ABSTRACT

The research question of this dissertation is whether the early Cantonese-English contact provides a phonological basis to the development of Hong Kong English (HKE henceforth). The dissertation provides an affirmative answer by studying four Cantonese-English bilingual dictionaries in the mid 19th and early 20th centuries.

The empirical evidence from the four bilingual dictionaries reveals three types of phenomena: inheritance, stabilization, and deviation. The phenomenon of inheritance refers to the phonological features discovered in the early Cantonese-English contact that have persisted in modern HKE. The phenomenon of stabilization includes the phonological features of the early Cantonese-English contact that are fortified and regularized in modern HKE. The phenomenon of deviation indicates certain phonological features of the early Cantonese-English contact differ from those of modern HKE.

The findings of the dissertation fill two research gaps in the literature of HKE. One research gap is the omission of the English acquisition patterns for average Hongkongers before mass English-language education was implemented in the 1970s. For the Hongkongers who had no access to formal schools, the Cantonese-English bilingual dictionaries were used as the learning materials in self-study or private schools. The other research gap is the lack of a historical perspective into the variations of modern HKE phonology. Most of the studies on HKE are synchronic in nature and fail to realize that the variations may be derived from the two different English acquisition patterns in history. This dissertation reveals that
the phonology of the functional bilinguals in HKE (the HKE speakers who could use English for various formal and informal needs) might be influenced by the phonological features of inheritance and stabilization discovered in the early Cantonese-English contact.

The findings establish the historical connections behind modern HKE phonology, enhancing the recognition of HKE as an autonomous New English Variety. This enables HKE to be the symbol of solidarity for Hongkongers. This dissertation investigates the historical data from the Cantonese-English bilingual dictionaries that remain largely unstudied for a long time. Transformed into a retrievable dataset, the historical data can be used for linguistic theorizing.
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