

the forty-niner

# Toning up

by Philip J. Hunt

**I**F WE had been putting this much effort into learning French," commented one European lady, "we'd be fluent by now."

We were nearly three months into our Cantonese course, and we could almost make ourselves understood to tea-shop waiters. . . provided we stuck to what we knew how to say, rather than what we actually wanted to eat. Beyond this significant achievement, we remained rudderless in a linguistic storm.

Cantonese is easy, except for the fact that it is Chinese.

Most of us English speakers have already tackled French, German or Italian at school. We struggled to remember whether the pen of my aunt was "*sur la table*" or "*dans la table*", but basically all we had to do was learn new words for familiar ideas. European languages are so similar that as long as one remembers the right words, it is possible to make meaningful sentences.

Chinese languages are (for the English speaker) quite different. There are the new words to learn. . . and the *tones*.

Some people never catch on to the idea of tones. One lady kept asking questions (in English) like "You mean '*sihk*'?" (Cantonese "to eat"). The only problem was that by letting her voice rise at the end of the question — as a proper English speaker naturally would — she wasn't asking what she thought she was asking. At a higher pitch, "*sihk*" means "to know" (among other things!).

No wonder she was confused by the answer: "No, I mean '*sihk*'" — this time delivered with the correct tone.

The effort to master "good tones" has interesting side effects. Some people find themselves conducting while they talk, as though their voice and fingers were inextricably linked.

Others follow the rising and falling of their voices with their eyebrows. For still others, the development of an elastic neck seems a pre-requisite for permitting their heads to stay in tune with their language.

For students who persevere, however, tones soon become ingrained in the same way they do in English. The fact that we use tones differently in English (eg. to



change a statement into a question), continues to be a problem until one develops the ability to "think Chinese".

Now this is no mean feat. Most of us aren't even aware that we currently think British, or Australian, or American. Learning Cantonese demonstrates the differences.

A New Zealand student keeps saying "Hang on", when she means "Wait". The Chinese tutor looks about for a convenient grab-rail and prepares for the imminent earthquake.

It gets even worse when you translate from your own language into Cantonese. Using Cantonese to say that someone is "big-headed", or that they have a "screw loose", or that we will "shoot through" after class, is a sure way to crumple the inscrutable tutorial face.

It becomes obvious that such idiomatic phrases are untransferable between languages, but even simple expressions such as "Let's go" or "Never mind" become absurd in Cantonese. So you have to learn the alternatives.

Tenses disappear into never-never land to be replaced by bits to add on to verbs according to which side of the bed you got up on that morning. Or so it seems at first.

At our school there is a "devotions time". Teachers cringe while students take

turns leading the meeting, inviting people to sing a hymn, and lead a prayer. Thankfully, most of the students remember to repeat what they have just said in English. Otherwise they find themselves looking out on mass confusion as the congregation tries to decide whether the leader has said Hymn 45 or Bus 45.

When it was my turn to pray in Cantonese I was truly terrified. After all, when you're talking to God Almighty, you don't want to mess things up. After a light breakfast, I spent a good part of the morning inspecting the plumbing at the school. Then, when the fateful moment came, I mumbled something appropriate about thanking God for making me feel like a child again, and chanted the correct ending, mispronouncing "Lord Jesus" so that it sounded more like "Pig Jesus". The rest of the day remained calm, however, so I surmised that God is indeed all-forgiving.

On one other occasion when I was fortunate enough to have an interpreter, I told a meeting (in Cantonese) that because I couldn't speak Cantonese my interpreter/friend would give me a hand. The interpreter simply said by way of translation, "I didn't understand a word!"

The sense of achievement finally comes when you manage to have a whole taxi trip without speaking a word of English. Mind you, such progress requires long periods of intense examination of the world outside the vehicle. The idea is that if you look pre-occupied, the driver won't interrupt your reverie.

Then, at the strategic moment, you emerge from your make-believe studiousness to command "turn left", or "stop here". With a little luck, you can read the meter and do the conversion plus tunnel toll, before the taxi-driver tells you how much. Only if you can make these calculations in English can you be certain of understanding the price in Cantonese.

Such encounters invariably conclude with the driver telling you how good your Cantonese is. You never say "Thank you", as a polite Englishman would. Rather, like a polite Chinese, you say "It's really quite bad".

No doubt, you are not being modest! ■