

ON THE GRADIENT VARIATION OF THE HAKKA ZERO-INITIAL ONSET

Raung-fu Chung

*Southern Taiwan University of Science and Technology,
rfchung@stust.edu.tw*

This study explores the gradient change in phonetic features of Hakka fricative. Acoustic analysis was adopted. Findings emerge that both manner and place contribute the gradient variation of Hakka fricative, resulting in dialectal accents.

Key words: *zero-initial syllables, Hakka, gradient variation, phonetic diversity.*

The goal of this article is twofold. One is to argue that some minor diversity or change in phonetic features, though unrecognizable for most speakers, would give rise to a key indicator for the phonological characteristics of a variety or a dialect. The other attempts to bring more attention to gradient phonetic studies on un-phonemic inventory. Our arguments are based on the acoustic data of the fricative occurring at the zero-initial of a Hakka high front vowel.

As one of the Chinese languages, Hakka is minor in terms of population, but it spreads sporadically almost everywhere in China. However, the data to be examined were mainly collected in Taiwan. Hakka phonology is intriguing in that only non-high vowels are allowed to occur independently, namely, [en] ‘we’, [on] ‘peace’, and [ang] ‘urn’, but *in, *un. For the onset of high vowels, the distribution is no more than asymmetrical for there must be a [v] at the onset of the back high vowel, i.e. [vu] ‘house’, [vun] ‘literature,’ but the fricative at the onset of the front high vowel [i] varies depending on different degrees of friction or different places, ranging from nothing ([i] ‘doctor’, [in] ‘sound’), to [j] or [ʒ], [z]. According to IPA (1999), [j] is a palatal fricative as the initial of English *yeast* [jist]), while [ʒ] and [z], both being fricative, differ in place, the former, post-alveolar, and the latter, retroflexed. Participants recruited to this study are 80: 40 females and 40 males, from 4 types of accents (nothing, [j] or [ʒ], [z]). They were asked to read a list containing zero-initial di-syllabic words and the second syllable is the target (to avoid the interference of tone sandhi). The Praat was adopted for the acoustic analysis. After careful investigation of the data, the following findings emerge. To begin with, both manner (friction) and place contribute equally significant role for the phonetic implementation. Secondly, the gradient phonetic difference reflects the indicator of each dialectal accents. Thirdly, for most informants (native speakers) the difference in phonetic features impresses them with foreign accents. Theoretical implications raised from such findings will be fully discussed in details.