

An acoustic study of the tone system of Penang Hokkien – a contact variety of Southern Min

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In this talk I present the results of a preliminary acoustic analysis into the tone system of Penang Hokkien, a contact variety of Southern Min spoken in Pulau Pinang, Malaysia. Apart from providing a general description of the tone system, one issue I seek to address is whether variation exists amongst speakers' tone inventories, given that Penang Hokkien developed in a linguistically varied environment, and most importantly where several Southern Min varieties (e.g., Zhāngzhōu, Quánzhōu, Cháozhōu etc) were present.

In order to obtain the contrasting tones in citation and sandhi forms, six native speakers were recorded reading a word list as well as phrases and sentences with targeted words. The data was then analysed in Praat by examining the pitch contours ($=f_0$) in spectrograms. As expected for a Southern Min variety, five tonemes for open syllables and two for checked syllables were found, each paired with a sandhi tone. As a tone system, it was also found that Penang Hokkien is very similar to that described of Zhāngzhōu (Tung 1958). That Zhāngzhōu-based varieties may have had a major influence on Penang Hokkien is not unexpected, given the high socio-economic status of a number of clans from this region during Penang's early days.

Nevertheless, there appears to be some variation, perhaps indicative of Penang Hokkien's contact history. For example, two variants were found for tone T2 (following Middle Chinese division of tones), which for Zhāngzhōu is a high falling tone often described as (53). This high falling tone exists in Penang Hokkien, but there appears to be a variant that is high rising (35). Amongst the speakers, the occurrence of each variant is generally systematic, e.g., speakers who use the high rising variant for a particular T2 syllable (= word) will tend to use it for other T2 syllables, and vice versa. Initial testing indicates that speakers tend to disregard this difference in tone shape for T2. Using this and other evidence, the tone space for Penang Hokkien is discussed.

References

Tung T. 1958. Four southern Min dialects. *Bulletin of the Institute of History and Philology* 30. 2, 729-1042