

Tone Perception Ability of Cantonese-speaking Children

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ABSTRACT

Studies have shown that while children acquire all Cantonese tones by age two, they are not able to label them reliably until approximately age ten. One possible explanation for the large age discrepancy may be the different methodologies used. This study aimed to (1) investigate a new research design for the collection of reliable tone perception data from young children; (2) compare lexical and non-lexical items for testing tone perception ability; and, (3) identify the relative ease of perceiving the three basic tone contrasts in Cantonese, i.e., high level/high rising (T1/T2), high level/low falling (T1/T4), and, high rising/low falling tones (T2/T4).

The three tone pairs were presented to 31 children in the form of word and nonword stimuli. It was found that the research design could be used to assess the tone perception knowledge of children as young as 2;09. Significant differences were found between word and nonword stimuli and also in the identification of the T2/T4 contrast in comparison with the other two pairs.

Children's overall tone perception abilities are discussed in detail with reference to the role of lexical knowledge and the potential for tone perception confusions arising from differences in fundamental frequencies for tone onset and offset.

KEYWORDS: tone perception, Cantonese, lexical knowledge, F₀ onset and offset