3-2015

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Variations of the third-person singular pronoun in Hong Kong Cantonese

Litong Chen*

1 Introduction

The third-person singular pronoun 佢 in Hong Kong Cantonese has several variations. While the citation form is koei (IPA: [kʰoy13]), which is generally regarded as the standard pronunciation, native speakers frequently substitute the voiceless aspirated velar stop k- with the voiceless aspirated alveolar stop t- (toei [tʰoy13], with the glottal fricative h- (hoei [høy13]) or with a zero onset (oei [Øøy13]). Some speakers use both koei and other forms alternatively, while other speakers consistently use only one of these forms (Bauer and Benedict 1997:330). This variation phenomenon is prevalent in modern Hong Kong, and has been the subject of various research studies.

Bauer and Benedict (1997:331) note that younger speakers tend to use the hoei form more than the older generation does. They also suggest that the change from a velar stop to a stop fricative is not only seen across Cantonese dialects, but also matches the historical velar-to-glottal sound change pattern in Chinese languages in general. Bourgerie (1990) identifies, from a variationist perspective, a correlation between the use of hoei and both age and formality of context. His main finding is that the use of hoei is more frequently observed among the younger generation and in informal situations. In comparison, other social factors examined in his study—for instance, gender, education, and place of birth—are not shown to significantly influence the k-h variation at the confidence level α = 0.05. In this study, Bourgerie also finds that in terms of formality, there is very little difference in the frequency of hoei use between impromptu speech and interview settings (36.8% vs. 37.4%), while in public speech the frequency is notably lower (7.3%).

This paper picks up where the previous studies leave off, and aims to answer the following question: Other than age and formality of context, are there any other linguistic and social factors that influence Cantonese speakers’ choice between the citation form koei (henceforth the k-form or the k-variation) and other variant forms? In particular, this paper investigates whether age, gender, conversational roles, and/or the position of the third-person singular pronoun in a sentence are closely associated with the use of the citation form vis-à-vis the variant forms. Although Bourgerie’s (1990) research does not find significant difference between male and female speakers in favoring one form over another, Eckert (1989) points out that gender can interact with other social variables in a very significant way, even though gender itself may not necessarily be an independent variable that has a significant influence. In light of this fact, the influence of gender on variation of the third person pronoun will still be investigated in the current study.

2 Methodology

This paper relies on spoken Cantonese data from the Hong Kong Cantonese Adult Language Corpus (HKCAC). This database records some spontaneous phone-in programs and forums on Hong Kong radio stations between November 1998 and February 2000. The HKCAC database provides orthographic transcriptions (in standard written Chinese) and detailed phonetic transcriptions capturing phonetic variations. False starts, repetitions, overlapping speech, pauses, and speech errors are also included in the transcriptions.

This study extracted 721 tokens of the third-person singular pronoun from the HKCAC database. Examined in this study are the tokens from two of the phone-in radio programs with a total length of 142 minutes. Content details are displayed in Table 1 (c.f. Leung and Law 2001: 309).

*I would like to thank the following individuals for their comments and suggestions at various stages of this research: Professor Kathryn Campbell-Kibler, Tsz-Him Tsui, Jackson L. Lee, as well as anonymous PLC reviewers. I also thank Nicholas Joch for his help in editing this manuscript. All remaining mistakes are mine.
Table 1: Details of the examined programs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Program name</th>
<th>Theme</th>
<th># of callers</th>
<th>Callers' ages</th>
<th>Hosts</th>
<th>Total time</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Middle-aged</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To appease your mind</td>
<td>Current affairs</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Star Trek and Titanic</td>
<td>Personal matters</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: Collinearity between “role” and “gender”

With female hosts absent from the data, “role” becomes partly predictable by “gender.” That is, if a speaker is female, one would immediately know that she is a caller, as hosts were male only. In this situation, although both “role” and “gender” are good predictors of the response variable $k$-variation by themselves, one of them can potentially be redundant and therefore may not be a good predictor of the response variable in a multiple-predictor model involving both independent variables. The variable selection analysis is helpful in view of this, as shown below.

After identifying this collinearity, I selected independent variables again using stepwise me-
methods. I conducted both forward and backward selections, and the results echo each other. As I predicted, one of the two independent variables having collinearity was thereby removed. Both forward and backward selection methods remove “gender”, and suggest a correlation between k-variation and the other three independent variables. This also echoes Bourgerie’s (1990) conclusion that gender does not significantly influence k-h variation. The two models including and excluding “gender”, respectively, are compared in Table 4.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model</th>
<th>P-value</th>
<th>age</th>
<th>gender</th>
<th>position (AIC)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>K ~ host/caller +</td>
<td>0.001</td>
<td>0.778</td>
<td></td>
<td>-1135.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K ~ host/caller + age +</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
<td>0.004</td>
<td>0.024</td>
<td>-1137.10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4: Model comparison with and without “gender” as a predictor

Finally, I took random variables into consideration and developed a mixed-effects regression model for comparison. I included “speaker” as a random-effect predictor, with the fixed variables “role”, “age”, and “position in sentence.” The results show that in the mixed-effects model, the k-form cannot be effectively predicted by two of the fixed-effect predictors, namely, “role” and “age”, as suggested by large p-values (0.147 and 0.106, respectively). However, the k-form can be effectively predicted by the other independent variable: “position in sentence” (p < 0.001). That is to say, the k-form can be predicted by “position in sentence”, even after allowing for the random effect of “speaker.” In other words, a generalization can be made between k-form, “speaker”, and “position in sentence.”

As shown in Figure 5, the relationship between the k-form and the independent variable “position in sentence” across speakers is not totally random. In a sentence-initial position (at the left-hand side of the figure), most of the dots are plotted above the 50% line: In this position, the k-form occurs more frequently than the non-k-forms. My conclusion, therefore, is that when the third-person singular variable is in a sentence-initial position, all speakers, with only two exceptions (LX and YS), tend to use the k-form.

![Figure 5: Line plot of frequency of the k-variation](image)
4 Implications

This paper examines the third-person singular pronoun in Hong Kong Cantonese and investigates some of the social and linguistic factors that are correlated with the occurrence of the koei form and other variant forms. Based on statistical analyses, this paper finds that in a mixed-effects model with both fixed variables (“role”, “age”, and “position in sentence”) and random variables (“speaker”), the response variable k-form can only be effectively predicted by the linguistic factors “position in sentence” and “speaker.” None of the social linguistic factors show a significant correlation with the dependent variable. These results suggest that the use of the citation form vis-à-vis variant forms of the Hong Kong Cantonese third-person singular pronoun is more likely to be a linguistic issue than a social linguistic one.

Kirchner’s (1998) study sheds light on this phenomenon. Based on his extensive lenition survey of 272 languages, Kirchner finds a large number of cases in which lenition is blocked in the word-initial position, and some examples of this are given in the table below. Hong Kong Cantonese also seems to exhibit this phenomenon, and the low number of cases of non-k-forms in sentence-initial positions might be explained by a universal phrase-/utterance-initial blocking of lenition.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language</th>
<th>Reference</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nepali</td>
<td>Acharya 1991</td>
<td>Spirantization of k except phrase-initially</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Samoan</td>
<td>Mosel &amp; Hovdhaugen 1992</td>
<td>s-ts utterance-initially</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td>Harris 1969</td>
<td>Spirantization obligatorily blocked utterance-initially</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tümpisa Shoshone</td>
<td>Dayley 1989</td>
<td>Spirantization of stops and nasals blocked phrase-initially</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6: Phrase- or utterance-initial blocking of lenition

In future studies, more balanced data should be examined. In particular, a more complete study should include programs with female hosts, and this could potentially break the apparent collinearity between the independent variables “role” and “gender.” Another question to answer is: What exactly does the variable “role” mean in more everyday contexts? Such a predictor makes perfect sense in a phone-in radio program, but what might it suggest about everyday conversations in which there are no explicit “hosts” or “callers”? Future research should also consider the potential differences in third-person singular pronoun usage in speech with degrees of consciousness (spontaneous speech vs. reading, for example). Finally, it seems worthwhile to examine other variation forms (toei and oei) as well, rather than grouping them collectively as variant or non-standard forms together with hoei.

References


\[1^{The original table is from Kirchner (1998:11) and has been slightly revised to fit the format of this paper.\]

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