An online survey of phonetic variation in Hong Kong Cantonese

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A voluminous body of literature has been devoted to recent and ongoing sound changes in Hong Kong Cantonese (HKC; Bauer 1979, 1983, 1986, Bauer & Benedict 1997, Mok et al. 2013, To et al. 2015, etc). Some examples include the change of initial [n-] to [l-], deletion of initial [ŋ-], and merger of high-rising and low-rising tones. As most changes are not completed yet, a great deal of synchronic variation exists in the perception and production of the critical sounds among current HKC speakers. However, apart from the apparent effect of speaker age, little is known about the general patterns of phonetic variation. Are the variations conditioned by speaker gender, social class, geographical location, language background, individual cognitive differences, etc? Such questions are difficult to address without a large dataset that offers adequate representation of each potentially effective factor.

In this project, we build an online project that collects speech samples (from passage reading) and detailed speaker information (demographics, family language background, experience with Mandarin and English at home and in the community, cognitive processing tendencies, etc). The platform our project is built on provides built-in recording functions, various surveying tools, and data storage. Participant recruitment is conducted via both crowd-sourcing (through social media promotion/advertisement) and targeted recruitment (from university classes and designated neighborhoods). So far we have collected data from about 80 participants. This talk will discuss the methods of this study as well as preliminary data analysis.