

On the Word Order Differences Between Cantonese and Mandarin

Zehong Liang^{1*}, Shiqi Ye¹

¹ College of Foreign Studies, Guilin University of Technology, Guilin, China

Email addresses

912780199@qq.com (Zehong Liang), venuskey@foxmail.com (Shiqi Ye)

*Correspondence: 912780199@qq.com

Received: 17 April 2023; **Accepted:** 28 April 2023; **Published:** 14 May 2023

Abstract:

Cantonese, differs from Mandarin in terms of vocabulary, phonology and grammar, among which, the word order is the most typical. Based on typology, this paper compares the differences between Cantonese and Mandarin in word order through 25 examples. The author finds that the differences mainly exist in fronting and postponement of Cantonese word order, and Cantonese speakers can reduce the irregular usage of Mandarin through some training.

Keywords:

Cantonese, Mandarin, Linguistic Typology, Word Order Differences

1. Introduction

1.1. Research Background

Cantonese is widely spoken in Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao greater bay, and some parts of other provinces like the south-eastern part of Guangxi and Hainan. It has a perfect writing system, and can be all expressed in Chinese characters, which is different with other Chinese dialects. Mandarin is China's official language, and is widely used throughout the country.

The differences in word order types between northern and southern dialects of modern Chinese may reflect the different sources of early Chinese in the north and south, and some southern Chinese dialects are the result of the development and evolution of early southern Chinese [6]. Far from central China, Lingnan areas developed individually compared with other parts of China. Therefore, Cantonese, the language spoken in this area, perfectly retains the characteristics of ancient Chinese, which leads to the difference to modern Chinese as well.

Nowadays, modern Chinese becomes more simplified. This leads to the difference between the two languages. Compared with Mandarin, Cantonese is quite different in pronunciation, words, and grammar. After the founding of the People's Republic of China, Mandarin is promoted throughout the country. But because of the huge difference between the two languages, Cantonese speakers tend to say Cantonese like Mandarin, which affects their communication with other people, and even made some jokes.

After the reform and opening up, Guangdong has a higher status in terms of China's economy. Over recent years, in particular, Guangdong, Hong Kong and Macao greater bay thrived, and people in Guangdong and other provinces (especially the northern parts of China) have closer communication. The dialect might become a hinder to this communication and the development of the greater bay to some extent.

1.2. Research Purpose and Significance

During the long history of China, different states split and unified, which was affected by various conditions like politics, wars, etc. So different dialects developed in different areas, and Cantonese is right in this situation. The Cantonese, therefore, has a large difference with Mandarin. And its speakers would make some mistakes naturally. To solve this problem, making the analysis of the difference of Cantonese and Mandarin word order is vitally important. Among the differences, grammar has the largest research value, for it has the transferability regularity, so it is easier to be applied in more communication occasions.

Having said that, Cantonese has a close relationship with Mandarin, which are inseparable from each other. Also, they are communication tools, which can make people's daily information exchange possible. So, the difference between these two languages cannot overtake their common points. The analysis of the difference between Cantonese and Mandarin does not mean they are in conflict. And communication gaps can be eliminated through some training.

The research can help learners to find out the difference between Cantonese and Mandarin, and facilitate the communication of people in these areas. The author has written this article in the hope that it will draw the attention of Mandarin learners to the differences between Cantonese and Mandarin word order, and to understand the patterns through a large number of the examples, which will enable learners to understand the differences in the order of Cantonese and Mandarin.

1.3. Theoretical Framework

In this paper the author will apply the research methods and ideas of linguistic typology to analyse the differences in the order of Cantonese and Mandarin from the perspective of fronting and postponement of Cantonese word order.

Language typology is also known as language universals and linguistic typology, which differs from formal linguistics and functional linguistics. The core approach of typology is to make cross attest, that is, to examine the distribution and performance of a syntactic structure across dialects or homographies, and to verify in which languages a certain structure is present.

The typology of languages is based on the idea that there is a typological consistency in all the languages of the world; the consistency is also known as universality or commonality. Linguistic typologists hope to gain an understanding and grasp of the commonalities of human languages through cross-linguistic comparative studies. Without much more complete sampling of the world's languages, the absence of exceptions to most of the universals asserted here cannot be fully assured [2].

Even the same type of pragmatic markers sometimes has different pragmatic functions in the two languages, perhaps because of the different cultural, social and cognitive constraints to which the two languages belong [3]. Cantonese and Mandarin have their own separate linguistic systems, and the composition of their linguistic

components is governed by their respective linguistic systems. The use of Cantonese and Mandarin is also influenced by the subjective factors of their respective users, which objectively requires that the typological analysis of the discourse accounts must grasp the two types of discourse markers in terms of their intrinsic linguistic mechanisms, and focus on the core features of these linguistic phenomena.

Indeed, linguistic typology had started as a method of crosslinguistic comparison which aimed at finding linguistic possibilities, improbabilities, and impossibilities (i.e., more and less highly populated domains in the multidimensional space of feature values) [1]. In the process of sorting out the differences between Cantonese and Mandarin, a linguistic typology approach can be used to compare a large amount of relevant corpus and find out the transferability for the Cantonese people to learn Mandarin.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Domestic Studies on Cantonese Word Order

Studies on Cantonese word order in China focus on the comparison to Mandarin, the official language in China. As a result, the comparative method is widely used in the research of Cantonese word order, and the paper usually applies this way to finish the research.

The study of Cantonese word order is also gradually improved these years. The research on the word order of Cantonese was rough at the very beginning. After the 1990s, the studies have become more and more detailed and in-depth.

2.2. International Studies on Cantonese Word Order

Cantonese is also the only Chinese language in China that has been independently studied in foreign universities except Mandarin. Studies abroad tend to apply innovative research methods and do the research from a unique angle. Hong Kong and overseas scholars are sensitive to some new linguistic research methods in foreign countries, and they have used them to analyze and explain the Cantonese sequencing phenomenon with great novelty. Deng Siying's adopted a new way to study the differences between Chinese dialects is a novel exploration. In his book *The Parametric Theory of Chinese Dialect Grammar*, the principles of generative grammar and parametric theory in the analysis of Cantonese double-object inflections was used. He argues that the inverted double object structure in Cantonese is actually the same as the grammatical structure except that the preposition is omitted, and the reason for the omission of the preposition is to avoid phonological repetition [4].

2.3. Overview

The current study of Cantonese language order has made good progress, but in general there are still many topics waiting to be developed.

At present, there is relatively more research on a single specific sequence of words, while some phenomena are not studied in sufficient depth, like the study of Cantonese sequencing from a sociolinguistic perspective. There is a new phenomenon of reverse influence, which means, the Mandarin affects the Cantonese speaking as well. Especially in the era of strengthening communication throughout the country and the promotion of Mandarin, the Cantonese speakers gradually formed the thinking logic of Mandarin, and thus use this logic in Cantonese. This phenomenon is also due to the

great differences between Cantonese and Mandarin word order, and affects the communications of Cantonese speakers to some extends, which leads to the Mandarin like Cantonese.

3. The Fronting of Cantonese Word Order

In order to stress the point of a sentence, the Cantonese would put some compositions forward.

3.1. Double-object Sentences

Cantonese's double-object sentence is quite different than Mandarin's. The major differences lie in the order of the objects. Mandarin uses the structure of "subject + verb + personal object + item object". In this structure, personal object comes before item object. In Cantonese, however, the object is usually placed in front of the person. Its order is "subject + verb + item object + personal object".

Example 1:

Mandarin: 我给他一台电脑。

Cantonese: 我俾部电脑佢。

English: I gave this computer to him.

There is also a difference between Cantonese and Mandarin in the "verb + 给(give)" compound verb with a double object. Cantonese generally splits verb and "给" so that they each have an object, whereas Mandarin "verb + give" compound verbs are usually together.

Example 2:

Mandarin: 他借给我一部相机。

Cantonese: 佢借部相机俾我。

English: He lends me a camera.

If the object of the referent has a modifier, the preposition "过" (than) is often added before the object of the referent.

Example 3:

Mandarin: 我给你一件漂亮的衣服。

Cantonese: 我俾件靓衫过你。

English: I'll give you a beautiful cloth.

Sometimes people also encounter sentences in which the object of the reference comes first and the object of the reference comes second. But such sentences have this particular meaning: either to emphasize the person referred to by the object, or to indicate a different meaning from the usual double-object sentence.

Example 4:

Mandarin: 我给他钱，又不是给你。

Cantonese: 我俾佢钱，又唔系俾你嘢。

English: I give him money, not you.

In Example 5, the speaker wants to emphasise that the person to whom something is given is him rather than you.

3.2. Comparative Sentences

In Mandarin, comparative sentences are mainly used in “比” (compare) sentences. When writing down the subject of comparison as A, the object of comparison as B, and the trait or degree of comparison as X, the sentence can be written down as “A + 比 + B + X”.

The preposition “比” is used in the following example to express comparison. In Cantonese, instead of using this form of comparison, the word “过”(than) is applied, which can be written as “A + X + 过 + B”.

Example 6:

Mandarin: 广州比深圳大。

Cantonese: 广州大过深圳。

English: Guangzhou is bigger than Shenzhen.

If the adjective is followed by a complement, the complement would place at the end of the sentence without following the adjective.

Example 7:

Mandarin: 他的数学比我好得多。

Cantonese: 佢数学好过我好多。

English: His math is much better than me.

3.3. Interrogative Sentences

The Cantonese has the similar word order with Mandarin in yes-no interrogatives, wh-questions and alternative questions. But their interrogative pronouns and modal particle are different.

Example 8:

Mandarin: 他是广州人吗?

Cantonese: 佢系广州人吗?

English: Is he a Cantonese?

Example 9:

Mandarin: 这本书是谁写的?

Cantonese: 依本书系边个写嘅?

English: Who wrote this book?

Example 10:

Mandarin: 是放在这, 还是放在那?

Cantonese: 系摆依到, 定系摆果到?

English: Should I put it here, or over there?

In yes-no questions, the word order of these two languages are the same, except the for the asking way. The Cantonese uses “V + 唔 + V”, while the Mandarin is “V + 不 + V”. In this case, the verb or adjective should be monosyllabic.

Example 11:

Mandarin: 你去不去香港?

Cantonese: 你去唔去香港?

English: Do you want to go to Hong Kong?

If the predicate is a verb-complement phrase, Mandarin uses the structure “V + 得 + R + V + 不 + R”, while the Cantonese uses “V + 不 + V + 得 + R”.

Example 12:

Mandarin: 你拿得到拿不到?

Cantonese: 你搵唔搵得到?

English: Can you get it?

If the verb in a positive or negative question is with an object, Cantonese and Mandarin have a different order. The Cantonese puts the object between the positive and negative questions, i.e., “S + V + O + 不 + V”. The Mandarin order is “S + V + 不 + V + O”, putting the object behind the interrogative sentence.

Example 13:

Mandarin: 你看不看到他?

Cantonese: 你睇唔睇到佢?

English: Can you see him?

3.4. Negative Sentences

In a negative sentence with a verb-complement structure, if the verb-complement structure also has an object and the object is a personal pronoun, the object in Mandarin is placed after the verb-complement structure and the order is “verb + not + complement + object”; in Cantonese, the object is directly followed by the verb before the complement and the order is generally “verb + object + not + complement”.

Example 14:

Mandarin: 我想不到这些。

Cantonese: 我霖佢唔到。

English: I can't think about it.

This format is more commonly used in spoken Cantonese, but in recent years the sequence of “verb + not + complement + object” has gradually appeared in spoken Cantonese. This is probably due to the influence of Mandarin.

In addition, Mandarin “verb + get” indicates that the action can be carried out, and its negative form is “verb + not + get”. Cantonese has a similar format, but the negative form is “唔 + verb + 得”.

Example 15:

Mandarin: 能不能找到。

Cantonese: 搵得搵到。

English: Can you find it?

4. The Postponement of Cantonese Word Order

Also, the Cantonese would put some compositions at the back of the sentence, and it is quite common in the difference between Cantonese and Mandarin. In this case, adverbs, adjectives and subjects are the most commonly seen.

4.1. Range

The Cantonese adverbs “乜滯” can restrict the adjective, which means not so much. They are often placed after the adjective in Cantonese, while the adverb in Mandarin is placed before the adjective.

Example 16:

Mandarin: 去晚了，没什么菜了。

Cantonese: 去迟左，无菜乜滯啦。

English: I went to the market a little bit late, and there were not so much vegetables.

The Cantonese adverbs “得滯”, “过头” are used to indicate that the situation that is too much, exceeding the normal range. These adverbs are also put at the later part of a sentence.

Example 17:

Mandarin: 这件衣服太长了。

Cantonese: 这件衫长过头。

English: The cloth is too long.

When the adjectives “fast” and “slow” are used as gerunds, they are mostly placed before the verb in Mandarin, but after the verb in Cantonese.

Example 18:

Mandarin: 你慢点儿开啊!

Cantonese: 你开慢啲啦!

English: Drive slower!

When the adjectives “more” and “less” are used as gerunds in Mandarin, they are usually placed before the verb.

In Cantonese, however, if the verb is followed by a word that expresses quantity, “more” is placed before the verb.

However, in Cantonese, if the verb is followed by a word that expresses quantity, the adjectives “more” and “less” are usually placed after the verb when used as a gerund.

Example 19:

Mandarin: 我少放点盐吧!

Cantonese: 我落少啲盐啦!

English: I'll put less salt!

4.2. Time

In Mandarin, adverbs and certain adjectives are usually placed before the verb or adjective when used as a gerund, but in Cantonese, some adverbs and adjectives are placed after the verb or adjective when used as a gerund.

The adverb “先” (first) is used as a gerund in both Cantonese and Mandarin to indicate that time or order is in front of the verb, but the position in the sentence is different: Cantonese adverbs are often placed after the word they are modifying, while in Mandarin is the opposite.

Example 20:

Mandarin: 你先洗澡。

Cantonese: 你冲凉先。

English: You can take a bath first.

4.3. Quantities

The Cantonese adverb “添” (one more) is often placed at the end of a sentence to indicate an increase in quantity and an expansion in scope, to make the action or situation described go further, equivalent to the meaning of “再” (one more).

Example 21:

Mandarin: 再带一本书。

Cantonese: 带多本书添。

English: I want to bring another book.

4.4. Tone

The Cantonese adverb “左” is used as a tone, to strengthen the emotion of speakers. And it is usually put at the end of the sentence.

Example 22:

Mandarin: 忘记了!

Cantonese: 唔记得左!

English: I've forgot it!

Also, the Cantonese uses “极” to show the angry of the speaker. Compare to the Mandarin, the Cantonese puts this adverb after the verb.

Example 23:

Mandarin: 怎么说都不明白!

Cantonese: 讲极都唔明!

English: No matter how I explain it, you don't understand!

4.5. Subject

In Cantonese, “至” is used to show the meaning of “most” in Mandarin. When using this word, the subject would be put behind the adverb.

Example 24:

Mandarin: 你最晚到了!

Cantonese: 至晏你了!

English: You are the latest.

The word “到” also means the extent of something. When using “到”, the subject should be put behind in Cantonese.

Example 25:

Mandarin: 可把他能的!

Cantonese: 叻到佢啊!

English: How on earth can he be so proud.

5. Conclusions

Language competence is a dynamic development system based on cognition, which has the continuity of diachronic construction and the integrity of immediate reflection. Therefore, the ability of speaking Mandarin is formed on the basis of one's existing dialect mother tongue system, which is bound to be restricted by the original dialect mother tongue thinking structure [5]. Long affected by the Cantonese speaking model, the local people have gotten accustomed to the way of thinking in that language.

Through the research and analysis of the difference between Cantonese and Mandarin in word order, the author found that the most differences lie in inversion. The inversion is mainly in the light of information focus, stressing verb and object, while weakening adverb and complement. The Cantonese often put the comparison signal words forward. Just like example 1, the word “过” is often used in Cantonese to express comparison, while Mandarin uses the word “比”. The adverb “先” is placed before the verb, while in Mandarin it is placed after the verb.

In double-object sentences, the grammatical structure of Mandarin is mostly “subject + predicate + inter object + direct object”, and the indirect object usually placed before the direct object, whereas Cantonese is “subject + predicate + direct object + inter object”. Here the positions of the direct object and the indirect object are reversed. Just like example 3, the item object “computer” comes before the personal object “him”. This syntax is similar to the grammar of the double-object clause in ancient Chinese, and makes the emphasis on the central word of the sentence more explicit.

In short, the Cantonese grammar varies from Mandarin's, but the people always use Cantonese grammar when speaking Mandarin. Hence mistakes happen. In the actual practice of acquiring Mandarin, the learner can focus on the main difference from the perspective of fronting and postponement of Cantonese word order, especially in terms of comparative sentences, double-object sentences, negative sentences, interrogative sentence, and position of certain adverbs as well as adjectives. Hence, they are easier to use Mandarin in a more appropriate way.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Acknowledgments

The author would like to acknowledge the supervisor Ms. Liang, who has spent much of her precious time guiding the author in the writing of this paper. Without her valuable instruction and advice, this paper would not have been able to be finished smoothly.

References

- [1] Daniel, M. Representative Sampling and Typological Explanation: A Phenomenological Lament. *Linguistic Typology*, 2007, 11, 69-78, DOI: 10.1515/lingty.2007.006.
Available online: <https://www.degruyter.com/document/doi/10.1515/LINGTY.2007.006/html> (accessed on 12 April 2023).
- [2] Denning, K.; Kemmer, S. On Language: Selected Writings of Joseph H. Greenberg. Stanford University Press: Redwood City, CA, USA, 1990; pp. 40-70, ISBN 9781503623217.
- [3] Jianguo, Xi. A Cognitive Study on the Meaning and Function of Pragmatic Markers in English and Chinese. *Journal of Zhejiang University (Humanities and Social Sciences)*, 2009, 38(4), 190-199.
Available online: https://kns.cnki.net/kcms2/article/abstract?v=3uoqIhG8C44YLtIOAiTRKgchrJ08w1e7VSL-HJEdEx3LJJ-bILWNsQCLAUb4xm9fvWxQ9hVksnVLqvdRGJN3JGH7HnqB_8n1&uniplatform=NZKPT (accessed on 12 April 2023).
- [4] Siying, D. Parameter Theory of Chinese Dialect Grammar. Peking University Press: Beijing, China, 2003; pp. 94-162, 9787301061077
- [5] Yueming, Z. Comparison and Analysis of Lexical and Grammatical Differences between Mandarin and Cantonese. *Journal of Chang Chun Teachers College*, 2004, 23(3), 79-81.
Available online: https://kns.cnki.net/kcms2/article/abstract?v=3uoqIhG8C44YLtIOAiTRKgchrJ08w1e7eeyE9jLkqq_fx-SvtDHCEgzXXwkYBU7wqQzKJajcakyWN0eEHptIvj0E-mRT94Ir&uniplatform=NZKPT (accessed on 12 April 2023).
- [6] Zhengxing, Z. An Investigation of the Word Order of Modern Chinese Dialects. *Dialects*, 2003, 2, 108-126.
Available online: https://kns.cnki.net/kcms2/article/abstract?v=3uoqIhG8C44YLtIOAiTRKgchrJ08w1e7ZCYsl4RS_3gqjAhhADb1CGMJ566nsTXAInC1T8W8oXC8R8Dkc3cCcqs1xw3B_AG&uniplatform=NZKPT (accessed on 12 April 2023).



© 2023 by the author(s); licensee International Technology and Science Publications (ITS), this work for open access publication is under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0). (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>)