Permissive Verbs in Hong Kong Cantonese:
Synchronic and Diachronic Perspectives

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Abstract

The present thesis studies the permissive verbs in Hong Kong Cantonese bei2 界, zeon2 准, joeng6 讓, jam6 任, jau4dak1 由得 and dang2 等 from synchronic and diachronic perspectives.

First, the feature of each permissive verb in question is discussed. It is demonstrated that bei2 界 is the generic permissive verb while the others each contain an idiosyncratic specification in addition to signifying the action of giving permission.

Second, the multiple functions exhibited by the permissive verbs are discussed. It is shown that bei2 界 also exhibits the functions of a letting verb, a permissive modal auxiliary verb and a passive and/or agent marker. Zeon2 准 also carries the permissive modal auxiliary verb function. Jam6 任 can also function as a letting verb and an adverb of manner. Jau4dak1 由得 can also serve as a letting verb and its similar form jau4 由 can be used as a passive and/or agent marker. Dang2 等 is also a causing verb and an unexpecte subordinating conjunction.

Third, the historical development of the multiple functions of the permissive verbs is discussed. On the one hand, it is argued that the letting verb function of bei2 界, jam6 任 and jau4dak1 由得, the permissive auxiliary verb function of bei2 界 and zeon2 准, the adverb-of-manner function of jam6 任 and the passive and/or agent marker function of bei2 界 are directly derived from their permissive verb function. On the other hand, it is shown that the passive and/or agent marker function of jau4 由 and the causing verb function of dang2 等 as well as its unexpecte conjunction function are in fact not derived from their permissive verb function.