

# Chapter 1 Introduction

## 1.0. Background - The Cantonese Language

Cantonese, also known as Yue, is one of several major languages spoken in China; the others being Mandarin, Wu, Min and Hakka. The first and oldest sense of the term Cantonese is in reference to the variety of Chinese spoken in and around the city of Canton (Guangzhou), the provincial capital of Guangdong Province in southern China (Wong, Chan & Beckman 2005:3). There are approximately 64 million speakers of Cantonese (Grimes 1996, cited in Wong, Chan & Beckman 2005:4) most of whom are from or live in Guangdong in the southern China. It is also spoken in Hong Kong, Macau, Taiwan and in some of the South-East Asian countries such as Malaysia, Singapore and Vietnam; it is also the lingua franca in many overseas settlements of the Chinese diaspora. The variety of Cantonese spoken in Hong Kong is more similar to that of Canton compared to varieties of the language spoken in towns closer to Canton City itself. Hence, socially prestigious Standard Cantonese can refer to the Cantonese spoken in Hong Kong as well as in Canton (Wong, Chan & Beckman 2005:4). It is considered as one of the major dialects in China but many linguists prefer to regard it and the other “dialects” of Chinese as separate languages. This is because the “dialects” are not mutually intelligible although they share the same Chinese writing system. Educated speakers from these different language varieties may recognise the written Chinese but will invariably pronounce the words in different ways. Consequently, from a linguistic point of view, they are not considered as proper dialects but rather as separate languages (Norman 1988, cited in the UCLA Language Materials Project 1992: para 2).

## **1.1. Role and Status of Cantonese**

In the Guangdong province, Cantonese is used alongside Mandarin, while in Hong Kong English, Cantonese and Putonghua each play different and changing roles in education sector (Bray & Koo 2004:215). Although Cantonese is used extensively in the Guangdong province as the predominant language, it is not being used as a medium of instruction in schools or for official occasions, as it is not the Official Language of China (Language Materials Project 1992: para 13). In Hong Kong, Cantonese is the dominant form of spoken Chinese and is used in education, business, government, and the media (Languages of the World 2007: para 4).

Written Cantonese is considered more reflective and expressive among speakers of Cantonese. Thus, it is used in instant messengers, movie subtitles and advertisements. Often, even records of legal documents in Hong Kong also use written Cantonese, in order to record exactly what a witness has said (Nationmaster 2005: para 4).

## **1.2. Cantonese Phonology**

In Cantonese, words are composed of single syllables and are assigned tones, where different tones can change the meaning of the same syllable. There are at least six to at most ten tones, depending on which method of classification is used. These tones interact in complex ways and under certain circumstances the tones can change, a phenomenon known as Tone Sandhi. Phonologically, a Cantonese syllable consists of an Initial (onset), and a Final (nucleus+coda), with the nucleus is obligatory (Law, Lee & Lau 2001:992) as well as a Tone. According to the transcription scheme of the Linguistic Society of Hong Kong (LSHK 1999), there are 19 Initial consonants in Cantonese and 53 Cantonese Final consonants as shown in Table 1.1 and 1.2 (A Chinese Talking Syllabary of the Cantonese Dialect: An Electronic Repository 1999).

**Table 1.1**  
**Cantonese Initials in the LSHK (1999) and IPA system**

affricate	/z/ , /c/
approximant	/l/ , /w/ , /j/
fricative	/s/ , /f/ , /h/
plosive	/b/ , /d/ , /g/ , /gw/ , /p/ , /t/ , /k/ , /kw/
nasal	/m/ , /n/ , /ng/

**Table 1.2**  
**Cantonese Finals in the LSHK (1999) and IPA system**

Vowels	e, oe, i, o, u, yu, aa
Diphthong (off-glide)	ai, ei, oi, ui, au, iu, ou, aai, aau, eoi
Syllabic nasal	m, ng
Vowel-nasal	aam, am, im, aan, an, in, on, eon, un, yun, aang, ang, eng, ing, oeng, ong, ung
Vowel-stop	aap, ap, ip, aat, at, it, ot, eot, ut, yut, aak, ak, ek, ik, ok, oek, uk

In order to further classify of fricative initial /s/ and the affricate initial /c/ and /z/, some researchers divide into finer sub-classes so that they correspond to their typical allophonic variations. As a result, there is a total of 23 Initials (a null initial is included) that need to be modeled (Wong *et al.* 1999:1091-4).

The Cantonese language has the most intricate tone patterns of all the Chinese dialects. In this study, the tone contours set in “Cantonese Primer” (Chao 1947) will be used as shown in table 1.3. There are nine citation tones: six basic tones and three repeat tones (/5/, /3/ and /2/) in Cantonese and they are divided into two groups: Non-entering Tones and Entering Tones. As can be seen from Figure 1.1-1.6 at p.5 the tones are characterized by “distinctive patterns of pitch (F0)”.

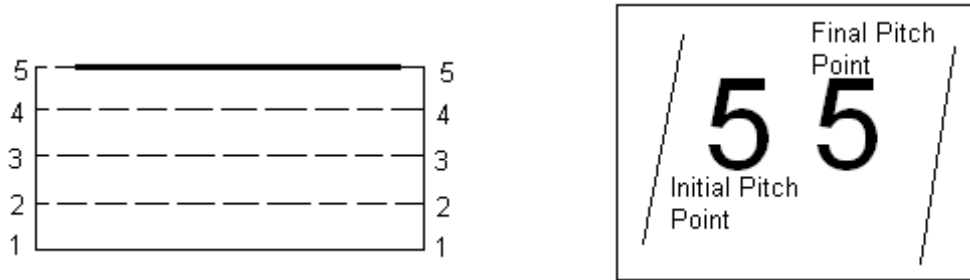
**Table 1.3**  
**Cantonese Tones Classification**

	Tone No	Pitch Feature	Tone Contour
Non-Entering Tones	1	High level	/55/
	2	Mid rising	/35/
	3	Mid level	/33/
	4	Low falling	/21/
	5	Low rising	/13/
	6	Low level	/22/
Entering Tones	7	High level	/5/
	8	Mid level	/3/
	9	Low level	/2/

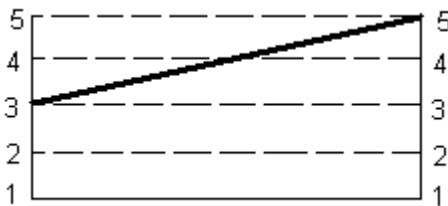
Standard Cantonese mostly preserves the tones from Middle Chinese, whilst the Entering Tones cannot be found in Modern Mandarin but is presented in some other Chinese “dialects”, such as “Wu” and “Min”. Entering-tone words have /p/, /t/, /k/ endings, but some dialects even include the glottal stop ending. Cantonese Entering Tones have a slight difference from Non-entering Tones, which have relatively shorter tone stressing. This is due to of the truncation that results from the plosive endings, which is also called *cù shèng* “促声” (Xú 1993:106). Entering Tones in Cantonese have three Level Tones, /5/, /3/, /2/, in which, /5/ refers to /55/, /3/ refers to /33/ and /2/ refers to /22/ of Non-entering Tones.

As can be seen in Figure 1.1, there are two vertical sequences of numbers which represent the level of the tones: the numbers on the left representing the initial pitch point,

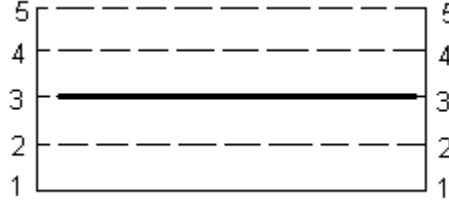
whereas the numbers on the right representing the final pitch point. The bolded line in Figure 1.1 represents the pattern of the tone contour of /55/. Figure 1.1-1.6 show schematic annotations of the tone contours in Cantonese.



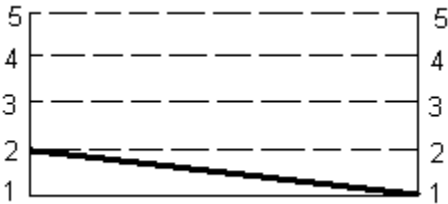
**Figure 1.1**  
**Tone Contour /55/**  
 (or Tone Number 1)



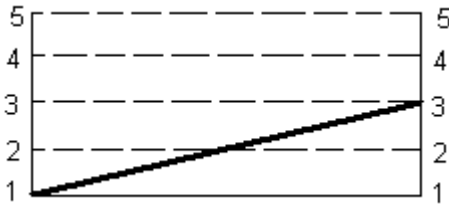
**Figure 1.2**  
**Tone Contour /35/**  
 (or Tone Number 2)



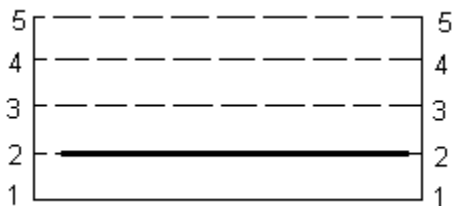
**Figure 1.3**  
**Tone Contour /33/**  
 (or Tone Number 3)



**Figure 1.4**  
**Tone Contour /21/**  
 (or Tone Number 4)



**Figure 1.5**  
**Tone Contour /13/**  
 (or Tone Number 5)



**Figure 1.6**  
**Tone Contour /22/**  
(or Tone Number 6)

### 1.2.1. Intonation and Syntax

Apart from pitch variation within a syllable to indicate lexical tone, pitch variation is also used to indicate different types of statements and interrogatives in Cantonese. A Cantonese statement and interrogative can share the same Subject+Verb+Object (SVO) syntax (Wong *et al.* 2004:1). Sentence-final Particles (SFPs), for example “𠵼” (aa4), can turn a declarative into an interrogative, see Example 1.1.

Example 1.1

佢(S) 番(V) 屋企(O)	Statement	佢	番	屋企	
Keoi5 faan1 uk1 kei5	Interrogative	佢	番	屋企	𠵼 (SFP)
he/she goes home					aa4

As can be seen in example 1.1, the statement and the interrogative, share a same syntactic structure. Based on the original tone setting, it can be expected that the declarative will have a final Low-rising tone from “kei5” /13/, while in the interrogative, on the other hand, a final Low-falling tone can be expected from the SFP, that is, “aa4” /21/.

A general assumption about the difference of interrogative and declarative is that an interrogative tends to end with a Rising Final Intonation, especially in Yes/No interrogatives, while a declarative ends with a Falling Final Intonation (Katamba 1997:243). However, it has been shown that even within interrogatives, there can be different sentence-final intonation patterns (Liu & Xu 2005:75), for example, Yes/No Interrogatives tend to show final rise more frequently whilst, Wh-Interrogatives tend to end with a final fall. Kohler (2003:3) presents the phenomenon of both final rise and fall do coexist in Yes/No and Wh- Interrogatives. However, there is a lack of studies on this phenomenon.

### **1.3. Purpose of the Study**

In view of the fact that there is a gap in the research, the present study seeks to examine the different types of interrogatives used in Cantonese with the focus being on sentence-final intonation patterns. In particular, this study aims to examine the different contour patterns, which are rising, falling and level, at the end of different types of interrogatives as used in spoken Cantonese and to find explanations for these occurrences. More specifically, the research questions are as follow:

1. What are the sentence-final intonation patterns in Cantonese Interrogatives?
2. What is the relationship between type of interrogatives and particular sentence-final intonation patterns?
3. What are the possible variables that affect the sentence-final intonation patterns?

### **1.4. Significance and Scope of the Study**

This study investigates intonation patterns in interrogatives used in conversational Cantonese which have not been previously examined in detail. Further, although there are countless numbers of reference books on the market today for those who wish to learn conversational Cantonese, much of the available material is not based on natural spoken data. The main inadequacy of current textbooks and cassette tapes on conversational Cantonese is the absence of any comprehensive description of the forms of intonations used in Cantonese, and especially those used in different types of interrogatives. This study is a step towards providing such a description based on Cantonese as used by native speakers.

## **1.5. Limitations of the Study**

The present study investigates the sentence-final intonation patterns used in interrogatives of conversational Cantonese based solely on the variety of Cantonese spoken in Hong Kong and therefore, may not be reflective of other Cantonese varieties used in other parts of the world. It is also limited to the interrogatives used in the context of a specific movie. The results from the present study can only therefore reflect the interrogatives used within this movie and may not be inclusive of all types of interrogatives used in spoken Cantonese.

## **1.6. Organization of the Dissertation**

This chapter presented an overview of the current knowledge of the status, phonology and syntax of Cantonese. It outlined the research question of this study indicating its significance and limitations.

This dissertation is divided into five chapters. Chapter 1 provides a brief background of Cantonese and highlights the phonological features of Cantonese relevant to this study. The chapter also outlines the purpose of this study, its significance and limitations. Chapter 2 is a review of relevant literature and includes a discussion of related studies on Cantonese intonation. Chapter 3 discusses the methodology used in this study while Chapter 4 presents and discusses the results of the study. Finally, Chapter 5 provides the summary and conclusion for the study.