

Cantonese Sound System

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Unit 1 Basic Cantonese Sound System

1.1 A syllable

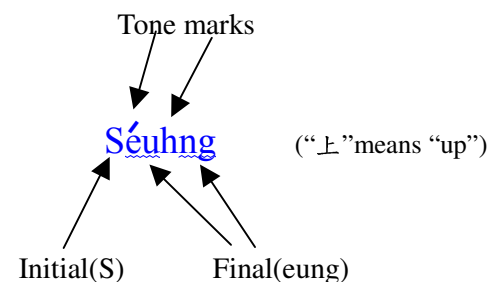
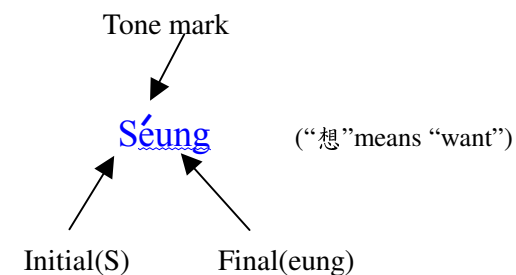
Initial + Final + Tone = Syllable

Each syllable of Cantonese is composed of three elements:

Initial : the beginning sound element of a syllable

Final : the ending sound element of a syllable

Tone : the relative pitch, or variation of pitch, of a syllable.



1.2 Tones

1.2.1 Tone marks

The six tones in Cantonese are grouped into one of three main contours: **falling**, **rising** and **level**, which are distinguished by using **tone marks on top of the first vowel in the final**.

The low level tone mark “**h**” is put after the vowel or the diphthong but before the ending consonant (if there is any). i.e. LR, LL and LF tones.

1.2.2 The Cantonese tones with mnemonic words

Cantonese has 6 distinctive tones:

Tone 1	HL	sī	~ pitch level of “ he ”
Tone 2	HR	sí	~ pitch level of “then”
Tone 3	ML	si	~ pitch level of “ you ” in “see you ”
Tone 4	LF	sìh	~ pitch level of “ cy ” in “Tracy”
Tone 5	LR	síh	~ pitch level of “ see ” in “I see ” *
Tone 6	LL	sih	~ pitch level of “ in ”

* Some Hong Kong people pronounce “I see” in this way”.

The respective 6 tones with the English examples:

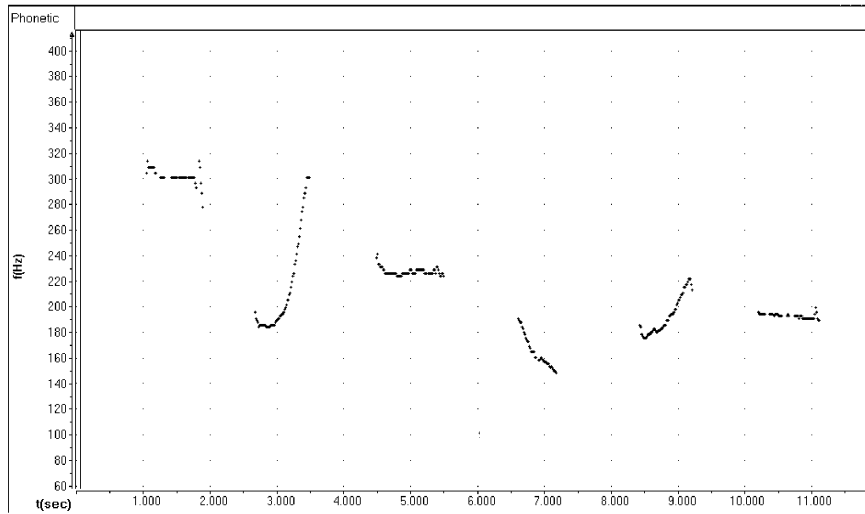
he	then	you	“cy”	see	in
sī	sí	si	sìh	síh	sih

1.2.3 The tones table

Tone No.	Tone Name	Mnemonic words	Tone mark	E.g.	Meanings
1 HL	High Level	he	—	sī	poem 詩
2 HR	High Rising	then	↗	sí	history 史
3 ML	Middle Level	you	—	si	to try 試
4 LF	Low Falling	Tracy	↘h	sìh	time 時
5 LR	Low Rising	see	↗h	síh	market 市
6 LL	Low Level	in	h	sih	matter 事

1.2.4 Actual recorded tone patterns

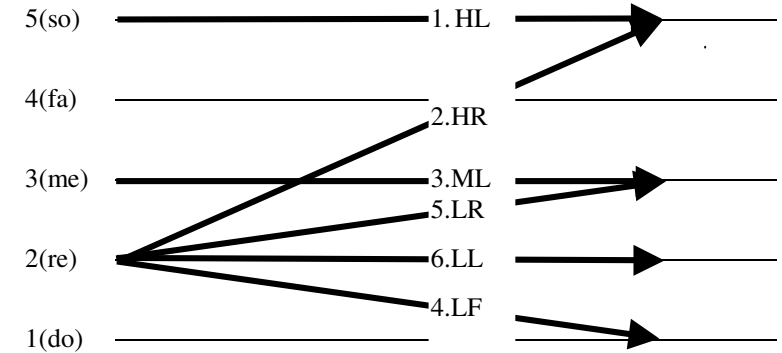
The following diagram shows the actual recorded pitch pattern of the six tones.



Tone No.	1	2	3	4	5	6
Tone names	HL	HR	ML	LF	LR	LL
Tones marks	—	/	no tone mark	h	h	h
Cantonese e.g.	sī	sí	si	sīh	síh	sih
English words with the same tones	he	then	see “you”	tra “cy”	i “see”	in
Character:	詩	史	試	時	市	事
Meaning:	poem	history	try	time	market	matter

1.2.5 Schematic tones diagram

The following is a tones diagram illustrating the co-relation of the six tones in Cantonese: (it’s schematic only, not in scale)



In this diagram, “5” stands for the highest pitch level while “1” stands for the lowest pitch level.

The arrows show the pitch level or the variation of the pitch of the tones.

Tone No.	Tone Name	From Pitch	To Pitch
Tone 1	High level	5	5
Tone 2	High rising	2	5
Tone 3	Middle level	3	3
Tone 4	Low falling	2	1
Tone 5	Low rising	2	3
Tone 6	Low level	2	1

1.2.6 Comparing the tones

- As you can see, the order of these 6 tones – tone 1 to tone 6 are not in the order from the highest pitch to the lowest pitch. And therefore it is quite difficult for learners to compare the relative pitch levels of these 6 tones.
- Here is just a comparison which rearranges the tones order to make it easier for learners to compare the differences between the tones.

Group	Tone No.	Tone name	Mnemonic words	Tone marks	E.g.
Level	1	HL	he	—	sī
	3	ML	you		si
	6	LL	in	h	sìh
	4	LF	“cy”	h	sìh
Rising	2	HR	then	/	sí
	5	LR	see	h	síh

- This is a reference only for comparing the pitch values. Ordinarily learners should follow the sequence of previous tones table (tone 1-6), because it is the sequence adopted by traditional Cantonese and most systems.

1.2.7 Examples of the 6 tones ◀

1. SĪ	2. SÍ	3. SÌ
Tone 1 (HL) High Level	Tone 2 (HR) High Rising	Tone 3 (ML) Middle Level
Tone mark: a line on top —	Tone mark: a line going up /	Tone mark: Nothing
Example: 一 yāt one 筆 bāt pen 蚊 mān dollar 三 sāam three 車 chē car 多 dō many	Example: 手 sáu hand 等 dāng wait 死 séi die 紙 jí paper 錢 chín money 好 hóu good	Example: 細 sai small 貴 gwai expensive 瘦 sau thin 四 sei four 褲 fu trousers 去 heui go

4. SÌH	5. SÍH	6. SÌH
Tone 4 (LF) Low Falling	Tone 5 (LR) Low Rising	Tone 6 (LL) Low Level
Tone mark: a line going down with “h” h	Tone mark: a line going up with “h” h	Tone mark: Nothing but “h” only h
Example: 人 yàhn people 裙 kwàhn dress 肥 fèih fat 平 pèhng cheap 年 nìhn year 停 tìhng stop	Example: 我 ngóh I 你 néih you 佢 kéuih he 有 yáuh have 冇 móuh don't have 買 máaih buy	Example: 飯 faahn rice 慢 maahn slow 食 síhk eat 麵 mihn noodles 六 lukh six 月 yuht month

1.2.8 Mnemonic words for the 6 tones

In the following sentences, the 1st syllable is tone 1 high level, the 2nd syllable is tone 2 high rising and so on.



- 1) 394052
sāam gáu sei lǎng fǎh yih
3 9 4 0 5 2
- 2) boss went to, friend's place
bō-sí heui, pàhng-yáuh douh
boss go to, friend's place
- 3) 1:30, come to my place
yāt díng bun, làih ngóh douh
1:30 , come to my place
- 4) taxi is fast, won't be slow
dīk-sí faai, m̀h wúih maahn
taxi fast, not will slow

1.2.9 General problems with the tones

Many learners don't follow what the tone that a syllable should be. It's because in English, speakers change the pitch levels according to the rhythm of the sentence.

- eg. I am happy. → The pitch of “**py**” is low
 Happy Birthday → The pitch of “**py**” is high

However in Cantonese, the tone, means the pitch level is a decisive element of a syllable. So try the best to stick with the tones. Same sounds with different tones may mean something very different.

- eg. buy: **máaih**, sell: **maaih**

1.3 Initials

1.3.1 The initials table

- 1) Cantonese has **19** initials as follows:

Manner of Articulation Place of Articulation	Plosives/ Affricates		Fricatives	Nasals / Lateral	Semi- Vowels
	Unaspirated Stops	Aspirated Stops			
Bilabial (two lips)	b	p		m	w
Alveolar (Tip of tongue and the alveolar ridge)	d	t		n, l	
Palatal-Alveolar (blade of tongue articulates with hard palate).	j	ch	s		
Velar (back of tongue and soft palate)	g	k		ng	
Labial-velar (adding the sound of “g” or “k” with “w”)	gw	kw			
Glottal (narrowing vocal cords)			h		
Labiodental (lower lip and the upper teeth)			f		
Palatal					y

The sequence of the initials said in the sound files is:

- b, p, d, t, j, ch, g, k, gw, kw,
 s, h, f, m, n, l, ng, w, y

1.3.2 The examples

As the initial can not be pronounced by itself, in the tape, the vocal element “a” is added to the initial to form a complete syllable.

For easy comparison, all the following syllables are pronounced at high level.

Articulation	symbol	English eg.	example	meaning
Non-aspirated stops	b	ba	boy	巴(士) bus
	d	da	dark	打 a dozen
	g	ga	guard	家 family
	gw	gwa	guava	瓜 melon
	j	ja	jar	渣 residue
Aspirated stops	p	pa	park	趴 lie on one's stomach
	t	ta	tart	他 he
	k	ka	car	卡 card
	kw	kwa	quick	誇 boast
	ch	cha	charge	差 inferior
Fricatives	f	fa	fast	花 flower
	h	ha	ha(interj.)	蝦 prawn
	s	sa	sand	沙 sand
Nasals / liquids	m	ma	mummy	媽 mummy
	n	na	name	拿 LF pick
	l	la	leg	啦 PM
	ng	nga	sing	牙 LF tooth
Semi-vowels	w	wa	went	蛙 frog
	y	ya	yes	也 LR also

1.4 Finals

1.4.1 The finals table

Cantonese has 51 finals as follows: ◀

	aa	a X	e	i	o	u	eu	yu
i	aa	ai	ei		oi	ui	eui	
u	aa	au		iu	ou			
m	aam	am		im				
n	aan	an		in	on	un	eun	yun
ng	aang	ang	eng	ing	ong	ung	eung	
p	aap	ap		ip				
t	aat	at		it	ot	ut	eut	yut
k	aak	ak	ek	ik	ok	uk	euk	

◀ The sequence of the finals said in the sound files is:
 aa, aai, aau, aam, aan, aang, aap, aat, aak,
 ai, au, am, an, ang, ang, ap, at, ak
 e, ei, eng ... and so on

There is no single “a” sound, which is with “X” besides it, in Cantonese. Therefore it is not pronounced. Actually in Yale, the symbol of “a” stands for the sound “aa”.

1.4.2 Examples for some syllables ◀

	aa	a	e	i	o	u	eu	yu
	a fā flower 花	X	e chē car 車	i jī know 知	o gō song 歌	u kū hoop 籊	eu hēu boot 靴	yu syū book 書
i	aai tāai tie 呔	ai gāi chicken 雞	ei fēi fly 飛		oi tōi embryo 胎	ui fūi grey 灰	eui sēui bad 衰	
u	aa <u>u</u> bāau bun 包	au nāu angry 鬍		iu bū a watch 錶	ou gōu tall 高			
m	aam sāam three 三	am sām heart 心		im jīm sharp 尖				
n	aan fāan back 返	an mān dollar 蚊		in chīn thousand 千	on gōn dry 乾	un būn move 搬	eun jēun bottle 樽	yun syūn sour 酸
ng	aang jāang owe 掙	ang jāng hate 憎	eng tēng listen 聽	ing bīng ice 冰	ong bōng help 幫	ung fūng wind 風	eung chēung window 窗	
p	aap taap ML tower 塔	ap jāp juice 汁		ip līp lift 輦				
t	aat saat ML kill 殺	at chāt seven 七		it mīt pinch 搵	ot got ML cut 割	ut wuht LL [alive]活	eut chēut out 出	
k	aak jaak ML narrow 窄	ak dāk okay 得	ek lēk smart 叻	ik sīk color 色	ok gok ML corner 角	uk luhk LL six	euk dēuk [chop]啄	yut syut ML snow 雪

1.4.3 The finals table with mnemonic words

	aa rather	a cut	e ten	i see	o or	u too	eu fur	yu* tu
i see	aai five	ai ice	ei page		oi toy	ui* oo+ee	eui* oy+ee	
u too	aa <u>u</u> loud	au out		iu* ee+oo	ou go			
m farm	aam farm	am come		im him				
n aunt	aan aunt	an fun		in in	on on	un moon	eun nation	yun* une
ng arn+ng	aang* arn+ng	ang sung	eng sang	ing king	ong long	ung* tone+ng	eung* earn	
p carp	aap carp	ap cup		ip sip				
t art	aat art	at cut		it sit	ot lot	ut boot	eut* short put	
k ark	aak ark	ak luck	ek echo	ik sick	ok lock	uk book	euk jerk	yut* chute

Where there is an asterisk “*”, it means there is no English equivalent.

For the column of “yu”, the examples are French words.

Unit 2 Tone Drills

1.4.4 Notes

1) “a” in the Yale system

Cantonese has the final “aa” but doesn’t have the final “a”. In the Yale system, final “aa” will be written as “a”. But the sound is still “aa”.

◀ eg. flower : fā (the sound is actually fāa)

2) The unreleased consonants

Finals ending with “p, t, and k” are not aspirated, which means don’t blow out air at the end of the final. People call these “p, t and k” the “unreleased consonants”



1:	yāt	but not	yāt~
6:	luhk	but not	luhk~
10:	sahp	but not	sahp~

2.1 Table 1 - From HL to other tones ▶

HL→HL	HL→HR	HL→ML	HL→LF	HL→LR	HL→LL
yāt-mān one dollar 一蚊	fāan-ké tomato 蕃茄	sāam-seui 3 years old 三歲	gā-yàhn family member 家人	gām-máahn tonight 今晚	sāu-yahp income 收入
fēi-gēi aeroplane 飛機	fā-yún garden 花園	Dāk-Gwok Germany 德國	mā-mìh mum 媽咪	tīng-máahn tomorrow night 聽晚	gām-yaht today 今日
sīn-sāang Mr. 先生	bē-jáu beer 啤酒	sīu-aap roast duck 燒鴨	dē-dīh daddy 爹哋	yāt-míuh one second 一秒	sāng-wuht live 生活
hōi-sām happy 開心	fēi-lám film 菲林	tīn-hei weather 天氣	chūng-mìhng clever 聰明	wān-nyún warm 溫暖	chūk-daih courier 速遞
dūng-tīn winter 冬天	fūng-gíng scenery 風景	jūng-yi like/love 鍾意	chīu-yàhn superman 超人	sāu-léih repair 修理	fūk-jaahp complicated 複雜

2.2 Table 2 - From HR to other tones ▶

HR→HL	HR→HR	HR→ML	HR→LF	HR→LR	HR→LL
géi-dō how many 幾多	géi-chín how much 幾錢	dím-heui how to get to 點去	séui-chíh pool 水池	chéng-chóh please sit down 請坐	cháau-faahn fried rice 炒飯
jí-gān tissue 紙巾	jí-yúu kite 紙鳶	gíng-chaat policeman 警察	gíng-yìhn unbelievably 竟然	hó-yíh can 可以	cháau-mìhn fried noodles 炒麵
sáu-bīu wrist watch 手錶	síu-síu a little bit 少少	gó-go that one 嗰個	hóu-fēih very fat 好肥	hóu-káhn very near 好近	hó-lohk coke 可樂
dím-sām dim sum 點心	fó-téui ham 火腿	hó-kaau reliable 可靠	hóu-yàhn nice person 好人	hóu-yúhn very far 好遠	hóu-sihk tasty 好食
hóu-lēk very smart 好叻	hóu-séui sea water 海水	hóu-gwai very expensive 好貴	gwóng-chèuhng plaza 廣場	séung-máaih want to buy 想買	hóu-meih delicious 好味

2.3 Table 3 - From ML to other tones ◀

ML→HL	ML→HR	ML→ML	ML→LF	ML→LR	ML→LL
ga-lēi curry 咖喱	daai-jí scallop 帶子	Taai-Gwok Thailand 泰國	taai-nàahn too difficult 太難	pa-néih afraid you 怕你	sau-yuhk lean pork 瘦肉
la-bā loudspeaker 喇叭	taai-tái wife 太太	Faat-Gwok France 法國	jeui-fèih fattest 最肥	taai-háuh too thick 太厚	jeui-hauh last 最後
daai-syū bring books 帶書	gaan-chék ruler 間尺	sai-gaai world 世界	jeuk-hàaih wear shoes 着鞋	baak-móuh friend's mum 伯母	jeuk-maht wear socks 着襪
heui-gāai go out 去街	dang-jái stool 櫈仔	gam-gwai so expensive 咁貴	syun-tàuh garlic 蒜頭	tiu-móuh to dance 跳舞	jyun-sehk diamond 鑽石
Syut-bīk Sprite 雪碧	cheung-pín music records 唱片	sung-fo deliver goods 送貨	syut-yàhn snow man 雪人	seun-kéuih believe him 信佢	syut-gwaih refrigerator 雪櫃

2.4 Table 4 - From LF to other tones ◀

LF→HL	LF→HR	LF→ML	LF→LF	LF→LR	LF→LL
yàuh-chāai postman 郵差	yèh-jí coconut 椰子	yàuh-haak tourist 遊客	yàhn-yàhn everyone 人人	ngàuh-méih ox tail 牛尾	nàahn-sihk terrible taste 難食
kèih-tā other 其他	yìh-ché moreover 而且	kèih-gwaai strange 奇怪	ngàuh-yàuh butter 牛油	kàhm-máahn last night 嚟晚	ngàuh-yuhk beef 牛肉
yìh-gā now 而家	pìhng-gwó apple 蘋果	pèih-hei temper 脾氣	pìhng-sìh ordinarily 平時	yàhn-nóuh human brain 人腦	kàhm-yaht yesterday 嚟日
lìhng-mūng lemon 檸檬	yùh-gwó if 如果	sìh-gaan time 時間	yìhng-yìhn still 仍然	pàhng-yáuh friend 朋友	lòh-baahk Chinese radish 蘿蔔
yùhn-bāt pencil 鉛筆	syùh-jái potato 薯仔	chìhng-fong situation 情況	yùh-syùhn fish boat 魚船	yùh-láuh fish fillet 魚柳	yèuhng-yuhk lamb 羊肉

2.5 Table 5 - From LR to other tones ◀

LR→HL	LR→HR	LR→ML	LR→LF	LR→LR	LR→LL
máaih-chē buy car 買車	néuih-jái girl/lady 女仔	míhn-fai free of charge 免費	yáuh-sìh sometimes 有時	máaih-yéh shopping 買嘢	máh-seuhng at once 馬上
chóh-dāi sit down 坐低	néih hóu wish you well 你好	láahng-hei air conditioning 冷氣	léuih-hàhng travel 旅行	yáuh-móuh do you have 有冇	máaih-maaih buy and sell 買賣
léuhng mǎn two dollars 兩蚊	máih-fán rice noodles 米粉	láih-baai week 禮拜	náaih-chàh milk tea 奶茶	wíhng-yúhn forever 永遠	láahn-doh lazy 懶惰
yíh-gīng already 已經	yíh-wúí parliament 議會	Méih-Gwok America 美國	yíh-wàih wrongly thought 以為	lóuh-yáuh pal, buddy 老友	méih-laih beautiful 美麗
móuh-bāt no pens 冇筆	léuhng-dím two o'clock 兩點	yúh-gaap pigeon 乳鴿	móuh-yàhn nobody 冇人	léuhng-míuh two seconds 兩秒	yíh-hauh from now on 以後

2.6 Table 6 - From LL to other tones ◀

LL→HL	LL→HR	LL→ML	LL→LF	LL→LR	LL→LL
laah-tjū chilli 辣椒	deih-jí address 地址	daaih-gwo bigger than 大過	mahk-pèih oatmeal 麥皮	dihn-nóuh computer 電腦	daaih-hohk university 大學
dauh-jēung soya milk 豆漿	dehng-tóí book a table 訂枱	baahk-choi Pak Choi 白菜	mahn-tàih problem 問題	meih-yáuh not yet have 未有	dauh-fuh bean curd 豆腐
mihn-bāau bread 麵包	dihn-wá telephone 電話	dauh-gok string bean 豆角	deih-tòuh map 地圖	jih-móuh English letter 字母	daaih-luhk mainland 大陸
meih-jīng MSG 味精	lihk-sí history 歷史	laahp-saap rubbish 垃圾	sehk-yàuh petroleum 石油	lohk-yúh rain 落雨	dihn-sih TV 電視
dihn-chē tram 電車	leuht-jí chestnut 栗子	seuhng-chi last time 上次	sih-yàuh soya sauce 豉油	juhk-yúh slang 俗語	yeuhng-yeuhng every kind 樣樣

Unit 3 Introduction to Cantonese

3.1 Why do people call it “Cantonese”?

Cantonese is used by the people in the province of Guang Dong and therefore it is called “**Gwóng Dūng Wá**”. “**Wá**” means “speech”

3.2 Chinese

- 1) Chinese: it refers to the written characters and the formal written form. It isn't like the spoken form, it is the same in different parts of China.
- 2) In China, people from different provinces have their own spoken language/dialect and say things differently. Therefore, maybe they do not understand each other even they are both Chinese.
- 3) However, because the written Chinese form is the same, a Chinese has no problem in reading an article from different provinces. Of course there may be some slang words which take specific meanings and may not be understood by other Chinese who are not from the same area.
- 4) For example, some Hong Kong people can't speak Mandarin, however they have no problem in reading newspapers from other parts of China

3.3 Complicated strokes and simplified strokes

The traditional Chinese characters are what people now call “complicated strokes ” or “traditional strokes”. The Chinese government found that the traditional strokes are too complicated and so it developed a system to simplify the strokes. This is what people call “simplified strokes ”.

- 1) Simplified strokes are mainly used in mainland China only. Other places like Hong Kong, Taiwan and south east Asia Chinese still use the traditional one, the complicated one.
- 2) Basically the two forms are quite similar, after one has learned one form, it's quite easy for one to learn the other.

3.4 Mandarin or Putonghua

It refers to the spoken form of Chinese. In Chinese, different provinces have their own different spoken form. Mandarin or Putonghua is the one mainly used in Northern part of China, and it is also the official language in China. So it is promoted and taught at all schools in China.

- 1) Putonghua and Mandarin are the same . But the Chinese government named it “Putonghua” since the literal meaning of “Putonghua” is “common speech”
- 2) Similar to English, Mandarin (refers to the spoken form) and Chinese (refers to the written form) are in the same format. It means how people speak and how people write.

3.5 Cantonese & Chinese

- 1) For English and Mandarin, the vocabulary and expressions in spoken form and the written form are always the same. However Cantonese(the spoken) & Chinese (the written), these are sometimes not the same. The differences may be up to 30%.
- 2) Most of the time, the Cantonese and the Chinese are the same:

English	beef	
Cantonese (spoken form)	ngàuh yuhk	牛肉(Chinese)
Mandarin	níu ròu	牛肉(Chinese)

- 3) Sometimes, the Cantonese and the Chinese are not the same:
 If a Hong Kong person says “they”, he says “**kéuih deih**”, however when he has to write down “they”, he has to change to write “**tā m̀hn**” instead. Because “**kéuih deih**” is a spoken form only and is not used in written Chinese.

English:	they	
Cantonese (spoken):	kéuih deih	佢地(not proper Chinese)
Cantonese (standard written form-Chinese):	tā m̀hn	他們(Chinese)
Mandarin:	tā mén	他們(Chinese)

- 4) Because Cantonese and Chinese may not be the same, there may be different ways to say exactly the same thing- one is the Cantonese form, one is the Chinese form when it is used in some fixed expressions or Chinese idioms.
 For example, “clothes” in Cantonese is “**sāam**”, however it is “**yī**” in Chinese. Usually when people talk about “clothes”, they say “**sāam**”. However, when people talk about “raincoat”, they say: “**yúh yī**” (literally means rain coat) as it’s a set expression, they never say “**yúh sāam (wrong)**”

3.6 Spoken & written Cantonese

- 1) Cantonese is an oral dialect and as mentioned before, sometimes the spoken Cantonese and the written Chinese formats are different. When it comes to the written form, the standard written Chinese is used. And at school, people learn Chinese – the standard written form but not the Cantonese.
- 2) However, in casual written passages, such as gossip columns in popular magazines, promotional leaflets and informal personal communication, written Cantonese may be used.

- 3) When the Cantonese sounds don’t take it’s formal character, people will put some other characters which share the same sound to stand for it.
 Sometimes people use a character that has a similar sound to it. Sometimes Hong Kong people create their own characters that you could never look up in dictionaries.

3.7 Cantonese accent

- 1) It’s because Hong Kong is so small, there is no different accent for Hong Kong born people. Also Hong Kong shares the same accent as Guangzhou. Therefore if a Guangzhou person comes to Hong Kong, Hong Kong people usually do not know he is not a local Hong Kong person. However occasionally, the terms that Guangzhou people use may not be the same as Hong Kong people. It’s similar to English, an American says “cab” while a British says “taxi”.
- 2) Cantonese is used in Guangdong province (and actually Guangxi provinces). However different areas of Guangdong province have different accents. The capital of Guangdong is Guangzhou and the accent of Guangzhou is considered to be standard. Therefore some people say Cantonese is “**Gwóng Jāu Wá**” where “**Gwóng Jāu**” means “Guangzhou” instead of “**Gwóng Dŭng Wá**”.
- 3) Also, some people, if they come from other parts of China, Cantonese is not their first language and of course they have their own accent in speaking Cantonese unless they come to Hong Kong when they were very young.

Unit 4 The Cantonese Sound System

4.1 Romanization

- 1) Romanization is the use of English letters to stand for Cantonese syllables. eg. “Hong Kong” itself is a sort of romanization. You may find the way we say “Hong Kong” in Cantonese is somehow similar to the sound an English speaker says “Hong Kong”

A wide range of romanization systems is in use for Cantonese; no standard comparable to the pinyin used for Mandarin, which the Chinese government standardized it as the only system. Moreover new systems continue to appear.

4.2 Proper names translated into English

- 1) The translation of most proper names of Cantonese into English is actually the romanization of the Cantonese. But you have to note that:
 - a) there are no tones shown on the English translations, the habit is people use High Level for all “translated sounds”
 - b) the romanization systems used maybe different to what you have learnt. It means we use different English letters to stand for the same Cantonese syllables. For example: ◀

Hong Kong Government (no tones are shown as they are expressed in English)	The Yale System (tones are shown)
Tsim Sha Tsui	Jīm Sā Jéui
Sai Kung	Sāi Gung
Chan (a surname)	Chàhn

4.3 The Yale romanization system

- 1) The Yale system was developed by Parker Huang and Gerald Kok.
- 2) This is the system used in Huang and Kok’s Speak Cantonese courses and other materials produced at Yale University.
- 3) In Hong Kong, it is the most common adopted system by institutes that provide Cantonese courses for foreigners. It is used at the University of Hong Kong and by the New Asia-Yale-in China Chinese language centre of the Chinese University in its courses. Also it is adopted by some other language institutes.

4.4 Tonal language

- 1) Cantonese is a tonal language in which the pitch or the pitch pattern of a syllable is crucial to the identity of a syllable.
- 2) It means a sound in different tone levels, means different characters and have different meanings.
- 3) It is somehow like English, the verb: dis’count and the noun ‘discount share the same sounds but put stress on different syllables – different tonal level then.

4.5 Monosyllabic language

- 1) Cantonese is a monosyllabic language. It means each character only consists of one syllable.
- 2) As you can imagine, there are a limited number of single syllables that people can pronounce. Therefore, people add the characteristic of tones to the syllable to increase the number of distinguishable syllables.
- 3) Even though Cantonese add the variety of tones to a sound, the number of syllables is still much less than the number of written characters we use. Therefore most “syllables” actually stand for more than one character.
- 4) It means, different characters with different meanings may share exactly the same sound.

For example: “**luk**” may mean “six 六” or “green 綠”, exactly like English “meet” and “meat” share exactly the same sound but they are different words and with different meanings.

Unit 5 Tones

5.1 The respective 6 tones

Refer to the “Actual recorded tone patterns” and “Schematic tones diagram” in the first chapter - Basic Cantonese Sound System:

- 1) **Tone 1 - High Level 5→5**
Tone 1 can be called High Level or High Falling. Because Tone 1 can be said using high level or high falling and they are not distinguishable. Most of the time, people start with high and fall off slightly. (refer to the actual pattern)
In all our material, all tone 1 will be marked as HL eg. sī. Some Cantonese teachers will mark all tone 1 as HF instead eg. s_i. Actually it doesn't matter as it's only a name.
In the traditional Yale system, HL and HF are denoted by different marks, maybe you will see both HL “s_i” and HF “s_i”. However you just treat them the same will be OK.
- 2) **Tone 2 - High Rising 2→5**
The high rising and low rising tones in fact begin at about the same pitch level (2). The high rising tone goes to pitch level 5 (2→5), and hence easily recognized. While the low rising tone rises only to the pitch level 3 (2→3) .
The name ‘high rising tone’ may mislead learners to think that it starts from quite high level to even higher level. But actually, it starts from low level.
- 3) **Tone 3 -Middle Level 3→3**
The Yale system uses no tonal indication for the middle level - tone 3. It's because the pitch level is neither high nor low and this is the most neutral pitch level.

4) Tone 4 - Low Falling 2→1

It starts at the low pitch level and goes lower. It's normally the lowest voice that a person can say. Therefore just try to make your voice as low as possible.

Just like singing, if you have to pronounce a low pitch voice, you have to relax the throat. The result will be much better than if you are too nervous and make your throat too tight.

Quite often, learners say High level not high enough and low falling not low enough. You could use the following English examples to practice these two tones:

Eg. **mārkèt**, **stūpìd** and **kīngdòm**.

All these words take high level as the first syllable and the low falling as the second syllable.

5) Tone 5 - Low Rising 2→3

Similar to High Rising, it starts from low level (2) but rises to middle level (3) only.

6) Tone 6 - Low Level 2→2

It stays on level 2 and it's very common in English such as the tone of the first syllable of “**reporter**” and “**professor**”. Also it shares the same tone of many unstressed sounds such as “**to**”, “**an**”, “**in**”, “**on**”, “**the**”, “**may**” and “**can**” etc

5.2 Other examples of the tones

- 1) Other English examples that share the same pitch levels as that in Cantonese

Tone 1 – HL - h**ē**, th**ē**y, **ī**t, sh**ē**, th**ī**s, **hā**ppy, **sī**lly, **Bō**by

Tone 2 – HR - th**én**, W**é**ll..., Excuse **mé**, **yó**u?

Tone 3 – ML - See **you**

Tone 5 - LR - I **seé** (the way that Hong Kong people may say)

Tone 4 – LF - Kitty, happy, silly, **Boby**, **markèt**, **baskèt**

Tone 6 – LL - in, to, on, at, the, may, can, will, **report**, **become**,

- 2) Typical tones in English - tone 1, tone 4 and tone 6

6 1 4 6 1 4 1 4

Repòrtèr **Profè**ssòr **Pè**tèr

From these examples, you can find that there are also different tones in English.

However Cantonese is much more sensitive about the tones. If you make a mistake in tone, the meaning may be changed totally.

eg. “**sei**” means “four”, while “**séi**” means “die”.

In English, if you make mistakes in tones, people may just find it sounds a bit strange.

- 3) Tone 2 HR is also common whenever the tone at the end of a sentence has to go up – eg. You go to **schoól**?
- 4) However tone 3 (ML) and tone 5 (LR) are not common in English.

5.3 Tone change

Sometimes, under the following situations, people may change the tones.

5.3.1 A compound of same syllables

When a compound is composed of 2 same syllables, the tone of the first syllable is changed to low falling, while the second syllable is changed to high level. ◀

	Original Tones	Changed Tones
papa	bā bā	bàh bā
elder brother	gō gō	gòh gō
elder sister or a child address a young lady	jé jé	jèh jē
baby	bī bī (sound of "B")	bìh bī

5.3.2 Addressing a young female friend

Sometimes people address a young female friend, they double the last syllable of her given name, usually the syllable is in low falling, people then change the second syllable into high rising. ◀

Meaning	Original Tones	Changed Tones
Ling	lìhng lìhng	lìhng líng
Ying	yìhng yìhng	yìhng yíng

5.3.3 Different meanings

If the tone is different (same character), the meaning is different. ◀

Original Tone	Changed Tone
sugar tòhng	candy tóng
a person yāt go yàhn	a person alone yāt go yān

5.3.4 Different parts of speech

Different tones mean different parts of speech ◀

Original Tone	Changed Tone
to plant jung	a seed júng
to part (a place), to divide gaan	a partition gāan

5.3.5 Different usages

Different usages take different tones. It's mainly because of habit. Learners have to remember it case by case.

However there is a small hint but it is not always true and hard to define. When people saying something in general, they use the changed tones as they are usually more common than the original tones. When some specific expressions or proper nouns are used, people go back to the original tones. ◀

Original Tones – specific	Changed Tones – general
fish ball yùh dāan	fish yú
The Chinese University Jūng Mǎhn Daaih Hohk	Chinese language Jūng Mán

5.3.6 Just optional

Sometimes, people say either way, it's optional and the meaning and usage are the same. ◀

Meaning	Original Tones	Changed Tones
at that time	gó jahn	gó ján
there is a person	yáuh yāt go yàhn	yáuh yāt go yán

5.3.7 Change to HR

- 1) When there is tone change, most of the time, it is changed to high rising. ◀

Meaning	Original Tones	Changed Tones
post office	yàuh guhk	yàuh gúk
man	nàahm yàhn	nàahm yán

5.4 Add a HR tone for questions

In order to give a question intonation, people change the tone to HR at the end of a sentence. It is not the same as just change from the original tone to HR, one have to say completely the original tone first and then change it to HR at the end. It is mainly used for:

5.4.1 Questions without using a question particle

- 1) Do you go?

néih heui m̀h heui a ? / néih heui m̀h heui ↗?
you go not go PM? / you go not go ↗?

5.4.2 Turn a statement into a question

For tone 1(HL) and tone 2(HR), no need to change it to HR at the end as itself is high enough.

For tone 3(ML) and tone 4(LF), you have to say the original tone first and then change to HR. The quality is different from you just directly change it to HR.

For tone 5(LR) and tone 6(LL), you can directly change it to HR, as the quality will be the same. It's because the pitch level of LR and LL is the same as the first part in HR. ◀

	Meaning	Cantonese
HL	I can go.	ngóh heui dāk.
	I can go?	ngóh heui dāk?
HR	You have money.	néih yáuh chín.
	You have money?	néih yáuh chín?
ML	He goes.	kéuih heui.
	He goes?	kéuih heui ↗?
LF	You have problems.	néih yáuh mahn tàih.
	You have problems?	néih yáuh mahn tàih ↗?
LR	It's him.	haih kéuih.
	It's him?	haih kéuih ↗?
LL	You are hungry.	néih tóuh ngoh.
	You are hungry?	néih tóuh ngoh ↗?

5.5 Entering tones

- 1) Ending consonants p, t, k
Traditional Chinese assign all words which end in unreleased consonants p, t and k to a different category of tones: “entering tones” and assign different numbers to them.
- 2) Tones 7, 8, 9
For sounds ending with p, t, or k - if they are tone 1, 3, 6, they call them 7, 8, 9, respectively. It gives Cantonese nine tones altogether. All syllables ending with p, t, or k will not be at tone 2, 4 and 5. This “9 tones system” is also used in general Hong Kong Chinese dictionaries.
- 3) The 6 distinctive tones
As there are only **6 distinctive tones** in Cantonese, in teaching Cantonese, most systems will make it practically easier and only 6 tones will be used. Our practice is the same, you will find only 6 tones are denoted in all our material.

5.6 How many tones are there in Cantonese?

- 1) As mentioned above, traditional Cantonese normally say they have 9 tones. However the last 3 tones are actually the repetitions. Therefore distinctive tones are only 6.
- 2) Sometimes in interjections, people may make some tones different to these 6 tones. They are non-distinguishable and these “possible tones” may be many.

It’s similar to English, people change the tones for some words under certain situations. For example, when English speakers pick up the phone, the way they say “hello” is longer than usual and with tone changes.
You can ignore the “possible tones” that a Cantonese may say. You just have to know the 6 distinctive tones and that’s enough.
- 3) One example is when people sigh, he may say “**aai**” from “mid level” to “very low level”. It is not one of the distinctive tones.

Oh!, I failed again this time!

aai ! gām chi yauh m̀h hahp gaak la!
INT this time again not pass PM!
(One has just got the examination result and makes a sigh)

6.1 Difficult initials: “j” and “ch”

- 1) “j” and “ch” are difficult initials for many learners. They are counterparts and basically they are the same. The only difference is “j” is unaspirated while “ch” is aspirated.

“j” and “cha” are somehow similar to the starting sound of the English “jar” and “charge” respectively. When you say it, try to make it “clearer and sharper”, avoid too much “friction” on the sounds.



jā	hold
chā	fork
jāai	vegetarian food
chāai	guess (Chinese)
je	to lend / to borrow
che	steep
jyun	turn
chyun	inches

6.2 Aspirated and unaspirated initials

- 1) In Cantonese there are 5 pairs of initials and each pair is very similar and the only difference is one is aspirated and the other is unaspirated.




	unaspirated (do not blow the air)	aspirated (blow the air)
1	bā	pā
2	dā	tā
3	gā	kā
4	gwā	kwā
5	jā	chā

- 2) Native English speakers will not find it difficult to distinguish the aspirated and the unaspirated one. As they are very similar to English. Such as “Ben” and “pen” are different.
- 3) In English, unaspirated sounds like “b” are voiced. The aspirated sounds like “p” are voiceless. However in Cantonese, both of them are voiceless. Therefore Cantonese say the sounds like b, d, g ... will be “clearer” as they are voiceless. However the difference is so small that it’s not significant.
- 4) However in some languages, such as French, for b, p, d, t, g and k, people say all these in an unaspirated way. The difference between b and p is voiced and voiceless instead of unaspirated and aspirated. For those learners, they have to pay particular attention to it. They have to speak “b” in an unaspirated way and “p” in an aspirated way, which means blow out air.

6.3 Points to note for some initials

6.3.1 “s” sound but not “sh” sound

- a) Although some spelling of some proper names in Hong Kong is “sh”, “sh” sound doesn’t exist in Cantonese, it should be “s” instead.
- b)  eg. the Cantonese sound of “Tsim Sha Tsui” should be “**Jīm Sā Jéui**”

6.3.2 Confusion of “l” and “n”

- a) Many native speakers of Cantonese don’t distinguish the pronunciation of the initial “n” and “l”. Most people say “l” sound for “n” sound.
- b) In Cantonese, syllables with initial “l” are more than with initial “n” and people adapt the “l” sound more. Actually sometimes, Hong Kong people may say the sound in between “n” and “l”.





English Meaning	Correct	Wrong
you	néih	léih
male	nàahm	làahm
south	nàahm	làahm
blue	làahm	nàahm

“male” and “south” share the same sound

- c) There are some books that teach Cantonese using “l” to stand for all “l” or “n” sounds as that is the way most Hong Kong people would say.

- d) In our material, even though there is still distinction between “l” and “n”. However, don’t treat this distinction very seriously. Because when you listen to Hong Kong people, you can’t rely on them to correctly say the “n” or “l” sound.
- e) When you speak to other Hong Kong people, it doesn’t matter you say “n” or “l”. It’s because anyway they sound the same for Hong Kong people and they can hardly tell the difference. Therefore you won’t confuse them.

6.3.3 Skipping of “w” in “gw” or in “kw”

- a) “gw” is the adding of “g” & “w”, “kw” is the adding of “k” & “w”.
- b) Quite often nowadays, when “gw” or “kw” combine with a final such as “o”, “ok” or “ong”, the “w” sound is skipped.
- c)  eg. some people say: “**Góng Dūng Wá (wrong)**” instead of “**Gwóng Dūng Wá (correct)**” for “Cantonese”
 But be careful, some syllables are really “g” only. For eg. Hong Kong is “**Hēung Góng**” but not “**Hēung Gwóng (wrong)**”.

6.4 Initial “ng”

1) Initial “ng” may only precede finals “aa”, “a”, “o” or “u” group.

2) Tone 1-3

For tone 1-3, (HL, HR, ML), they shouldn’t take the initial “ng”. If no other initials are used, the sounds should be left to be “zero initials”, means no initials. ◀

Correct	Wrong	English Meaning
āam	ngāam	correct
ūk	ngūk	house
ái	ngái	short (opposite to tall)

3) Tone 4-6

For tone 4-6 (LF, LR, LL), they should not be “zero initials”. If no other initials are used, initial “ng” should be used. ◀

Correct	Wrong	English Meaning
ngóh	óh	I
ngàuh	àuh	cow
ngàahm	àahm	cancer

4) However, if the original tone of a sound is tone 4-6, only because of tone change, people say it in tone 1-3, the initial “ng” should still be kept

eg. ◀ goose is called “ngòh”, colloquial saying is tone 2 HR,

i.e. ◀ goose is called “ngó” instead.

5) Confusion of keeping of “ng” or not

a) Many HK people skip the initial “ng” especially the younger generations. As you can find that it is easier to say the syllable if “ng” is skipped. The sound becomes “zero initial” meaning no initial.

b) ◀ eg. some people say : “óh (wrong)” instead of “ngóh (correct)” for “I”.

c) Another phenomenon is some words take no initial, however for people “with ng habit”, they still say the initial “ng”.

◀ eg. some people say: “ngūk (wrong)” instead of “ūk (correct)” for “house”, “ngoi (wrong)” instead of “oi (correct)” for “love”.

d) In actual life, people do not speak according to what dictionary show, people say depending on their own habits. This is also true for other languages.

6) Confusion of “m” and “ng”

a) Nowadays, many people use “m” sound to replace “ng” sound when these sound are used alone. When these sounds are used alone, they are called **syllabic nasals**.

b) ◀ eg. most people say: “m̂h (wrong)” instead of “nĝh (correct)” for “5”

c) ◀ Actually only “m̂h” which means “not” takes “m” sound, all others syllabic nasals have to take “ng” sound. It should be noted that the “h” here is the tone mark but not the sound.

6.5 Zero initials

- 1) As mentioned above, some syllables consist of finals only but no initials, they are called “zero initial”. Zero initials will appear at tone 1-3 (HL, HR, ML) but not tone 4-6 (LF, LR, LL)

6.6 General mispronunciation problems

- 1) As you can find there are quite a lot of mistakes made by native speakers in Cantonese. The main reason is because Chinese characters do not tell the speaker how they should be pronounced.
- 2) As language is dynamic, it is changed continuously. The general trend is people try to make it easier and easier. Such as people skip the “ng” sound and “w” sound in “gw” and “kw” sounds.
- 3) Generally speaking, these mispronunciation problems are getting more prominent in younger generations.

6.7 Accepted mispronunciations

- 1) The following mispronunciations are so common that they are generally being accepted.
 - (1) Confusion of “n” and “l”
 - ❖ eg. “néih (right)” or “léih (wrong)” for “you”.
 - (2) Confusions of taking initial “ng” or not
 - ❖ eg. “āam (right)” or “ngāam (wrong)” for “correct”,
 - ❖ eg. “ngóh (right)” or “óh (wrong)” for “I”.
 - (3) Confusions of “m” or “ng”
 - ❖ eg. “ngh (right)” or “mh (wrong)” for five.

- 2) However some people, especially scholars, language teachers, acting people and broadcasting people, they treat these are wrong and urge people have to pronounce according to what are shown in the dictionaries.
- 3) One can imagine, if people change, their language will change. However if their dictionaries do not change, these “mispronunciation” problems will exist.

6.8 “Not very good” pronunciations

- 1) Some mispronunciations are quite common but they are still generally treated “not very good” Cantonese. (As it’s getting more and more common, it may also be widely accepted one day) Skipping the “w” sound in “gw” or “kw” sounds.
 - ❖ eg. “gok gā (wrong)” instead of “gwok gā (right)” for “country”.

6.9 Unaccepted mispronunciations

- 1) Just a few people make the following mistakes and they are treated wrong. Skipping the “g” in “aang”, “ang” and “ong”.
 - ❖ eg. “dán (wrong)” instead of “dáng (right)” for “wait”
 - ❖ “hàahn (wrong)” instead of “hàahng (right)” for “walk”
 - ❖ “Hēung Gón (wrong)” instead of “Hēung Góng (right)” for “Hong Kong”.

7.1 Vowels

- 1) The finals consist of a vocalic element with or without a final consonant. The vocalic element is a vowel or a diphthong.
- 2) There are 8 vowels in Cantonese – the degree of opening of the mouth, the shape of the lip and the position of the tongue are as follows:

Tongue Lips Shape Opening of Mouth(Tongue)	Front		Central	Back
	Spread	Rounded	Neutral	Round
Small (High)	i see	yu French “tu”		u too
Medium (Middle)	e ten	eu fur		o or
Large (Low)			a, aa cut, rather	

◀ The sequence of the vowels said in the sound file is:

i, yu, u, e, eu, o, aa

- 3) The mouth shapes of “a” and “aa” are similar, “aa” is long while “a” is short.
- 4) There is no exact counterpart for “yu” in English. This vowel is most difficult to English speakers.
- 5) The above 8 vowels form the nucleus of the 51 finals in Cantonese. To be finals, they can either stand alone or followed by another vowel or consonant.

7.2 Diphthongs

- 1) If two vowels are added together, it is called a diphthong. Like most English diphthongs, the second element of a Cantonese diphthong denotes only the direction towards which the tongue moves. Therefore do not pronounce the second vowel so much.

7.3 Difficult finals

7.3.1 yu

(1) Confusing presentation for “yu”

In yale, final “yu” is actually initial “y” plus final “u”.

ie. **yu = y + u = yu**

It’s because “u” is easier to be typed than “ü”, “ü” is used instead “u”. However there’s another vowel “ü” in Cantonese, in order to distinguish them, initial “y” is added in front.

Therefore,

◀ final “ü”, written as “yu”, pronounced as “yü”,

◀ final “u”, it’s just another Cantonese vowel

(2) Be careful

In Yale, for example, “snow” is written as “syut”. However the actual pronunciation is “sut”. Some learners are not aware the presentation of “yu” just stands for “ü” and pronounce both the initial “s” and “y” and then “ut” and hence pronounce it wrong.

Therefore if you find there is another letter comes before “yu”, then the real initial is that letter but not “y”, and “yu” should be only be pronounced as “u” instead of “yu”.

(3) **Other examples**

- “book” is written as “**syū**”, it should be pronounced as “**sū**”
- “live” is written as “**jyuh**”, it should be pronounced as “**juh**”
- “blood” is written as “**hyut**”, it should be pronounced as “**hut**”

(4) **No problems if the initial is “y” anyway**

- “fish” is written as “**yú**”, it is pronounced as “**yú**”. It’s because anyway the initial is “**y**” for the word “fish”.

(5) **Finals with these two vowels**

- Finals with vowel “**ü**”: **yu, yun, yut**
- Finals with vowel “**u**”: **u, ui, un, ung, ut, uk**

Therefore symbols “**u, un, ut**” maybe easily confused. You can tell them to see if there’s a “**y**” in front of them. If there’s “**y**”, it’s “**ü**” sound, if there’s no “**y**”, it’s “**u**” sound

English	Finals with vowel “ ü ”	English	Finals with vowel “ u ”
book	syū	man	fū
donate	gyūn	official	gūn
roll	gyún	pipe	gún
a silk	gyun	pour	gun
decide	kyut	include	kut

(6) **Difference between “yu (ü)” and “u”**

- The sound of “**yu/ü**” is in front
- The sound of “**u**” is at the back

(7) **How do you speak “yu (ü)” ?**

English speaking learners easily pronounce “**yu (ü)**” wrong as the sound like “**u**”.

“**yu (ü)**” doesn’t have a similar sound in English. It’s similar to the Cantonese “**i**” sound but with rounding lips. It’s because there is no equivalent in English and the sound is similar to the English sound “**u:**” in “you” and “too” (equal to the “**u**” sound in Cantonese), learners always pronounce it wrong as the Cantonese “**u**” sound.

In order to say it correctly, one has to keep his tongue in front, the tongue can completely touch in between the back of the lower teeth and the bottom of the mouth as long as he says this sound.

If a person’s tongue retracts and just can touch the bottom of the mouth but not the back of the lower teeth, the sound will be similar to the Cantonese “**u**” sound.

Usually students are quite correct when they first say the sound, but they can’t “keep” the tongues in front and retract them as long as they say the “**yu (ü)**” sound. Therefore at the end, they pronounce the sound in between “**yu (ü)**” and “**u**” instead of purely the “**yu (ü)**” sound.

(8) **Examples of words using “yu (ü)”**

	Yale Roman	English	Actual pronunciation
1.	syū	book	sū
2.	jyū	pig	jū
3.	jyú	cook	jú
4.	jyuh	live	juh
5.	chyhò fóng	kitchen	chhò fóng
6.	yùh gwó	if	yùh gwó
7.	yú	fish	yú
8.	yuh beih	prepare	yuh beih

7.3.2 iu

see + too

One can try to say the “ee” sound, means the vowel part of “see” and then say the “oo” sound of “too”. Speak the two sounds very fast and link them to become one sound. You will then speak the Cantonese “iu” sound.

However, you have to note that as it’s a diphthong, the second element “oo” sound should not be so much as the first element “ee” sound. Otherwise, the mouth shape will be too exaggerated and the sound will be unnatural. ◀

1.	siu	smile
2.	síu	a little, a few
3.	giu	called
4.	yiui	have to

7.3.3 eui

fur + yu

Try to say the vowel part of “fur” without rolling the tongue and then the Cantonese “yu (ü)” sound. Speak the two sounds very fast and link them to become one sound. ◀

1.	heui	go
2.	sēui	bad
3.	séui	water
4.	jeui	most

7.3.4 eng

English: sang

It sounds similar to the English “sang” ◀

1.	hēng	light
2.	dēng	nail
3.	pèhng	cheap
4.	yèhng	to win

7.3.5 eung

English “earn”

It sounds similar to the English “earn” but skip the “r” sound in it. At the end, make sure the mouth is open but not close. ◀

1.	Hēung Góng	Hong Kong
2.	séung	want
3.	chéung	take by force
4.	chèuhng	long

7.4 “aa~” and “a~”

- 1) Learners usually have no problem with “a~” sounds. However for “aa~” sounds, many learners are actually saying the intermediate between “aa~” and “a~”.

When pronoun “aa~” sounds, the mouth should open bigger and they are longer than “a~” sounds. ◀

1.	aa i	a i
2.	aa u	a u
3.	aa m	a m
4.	aa n	a n
5.	aa ng	a ng
6.	aa p	a p
7.	aa t	a t
8.	aa k	a k

- 2) The first column is long vowels, while the second column is short vowels. A long vowel has a weak ending and a short vowel has a strong ending.
- 3) “**aa**i” sounds similar to the sound of “**a**i” in “**adv**ise” or “**f**ive” while “**a**i” sounds similar to the sound of “**a**i” in “**adv**ice” or “**f**ight”. Other “aa~” and “a~” sounds share the similar characteristic.

- 4) Examples ◀

1.	g āi	street	g āi	chicken
2.	g aa <u>u</u>	teach	g au	rescue
3.	l àahm	blue	L àhm	a Chinese surname
4.	w àahn	return sth back	w àhn	cloud
5.	w àahng	horizontal	w àhng	huge
6.	l aa <u>h</u> p	wax	l ahp	sticky

7.5 Similar finals

7.5.1 “..p”, “..t” and “..k” ◀

All finials end with “**p**” or “**m**”, your lips should be closed.

All finials end with “**t**” or “**n**”, your teeth should be closed (not the lips)

All finials end with “**k**” or “**ng**”, your mouth is open, the back of your tongue will touch the soft pallet.

1.	h àahm	salty
2.	h àahn	idle
3.	h àahng	walk
1.	y i <u>h</u> p	(tree) leave
2.	y i <u>h</u> t	hot
3.	y i <u>h</u> k	wing
1.	g ón	in a hurry
2.	g óng	speak
1.	g ot	cut
2.	g ok	corner

7.5.2 “aap”, “aat” and “aak” ◀

1.	ch aap	to insert
2.	ch aat	to rub
3.	ch aak	disassemble

7.5.3 “ap”, “at” and “ak” ◀

1.	sāp	wet
2.	sāt	to lose (written Chinese)
3.	sāk	stop up, block

7.5.4 “eng” and “ing” ◀

1.	pèhng	cheap	pìhng	flat (adj.)
2.	yèhng	win	yìhng	a female given name
3.	tēng	listen	tīng	tomorrow (tīng yaht)
4.	sēng	sound	sīng	star

7.5.5 “oi” and “eui” ◀

1.	tói	table	téui	ham (fó téui)
2.	hói	sea	héui	a Chinese family name
3.	gói	correct	géui	hold up
4.	joi	again	jeui	most

7.5.6 “ong” and “ung” ◀

1.	tòhng	sugar	tùhng	and, with
2.	fōng	square	fūng	wind
3.	dōng	when (used in a statement but not a question)	dūng	winter
4.	lòhng	wolf	lùhng	dragon

7.6 Easily confused finals

7.6.1 “o” and “ou” ◀

Because these sounds are quite different from what it seems in English, learners always make mistakes

The Yale “o” sounds like “or” in English

The Yale “ou” sounds like “old” or the alphabet “o” in English

1.	go	MW for people and etc.	gou	prosecute
2.	hó	can, may: hó yíh	hóu	very, good
3.	dō	many, much	dōu	also
4.	jó	left, hinder, to block	jóu	morning, early

7.7 Syllabic nasals

In the chapter about the Initials-Initial “ng”, it talked about a few syllables consist of a nasal consonant alone, “m” or “ng”



- 1) Not
m̃h
(it's the only syllabic nasal that should be with the “m” sound)
- 2) Five
ŋh
(widely pronounced as “m̃h”)
- 3) misunderstanding
ng̃h wuih
(widely pronounced as “m̃h wuih”)
- 4) Mr. Ng
ŋh sāang 吳生 / ŋh sāang 伍生 (two different Chinese surnames)
(widely pronounced as “m̃h sāang / m̃h sāang”)
- 5) There are 51 finals in the above table, adding “m” and “ng”, there are 53 finals. Therefore Cantonese normally say they have 51 or 53 finals.

7.8 Additional informal finals

- 1) There are another 6 finals included by the Yut6 Ping3 system and therefore there are 59 finals in total in this system.
- 2) The “6” in “Yut6” and “3” in “Ping3” are the tone numbers of these two syllables in Cantonese. Because this system use numbers to show the tones instead of using tone marks.
- 3) The 6 additional informal finals are:
- em, en, ep, et, eu, and up
- “eu” here is different from “eu” in the Yale
- 4) But actually these additional 6 finals are the "sound" sometimes a Cantonese would say such as in interjections or onomatopoeia etc. They are not formal syllables and just used for a few occasions. Moreover, these additional 6 finals don't appear in Cantonese dictionaries as people don't have proper characters for them.

Unit 8 Exercises

8.1 Reading romanization

- 1) Try to write down the initials, finals and tones of the following syllables.

	English	Roman.	Initials	Finals	Tones
1	Hong	Hēung			
2	Kong	Góng			
3	Goods	fo			
4	Cheap	pèhng			
5	Buy	máaih			
6	Sell	maaih			

- 2) Try to write down the initials, finals and tones of the following syllables. Moreover if it is “syllabic nasals”, put “SN” in the last column. If it is “zero initial”, put “ZI” instead.

	English	Roman.	Initials	Finals	Tones	SN/ZI
1	not	nh				
2	five	ng				
3	correct	ām				
4	short	ái				
5	country	gwok				
6	corner	gok				
7	I	ngóh				
8	you	néih				
9	manage	léih				
10	see	gin				
11	piece	gihn				

12	mouth	háu				
13	thick	háuh				
14	dollar	mān				
15	ten thousand	maahn				

8.2 Introduction to Cantonese

- In Hong Kong, complicated / simplified strokes system is used.
- The complicated / simplified strokes system is the traditional one.
- The vocabulary used in Cantonese and Mandarin may / must be different.
- In formal situations, a Cantonese have to write Chinese / Cantonese

8.3 The Cantonese sound system

- There is/are one / more than one Cantonese romanization system used in Hong Kong.
- The Yale system is the best/ most common romanization system adopted by Cantonese teaching institutes in Hong Kong.
- Cantonese is called tonal language because _____ value is crucial to the identity of a syllable.
- In Cantonese, one character must take _____ syllable(s).
- A syllable consists of three components: _____, _____ and _____.

8.4 Tones

- 1) There are _____ distinctive tones in Cantonese
- 2) Tone 1 can be pronounced as _____ or _____
- 3) In all our material, tone 1 is marked as HL / HF.
- 4) Write down the tone marks of the following tones -

HL:	LF:
HR:	LR:
ML:	LL:

8.5 Initials

- 1) There are _____ initials in Cantonese
- 2) Many Hong Kong people confuse “**n**” and _____
- 3) Sometimes, Hong Kong people skip the _____ sound in “gw”
- 4) Sometimes, Hong Kong people skip the _____ sound in “kw”
- 5) “Zero initial” means there’s no initial/final in the syllable.

8.6 Finals

- 1) There are _____ finals in Cantonese
- 2) In the Yale, a single “**a**” is used to stand for a/aa sound.
- 3) The sound of the “**a**” in “**fā**” is actually the aa/a sound.
- 4) “not” is m̀h / ñgh
- 5) “five” is m̀h / ñgh but it is widely pronounced as m̄h / ñgh and it is generally accepted/unaccepted
- 6) “you” is “**néih**”, which is generally accepted to be pronounced as “_____”

8.7 Listening-Different Tones

Write down the order of the following pairs of syllables said in the sound file in the blanks below.

For example, the sound file says “**sáu**” and then “**sāu**”, you have to put “1” before “**sáu**” and “2” for “**sāu**”.

(2) sāu	receive	(1) sáu	hand
------------------	---------	------------------	------

1	() yíng	shadow	() yihng	recognized
2	() kēui	district	() kéuih	he, she, it
3	() mān	dollar	() màhn	language
4	() yāt	one	() yaht	day
5	() si	try	() sih	matter
6	() kéi	chess	() kéih	stand
7	() gei	post	() geih	taboo (gam geih)
8	() sīng	star	() síng	rope

8.8 Listening-Similar Initials

1	() jā	hold, drive	() chā	poor, inferior
2	() jāai	vegetarian food	() chāai	guess(Chinese)
3	() gok	corner	() gwok	country
4	() būu	watch	() pūu	float
5	() dēng	nail	() tēng	hear, listen

8.9 Listening-Similar Finals

1	() pèhng	cheap	() pìhng	flat
2	() gāai	street	() gāi	chicken
3	() tòhng	sugar	() tùhng	with, and
4	() sehk	stone	() sihk	eat
5	() jīng	steam	() jīn	pan-fried
6	() hó	can	() hóu	very or good
7	() jēun	bottle	() jēung	a surname
8	() sé	write	() séi	die
9	() būu	watch	() būi	cup
10	() cháau	stir-fried	() cháu	ugly

Unit 9 Suggested Answers

9.1 Reading romanization

1) The Initials, finals and tones:

	English	Roman.	Initials	Finals	Tones
1	Hong	Hēung	H	eung	HL
2	Kong	Góng	G	ong	HR
3	Goods	fo	f	o	ML
4	Cheap	pèhng	p	eng	LF
5	Buy	máaih	m	aai	LR
6	Sell	maaih	m	aai	LL

2) The Initials, finals and tones:

	English	Roman.	Initials	Finals	Tones	Remarks
1	not	m̀h	m	-	LF	syllabic nasals
2	five	ńgh	ng	-	LR	syllabic nasals
3	correct	āam	-	aan	HL	zero initial
4	short	ái	-	ai	HR	zero initial
5	country	gwok	gw	ok	ML	
6	corner	gok	g	ok	ML	
7	I	ngóh	ng	o	LR	
8	you	néih	n	ei	LR	
9	manage	léih	l	ei	LR	
10	see	gin	g	in	ML	
11	piece	gihn	g	in	LL	
12	mouth	háu	h	au	HR	

13	thick	háuh	h	au	LR	
14	dollar	mān	m	an	HL	
15	ten thousand	maahn	m	aan	LL	

9.2 Introduction to Cantonese

- 1) In Hong Kong, complicated/~~simplified~~ strokes system is used.
- 2) The complicated/~~simplified~~ strokes system is the traditional one.
- 3) The vocabulary used in Cantonese and Mandarin may/~~must~~ be different.
- 4) In formal situations, a Cantonese have to write Chinese/~~Cantonese~~

9.3 The Cantonese sound system

- 1) There ~~is~~are ~~one~~/more than one Cantonese romanization system used in Hong Kong.
- 2) The Yale system is the ~~best~~/most common romanization system adopted by Cantonese teaching institutes in Hong Kong.
- 3) Cantonese is called tonal language because the tone/pitch value is crucial to the identity of a syllable.
- 4) In Cantonese, one character must take one syllable(s).
- 5) A syllable consists of three components: an initial, a final and a tone

9.4 Tones

- 1) There are 6 distinctive tones in Cantonese
- 2) Tone 1 can be pronounced as high level HL or high falling HF
- 3) In all our material, tone 1 is marked as HL/~~HF~~.
- 4) Write down the tone marks of the following tones -

HL:	—	LF:	↘ h
HR:	↗	LR:	↙ h
ML:	(no tone mark)	LL:	h

9.5 Initials

- 1) There are 19 initials in Cantonese
- 2) Many Hong Kong people confuse “**n**” and l
- 3) Sometimes, Hong Kong people skip the w sound in “gw”
- 4) Sometimes, Hong Kong people skip the w sound in “kw”
- 5) “Zero initial” means there’s no initial / ~~final~~ in the syllable.

9.6 Finals

- 1) There are 51/53 finals in Cantonese
(if “**m**” and “**ng**” are included, there are 53 finals instead of 51 finals)
- 2) In the Yale, a single “**a**” is used to stand for aa sound.
- 3) The sound of the “**a**” in “**fā**” is actually the aa sound.
- 4) “not” is m̄h (but not “ṅh”)
- 5) “five” is ṅh but it is widely pronounced as m̄h and it is generally accepted/~~unaccepted~~
- 6) “you” is “néih”, which is generally accepted to be pronounced as “léih”

9.7 Listening-Different Tones

1	(1) yíng	shadow	(2) yihng	recognized
2	(2) kēui	district	(1) kéuih	he, she, it
3	(1) mān	dollar	(2) màhn	language
4	(1) yāt	one	(2) yaht	day
5	(1) si	try	(2) sih	matter
6	(2) kéi	chess	(1) kéih	stand
7	(1) gei	post	(2) geih	taboo gam geih
8	(2) sīng	star	(1) síng	rope

Cantonese Sound System

Edited by: Cantonese Learning Centre
 Tel: (852) 2881 0116
 e-mail: info@clc.com.hk
 URL: <http://www.clc.com.hk>
 Version: V5.1
 First printed in: 2000
 Revised in: May 2006
 Printed in: June 2006

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 Printed in Hong Kong

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9.8 Listening-Similar Initials

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2	(2) jāai	vegetarian food	(1) chāai	guess
3	(1) gok	corner	(2) gwok	country
4	(2) būu	watch	(1) pūu	float
5	(1) dēng	nail	(2) tēng	hear, listen

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4	(2) sehk	stone	(1) sihk	eat
5	(1) jīng	steam	(2) jīn	pan-fried
6	(2) hó	can	(1) hóu	very or good
7	(1) jēun	bottle	(2) jēung	a surname
8	(1) sé	write	(2) séi	die
9	(2) būu	watch	(1) būi	cup
10	(2) cháau	stir-fried	(1) cháu	ugly
