Abstract

At the end of the 1970s, my teacher Professor Chen Chung Yu wrote an article on a special short falling pitch occurring in Singapore Mandarin, ‘A Fifth Tone in the Mandarin spoken in Singapore’ (Chen, 1981, 1983). Such a pitch occurs with character that carries a Ru-sheng (Entering Tone; hereafter, Ru-sheng Character) in the Southern Chinese dialects, which are the native dialects of most Singaporeans. More than 20 years has passed, however, this ‘Fifth Tone’ still exists in Mandarin spoken in Singapore. According to Chen Chung Yu’s description (Chen, 1981, 1983), this ‘Fifth Tone’ is a falling tone with a glottal stop coda [ʔ], which may vary in terms of prominence. Owing to the glottal stop coda, the whole syllable ends more or less abruptly. It also appears to be fairly tense, and the initial consonant seems to have a clear-cut onset.

This thesis aims to examine the frequency of the ‘Fifth Tone’ in Singapore on a spectrum of ages. 95 informants from four different age groups have participated in a survey. After collecting and analyzing all the phonetic data, I arrived at the following conclusions:

1. The ‘Fifth Tone’ still exists in Singapore Mandarin, however, its frequency falls as the age goes down. The total frequency of the ‘Fifth
Tone’ in the age group of 65-70 is 41.2%, but in the age group of 20-25 is only 4.9%.

2. Education background does have some bearing on the frequency of the ‘Fifth Tone’. In most of the cases, informants who have graduated from junior colleges tend to have lower frequencies of the ‘Fifth Tone’.

3. The text frequency of the Ru-sheng Character does not seem to have direct effect on the frequency of the ‘Fifth Tone’.

4. Among all the Ru-sheng Characters, those which carry Mandarin Tone-1 have the highest frequency for the ‘Fifth Tone’ reading, which is 31.7%.

5. Ru-sheng Characters that end with a vocalic glide in [i] or [u] in Mandarin, never appear in the ‘Fifth Tone’. However, they may assume a different segmental form and appear in the ‘Fifth Tone’ (For instance, character 粥 may occur as [-ou] or [-u?]).

6. A comparison with a survey done in 1999 (by Ho Lui Choon) shows a consistent decrease in the frequency of the ‘Fifth Tone’ across all four age groups; the average frequencies have dropped from 36.5% (1999) to 24.3% of the present study.