

A Sociolinguistic Analysis of Cantonese in mid19th - early 20th century USA

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Nearly 20,000 Chinese immigrants arrived in the United States, mostly in California, during the Gold Rush of 1848-1855, and many were there employed to build the Transcontinental Railroad (Chang, Fisher Fishkin, 2019). From that time onward, a few language materials to learn Cantonese were printed in the US for the benefit of westerners having to communicate for different purposes with the growing number of Chinese people in their country. As reported in the earliest of these works (Benoni 1867), Cantonese was fundamental to communicate with all the Chinese, regardless of their status or provenance.

What kind of Cantonese is depicted in these works? Who were the intended interlocutors? What language registers were used? What kind of sociocultural information can we gather from them? Can we retrace any influence of the local society of the time on Cantonese language?

In order to answer the above questions, this study has selected five works compiled between the mid-19th and early 20th centuries by Westerners aiming at teaching Cantonese, with the help of native speakers (see primary sources below). An analysis of these texts will firstly reveal the “kind” of Cantonese portrayed (oral/spoken, formal/informal) and the language registers used according to the different interlocutors. It will try to finally assess the influence of American society on Cantonese and on the way it was used, mainly in terms of lexicon, code-switching and grammar.

Primary sources:

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Investigating Dictionary Use Habits of CFL University Students in Italy: A Questionnaire-Based Case Study

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Atkins and Rundell (2008: 24) maintained that dictionaries may be divided, according to their

language(s), into monolingual, bilingual (unidirectional or bidirectional) and multilingual; according to the medium they appear on, they may be divided into print, electronic (in the form of a DVD or a handheld device) and web based. Granger (2012: 4) on the other hand, held that one of the results of electronic lexicography is that “barriers between the different types of language resources” are being removed, leading to the hybridization of the previous forms of lexicographical products.

This contribution addresses the issue of dictionary use in the process of learning Chinese as a foreign language, focusing on the differences between online/offline and monolingual/bilingual dictionaries. Research on dictionary use is a well-established field, dating back to the end of the 1980s (Tono 2001); many studies on the subject are aimed at pointing out the skills that users should possess to employ the dictionary in an efficient way (among the latest, see Zhang, Xia and Liao 2018) Research on electronic dictionaries started to thrive in the 2000s (see Nesi 2000; Granger and Paquot 2012). Despite Müller -Spitzer, Koplenig and Töpel 's (2012, 425) complaint about the scarcity of research on the usage/ of online dictionaries, several contributions have in fact discussed it lately (among the latest, Zheng and Wang 2016; Farina, Vrbinc and Vrbinc 2019). Among these, Lestari, Rasyid and Nuruddin (2020 and 2021) have investigated the usage of offline (i.e., printed) vs. online dictionaries, and monolingual vs. bilingual dictionaries in a number of EFL students in Jakarta: their results show that most students prefer to use a bilingual online dictionary rather than a monolingual and offline dictionary.

Based on these premises, we created an online, semi-structured questionnaire, which was submitted to BA and MA students who learn Chinese as a foreign language in Italian Universities with the following goals: 1) to investigate the languages (monolingual vs. bilingual) and the medium (offline vs. online) of dictionaries they are trained during their course(s); 2) to verify the languages and the medium of the dictionaries they were invited or even required to use in classroom activity; 3) to know the languages and the medium of the dictionaries the students commonly prefer to use in individual work.

At the time of writing this abstract, 227 students from several Italian universities answered the questionnaire. The preliminary results suggest that, on the one hand, the respondents are usually trained to employ offline (i.e., printed) dictionaries, and that these are also commonly (though not exclusively) required during classroom activities; on the other, the answers also show that, when using dictionaries for individual study, students show a clear preference for online bilingual dictionaries, with a particular prevalence for smartphone apps.

References

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