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**The Beginning of Merging of
the Tonal Categories B2 and C1
in Hong Kong Cantonese**

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Abstract

It has been widely accepted that traditionally there are nine tonal categories in Cantonese with primarily six tonal contours currently. However, there has been a tendency of the merging of the tonal categories C1 and B2 in Hong Kong Cantonese recently such as pronouncing the morpheme “試” meaning examination in tone B2 as in “考試” or pronouncing the morpheme “社” in tone C1 as in “社會”. In fact, this phenomenon was first discussed in the book written by Siew-Yue Killingley “A New Look at Cantonese Tones: Five or Six?” published in 1985. In addition, Flynn has also briefly mentioned this in the domain of Hong Kong Cantonese in her paper presented in the First International Conference in the Dialect *Yue* (第一屆國際粵方言研討會).

In Killingley’s paper, she constructed the following five-toneme system of Malaya Cantonese (Killingley 1985, 24):

Example	Meaning	Description/ Common Allo-tones	Corresponding Toneme in Traditional System
/ɸfɛn/分	to divide	HL 1 [HF]	1
/ɸfɛn/粉	powder	HR 2	2
/ɸfɛn/瞓	to sleep	HML 3 [LR]	3
/ɸfɛn/份	A share	LML 4	6
/ɸfɛn/墳	Tomb	LL 5 [LF]	4

With the construction of this system, she gave three supporting evidences:

- (1) The number of meaningful free forms with pitch contrast of the same syllable;
- (2) The number of syllable tokens containing a LR tone with six tonal distinctions;
- (3) The unexplained confusion in tonal identification involving native speakers/listeners.

In addition, she would also like to extend this discovery to Hong Kong and mainland Cantonese. However, the examples given by Killingley are not consistent with the situation in contemporary Hong Kong if in Malayan Cantonese. Rather, it would be more reasonable to say that there has been a tendency for the merging and it is at the very beginning stage only in Hong Kong. In summary, some tokens change from 3(5) to 5(3) permanently; some can be pronounced as both and some undergone tonal splitting to represent different meanings. Here are the main reasons behind the alternation: (i) as a result from sentence intonation; (ii) as a means to differentiate meaning; (iii) as a result of ambiguous; *and* (iiii) as a result of phonetic difficulty and similarity.

In this article, the arguments given by Killingley are reviewed and a survey about this recent change in Hong Kong Cantonese was performed. Finally, the reasons behind this phenomenon are discussed in detail.

Word Count: 414

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