Abstract

This study attempts to examine the usage of personal pronouns in Singapore Cantonese spoken by local Cantonese speakers, in an attempt to distinguish the differences between personal pronouns used in conversational Cantonese and that of written Cantonese.

This study is based on the in Biq Yung-O’ s model of cataloguing the different usages of personal pronouns in her article “The multiple uses of the second person singular pronoun ni in conversational Mandarin” (Journal of Pragmatics v 16). While she has based her model in the usages of the second person singular pronoun in conversational Mandarin, this study attempts to modify it to study the different usages of the personal pronouns in local conversational Cantonese.

Oral data is collected through about two hours of conversation among local adept Cantonese speakers, which amounted to more than a hundred pages of conversational transcripts. An analysis of the different usages of the personal pronouns is carried out and the different usages of personal pronouns are catalogued.

The findings show that the usage of personal pronouns in conversational Cantonese is much more varied than its written form, and more often than not, they are used in non-deictic circumstances to better bring the speaker’s point across. As the deictic meaning of the personal pronouns depend much on the status of the speaker and audience, we can see the meanings and usage of the personal pronouns often shift when the speaker takes up another’s point of view.

The implication of this study is that personal pronouns are often used less rigidly in everyday conversations than in written grammar, and are often based on the choice of the speaker.