

Innovative sound changes in Hong Kong Cantonese: the case of syllable-final consonant alveolarisation

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This talk presents findings from a study on alveolarization in Hong Kong Cantonese, a phenomenon whereby velar nasal $-ŋ$ and velar stop $-k$ syllable-final consonants are fronted to alveolar counterparts $-n$ and $-t$ respectively. Since one of the first descriptions on alveolarization (Bauer 1979), there have been a number of quantitative sociolinguistic studies on sound changes, particularly of the syllable-initial consonants, in Cantonese (e.g. Yeung 1980; Bauer 1982; Pan 1982; Bourgerie 1990; and Ho 2004), but few studies have focused solely on alveolarization of the syllable-final consonants (except two small-scale studies, Shum 1993 and Wong 2005). To address the question of how prevalent alveolarization is in present-day Hong Kong Cantonese, and to investigate the extent to which language-internal and –external factors correlate with alveolarization, I collected sociolinguistic interview data in 2010, from 30 native speakers of Hong Kong Cantonese, stratified according to age group (14-18; 19-45; and 46-65) and gender. The data elicitation was also designed to obtain a range of speech styles, including casual speech, passage reading, word list reading, and minimal pair reading styles. Preliminary findings suggest that the linguistic variables correlated with age, but surprisingly, it was not the youngest speakers who displayed the greatest degree of alveolarization, as would be expected in a progressive sound change situation. Instead, it was the middle age group which displayed the greatest degree of alveolarization. These findings, along with further discussion of linguistic constraints such as phonetic environment, lexical frequency, and phonological competition, are presented in this talk, in an attempt to answer the question of which factors drive or impede the progression of this sound change.

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