



香港浸會大學  
HONG KONG BAPTIST UNIVERSITY

Department of English Language & Literature  
DEPARTMENT RESEARCH SEMINAR SERIES  
<http://buenglish.wordpress.com>

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*Venue:* OEM1008, 10/F, OEN Hall Building, Ho Sin Hang Campus

## English Loanwords in Cantonese: How their meanings have changed

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In this seminar I will describe some research that I have begun, and which I plan to expand on. I will then solicit suggestions for how to improve my methodology. This research relates to a recently written paper that describes the semantic change of six English loanwords in Cantonese:

- *sot1* “short”;
- *ku1* “cool”;
- *hep1pi2* “happy”;
- *ang1kou4* “uncle”;
- *haai1* “high”;
- *on1si2* 安士 “ounce”.

In the literature on loanwords, different types of semantic change have been discussed, but as far as I know there has not been any attempt to look exhaustively at all the changes undergone by individual words. Typically a type of semantic change is briefly explained, and then one or more examples of that type of change are given. In contrast, my methodology collected all the types of semantic change that I found mentioned in the literature and used them to create a “checklist.” I then examined every loanword for evidence of each type of semantic change on this checklist. For your reference, I have included a table on the following page that lists the types of semantic change, subcategories if any, and one or two examples of each.

Any comments or suggestions about this methodology would be greatly appreciated. Here are some specific questions that might help you think of advice to give:

- Does the list of types of semantic change seem complete? Do you know of others?
- Are the types of change I discuss clear? Do any lack specificity?
- Should I add more subcategories anywhere?
- What are some good ways to examine all the differences between the meanings of an English word and its Cantonese loanword counterpart?
- Beyond all this, can you think of any good ways to research the origins of English loanwords in Cantonese?

Thank you in advance for any potential help! If you cannot think of anything and only end up asking clarification questions, that’s great too!

| Type of semantic change  | subcategories           | Example  |
|--|-------------------------|--|
| a. semantic extension/<br>expansion  | None                    | The loanword <i>sot1</i> “short” has extended its meaning to refer to a person being crazy.  |
| b. semantic narrowing  | None                    | The loanword <i>ku1</i> “cool” lost its literal meaning related to temperature.  |
| c. radical semantic change   | None                    | Example a. above is an example of radical change   |
| d. change of emotive<br>content  | amelioration (A)        | Example a. above is pejorative.  |
|  | pejorative shift (P)    | Another example is <i>hep1pi2</i>  |
|  | taboo/euphemism (E)     | “happy,” which can be used as a verb to euphemistically refer to having sex.   |
| e. metaphorical change   | metaphorical change (C) | Example a. above is a metaphorical use that does not exist in English.   |
|  | metaphorical gain (G)   |  |
|  | metaphorical loss (L)   |  |
| f. change of syntactic<br>category   | change (C)              | The adjectives <i>hep1pi2</i> “happy” and <i>haai1</i> “high” can be used as verbs.  |
|  | addition (A)            |  |
|  | reduction (R)           |  |
| g. change of valency   | None                    | The verb form of <i>haai1</i> “high” can take an object: <i>Keoi5 haai1-zo2 je5</i> (佢 high 左野呀; “He’s high on something—Lit. “He highed something”) |
| h. denoting a version based<br>on the culture of the<br>borrowing language | None                    | The vocative (address term) <i>ang1kou4</i> “uncle” has changed its meaning in a way that is influenced by the local culture.                        |
| i. denoting a version based<br>on the culture of the source<br>language    | None                    | I’m not aware of any examples of this.   |