

**‘He can make himself look more young’:
the use of comparative constructions of Cantonese heritage speakers
in the Greater Toronto Area**

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This paper points out the importance of studying comparative constructions used by Cantonese heritage speakers in Toronto, Canada, and raise questions regarding syntactic influence that these speakers experience. Comparative constructions have long been of great interest to researchers in different fields of linguistics because of its substantial cross-linguistic variation and rich semantic embodiment (e.g. Bresan 1973;1975; Beck et al. 2004; Ansaldo 1999;2010). By definition, comparative construction refers to the construction which ‘has the semantic function of assigning a graded position on a predicative scale to two (possibly complex) objects’ (Stassen 1985; p.24). This includes both comparisons of equality (e.g. *John is as tall as Sam*) and inequality (e.g. *John is taller than Sam*). In terms of typology, English comparatives of inequality are more marked than the Cantonese ones (World Atlas of Language Structures 2013). In terms of syntax-semantics, comparative constructions in Cantonese tend to manifest simpler and neater mappings compared to that in English while semantic structures of comparative constructions in Cantonese are a subset of that in English (cf. Hohaus et al. 2014). Given these properties, it is predicted that (1) English comparatives may subject to cross-linguistic influence from Cantonese comparatives because of the neater mapping in Cantonese comparatives, (2) with reduced input of Cantonese and dominant influence from English, structures that are only allowed in English may be transferred into the Cantonese production of the heritage speakers.

With over 166,000 Cantonese speakers, Toronto is an ideal place to examine ongoing changes in heritage Cantonese. The Heritage Language and Documentation Corpus (HerLD) developed in The Heritage Language Variation and Change in Toronto Project (HLVC, Nagy 2009) documents the conversational speech of eight heritage languages including Cantonese over the course of several generations, consisting of samples of 1st (born in homeland, immigrated as adults), 2nd (children of first generation, born in Toronto) and 3rd generation speakers (children of second generation). Based on conversational data from sociolinguistic interviews (Labov 1984) in HerLD, we look at 15 Cantonese heritage speakers, 5 from each generation. The present study will examine the use of comparative constructions in Toronto heritage speakers in both a quantitative and qualitative way.

In this paper, we aim at answering three research questions. First, what patterns do these heritage speakers exhibit in employing comparative constructions? Second, given the pattern, is comparative construction a vulnerable domain for Cantonese heritage speakers? Third, why is comparative construction (not) a vulnerable domain for Cantonese heritage speakers?

Key References:

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