得* complex and the complement. Again, this shows that, at this stage, V and *dé 得* were already part of an inseparable constituent, but the complement was not yet bound to *dé 得*. Later on, the object could be placed either before the verb or after the verb-complement construction; however, in the latter case, the verb must be repeated. This is still the case both in Modern Mandarin and in Cantonese. In the case of the manner construction, it appears that the negative form developed from the affirmative form, differently from the potential construction, as it has the V + *dé 得* + NEG + A order since its earliest attestations (see the examples in Ōta 1987 [1958]: 365).

¹⁴ Yang (1990) suggests that the verb complement construction emerged when the V + *dé 得* construction, instead of being followed by an NP object, was followed by a predicative constituent. According to Sun (1996: 123–126), the grammaticalization of *dé 得* as a particle in verb complement constructions derives from the interaction of postverbal and preverbal *dé 得*, i.e. from a merger of the V + *dé 得* and *dé 得* + V constructions. We cannot discuss these proposals here due to space constraints: the reader is referred to the sources for the details.

5.5 Summary

To sum up, it appears that the V + *dé* 得 construction and the three verb complement constructions (i.e. potential, extent, and manner) all had a parallel development from the same source. Lamarre (2004: 116) already pointed out that “when DE is used in both manner/extent complements and in potential complements [...] its potential meaning historically stems from the same realizative function that gave birth to the manner complement marker”.

In essence, postverbal *dé* 得 shifted from a marker of realization to a marker of *potential* realization (see Enfield’s 2001 cline, Section 5.1), later allowing not only NP direct objects, but also predicative elements as complements, turning into a structural particle linking verb and complement. This also involved a constructional reanalysis in which V and *dé* 得 became bound first, and the complement became part of the same complex too. The negative resultative and potential constructions, as seen above, went through the fusion of the negator and the complement, and then of the whole V + NEG + C complex; while they apparently did not directly involve *dé* 得 as a particle, *dé* 得 as a complement appears to have had a crucial role in their development.

As for the extent and manner constructions, the changes in the position of the object occurred similarly to the potential construction. Indeed, one aspect that ties together all of the constructions discussed here is that the object shifted from ‘construction-internal’ to ‘construction-external’ (for lack of a better term), as a consequence of the increased bonding of the constituents (i.e. the verb, *dé* 得, the negator, and the complement, depending on the specific case). Lastly, note that, in mainstream Chinese and in Modern Mandarin, the negator came to be placed after the main verb for all the constructions considered (the exception being the Modern Mandarin preverbal *bùdè* 不得 modal complex; see [31]).

6 The historical development of *de/dāk* 得: comparing mainstream Chinese and Cantonese data

If we compare the Cantonese data (including both Early and Modern Cantonese) with the mainstream written Chinese and Modern Mandarin data, it clearly appears that Cantonese (especially, early Cantonese) has a greater degree of variation, especially in word order patterns.

Yue (2004a) proposes a comparison between the historically attested word order patterns for the long potential construction in mainstream Chinese and in (Early and Modern) Cantonese,

showing that the affirmative and negative potential construction are indeed asymmetrical, as there are more word order patterns in the negative than in the affirmative, and concludes that “[t]he asymmetry and complexity in the potential form of the V-C structure in modern Cantonese is [sic!] the result of the accumulation of several syntactic strata temporally and spatially” (Yue 2004a: 259). She points out that nearly all of the patterns found in Cantonese have been attested in the mainstream Chinese literature, the main exception being the negative NEG + V + *dāk* 得 + C + O pattern, which is apparently a specific Cantonese pattern. Thus, the different options available in Early and Modern Cantonese mostly reflect constructions that developed at some point in the recorded history of mainstream Chinese, at least for the long potential.

Yue (2004a) identifies a wide range of possible word orders in Early and Modern Cantonese. All of the patterns she found are also attested in our sample, and we found one more which is not included in her work: namely, V + NEG + *dāk* 得 + C (a rare pattern, as pointed out in Section 3). Indeed, in her Cantonese sample there are no patterns in which the negator directly precedes *dāk*; also, she does not take into consideration the short potential construction, the constructions with an adjective in the slot for the first verb, and the construction with preverbal *dāk*, and she does not elaborate on the meanings that these constructions may convey. As for the V + NEG + *de/dāk* 得 + C pattern, we did not find attestations in the mainstream Chinese literature; however, the pattern V – NEG – *de/dāk* 得 + O + C, with an object appearing before the complement, was apparently attested, although rare (Yue 2004a: 251).

The analysis of our sample confirms Yue’s (2004a) observation that there are more patterns for the negative long potential than for the affirmative potential (see Table 1 and Table 4): this applies also to the short potential. If we look at Modern Cantonese data, we see that this asymmetry also applies to the placement of the object: while in the affirmative long and short potential constructions we have only one possible position (after *dāk* 得 and after the complement, respectively), there are two different positions for the objects in their negative counterparts. Furthermore, in Section 3 we also pointed out that the negative form of the short potential appears earlier than the affirmative in our sample, and that the long potential is more often used in the negative form in the early texts. All of the above is in line with what we saw above for mainstream Chinese: namely, that the affirmative and negative potential constructions underwent somewhat different developments, in constructional terms; also, we pointed out that the negative form *bùdé* 不得 was used in the potential sense earlier than the affirmative *dé* 得.

As for the origins of the different patterns, we already saw that nearly all of them, with two exceptions, have attestations in mainstream Chinese. What clearly emerges is that Cantonese

(especially, Early Cantonese) preserves construction types in which there are different patterns of integration among the constituents, if compared to Mandarin. Firstly, in the long potential construction, the object may still appear between the verb and the complement; interestingly, while in Modern Cantonese this appears to be possible only for the negative form (14), in Early Cantonese this was also possible in the affirmative (41). Note that, as said earlier, already in Early Cantonese the most common option was having the object after the complement: this is indicative of a gradual convergence towards the more innovative (and mainstream/Mandarin) pattern. Secondly, in the short potential, the negator appears either before the first verb or between the verb and *dāk* 得: the former reflects the ‘native’ Cantonese order, while the latter is the same as the Modern Mandarin pattern (28), also from the semantic point of view (we will get back to this below). Thirdly, Cantonese allows the placement of the negation between the verb and *dāk* 得, which could be the continuation of the Medieval Chinese V + NEG + *dé* 得 + O + C construction, as said above, but could also be an independent development (note the position of the complement in the Cantonese construction).

As for the two patterns which do not seem to be attested as such in the mainstream literature, we find interesting insights in Yang (2005; see above, Section 3). Yang analysed the patterns for the short and long potential constructions in three collections of Cantonese folk ballads (*Yuè òu* 粵謳) from 1828, 1910 and 1924. In the texts she considered, the long potential has the negative forms NEG + V + *dāk* 得 + C, V + *mh* 唔 + C, and V + *bāt* 不 + C, the latter being clearly borrowed from the standard written language (hence the different negator). Yang (2005) shows that V + *bāt* 不 + C becomes increasingly uncommon in the time period she considered, while the two other constructions become increasingly more common: this may be interpreted as the ‘nativization’ of the Mandarin pattern V + NEG + C, with the substitution of *mh* 唔 for *bù/bāt* 不, while NEG + V + *dāk* 得 + V is clearly a native Cantonese construction. As for the short potential, she shows that *mh* 唔 + V + *dāk* 得 is about as common as the (mainstream) pattern V + *bùdé* 不得 in the first two sources she consulted, but the latter disappears in the 1924 text. Yang (2005) claims that the pattern V + *bùdé* 不得 did not influence the native model *mh* 唔 + V + *dāk* 得, because at this stage *dāk* in the short potential construction was already a verbal suffix, completely bound to the verb, and thus a negator could not appear between the verb and *dāk*. However, we have shown above (Section 2) that Modern Cantonese does actually have a V + *mh* 唔 + *dāk* 得 short potential construction (20): this might be understood as coming from a more recent layer of Mandarin influence, although it is already attested in a 1864 source in our sample (47). Lastly, note

that both NEG + V + *dāk* 得 and NEG + V + *dāk* 得 + C (+ O) are the earliest negative constructions in our sample: the latter is actually attested at the same time as and V + NEG + C and NEG + V + *dāk* 得 + O + C. This shows that NEG + V + *dāk* 得 clearly is a Cantonese construction, possibly related to earlier mainstream patterns; NEG + V + *dāk* 得 + C (+ O) is likely to be a distinct Cantonese pattern, with a quite long history, coexisting with the mainstream pattern V + NEG + C since its earliest attestations in our sample.

Thus, the (limited) diachronic data we have for Cantonese show that the differences between Mandarin and Cantonese may be largely explained by a partially divergent evolutionary path. In Table 5, we sum up the main differences in the diachronic evolution of *dé* 得 and *dāk* 得 in the potential constructions.

Table 5: Main differences in the historical evolution of *dé* 得 and *dāk* 得.

<i>Mandarin</i>	<i>Cantonese</i>
Negation became consistently postverbal (except for preverbal <i>bùdé</i> 不得)	Preverbal and postverbal negation, depending on the pattern
Objects always construction-external	Both construction-internal and construction-external objects
'Fusion' of V and <i>dé</i> 得 in the affirmative potential (but not in the V + NEG + <i>dé</i> 得 construction), and of NEG and C in the negative potential	Strong bond between V and <i>dāk</i> 得 (although V + NEG + <i>dāk</i> 得 is also possible), but not necessarily between NEG and C.
Symmetry (1:1 correspondence) between the affirmative and negative (long) potential	Asymmetry between the affirmative and negative (short and long) potential
Loss of the attainment sense of V and <i>dé</i> 得	Attainment sense of V + <i>dāk</i> 得 partially retained (in the focalized quantity/duration construction)
Decline of the V + <i>dé</i> 得 construction, retention of preverbal <i>děi</i> 得	V + <i>dāk</i> 得 construction very productive, <i>dāk</i> 得 + V common in Early Cantonese but limited to specific constructions in Modern Cantonese

Besides the differences which emerge in the comparison of the potential constructions, we may also remark that constructions as A + *dāk* 得, A + *dāk* 得 + C, *yáuh dāk* 有得 + V, and P + *dāk* 得 do not seem to be attested in mainstream Chinese, at least in the potential sense. Actually, A + *de* 得 + C is a possible extent construction in Modern Mandarin, but we already pointed out that the Cantonese extent construction makes use of the linking particle *dou* 到, rather than *dāk* 得; hence, a connection between the two does not seem to be very likely. We also pointed out that,

interestingly, Early Cantonese made use of a *dāk* 得 + V (+ C) construction, which may express both possibility and attainment (of a state), depending on the specific case: this meaning for a preverbal acquisitive modal does not appear to be available either in Mandarin or in the MSEA languages we considered here. It is true that preverbal *dé* 得 was used in mainstream Chinese to express circumstantial possibility (64): this, however, does not entail that the two constructions are directly related. All of the Cantonese patterns which are seemingly unattested in mainstream Chinese could well be local innovations, based on the rich array of (related) modal meanings which may be expressed by *dé/dāk* 得.

Lastly, it is worth remarking here that the manner construction, despite sharing a common origin with the potential construction(s), seems to have had a much more straightforward development: at least in Modern Cantonese, we see no significant differences with Mandarin, and no construction-internal object was retained.

7 Concluding remarks

In this paper, we tried to provide an overview of the synchronic and diachronic variation in the use of *dé* 得, *dāk* 得 and other acquisitive modals in Early and Modern Cantonese, in Modern Mandarin, in the mainstream Chinese literature and in a small sample of MSEA languages. Mandarin is often seen as a rather innovative Sinitic language (especially for its phonology and lexicon), while Cantonese and, generally speaking, southern dialects are said to be more conservative: what seems to emerge from our analysis is that Cantonese does indeed retain older word order patterns which have been lost (or, anyway, are no longer productive) in Modern Mandarin, but at the same time it appears to have developed its own constructions. The current inventory of uses for *dāk* in Modern Cantonese is more than just the product of different historical strata but, rather, a combination of retention and innovation; not all the innovations found in Cantonese may be explained by the influence of Mandarin (or, better, of the written standard), although its role can hardly be overstated.

The comparison with MSEA languages shows that, from the structural point of view, Cantonese shares many features with its sister language Mandarin, but even more with its areal neighbours: a notable degree of convergence exists between Cantonese and Zhuang, which are the most closely related in areal terms. As for the modal meanings conveyed by acquisitive modals, we showed that Cantonese, again, is more similar to Zhuang than to Mandarin or other MSEA languages. The core meanings expressed by modal *dāk* 得 in Cantonese are circumstantial and deontic possibility; epistemic modality does not appear to be among the domains of *dāk* 得, and

ability (participant-internal) is indeed limited. The Cantonese short potential is the only construction among the languages we surveyed in which a postverbal acquisitive modal conveys deontic modality: this could be argued to be a retention from earlier stages of the development of the V + *dé* 得 (see [63]).

Through the comparison of the development of *dé* 得 and *dāk* 得 we showed that the former had a much more straightforward development in mainstream Chinese, which is reflected in the relatively simple and symmetrical construction types found in Modern Mandarin, while Cantonese allows for a very broad range of options, sometimes associated with different meaning nuances. However, in many cases the choice between different word order patterns is not directly related to semantic differences, and different patterns may well be used to convey the same modal meaning: a case in point are the many options available for the long potential (see examples from [7] to [14]), which may have added semantic nuances, but are often (nearly) synonymous, from the point of view of modality. Interestingly, sometimes specific form-meaning associations emerge only in the negative form: this is the case of the additional prohibition meaning for the long potential, which is available only in one specific negation pattern (10). This is in line with a more general trend in the history of Sinitic languages, namely the parallel, partly independent development of the affirmative and negative potential constructions.

One residual issue in our survey concerns the status of the manner construction. As said earlier, despite the shared origin, the potential and manner construction apparently had a very different development in Cantonese, as the latter is now nearly identical to its Mandarin counterpart in most (if not all) respects. More research on the history of this construction in Cantonese is needed to understand the reason behind this major difference: as a tentative hypothesis, we dare suggest that the proliferation of different construction types and word order patterns for potential *dāk* 得 might be explained by the richer semantic content of *dāk* 得 in this family of constructions. We leave this for further research.

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