The Diminutive Tone Change in Siyi Dialects
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Abstract

Diminutives are words formed by a morphological device that adds a semantic element of smallness to the meaning of the stem. This thesis seeks to present a systematic investigation of diminutives in Siyi, a subgroup of Yue spoken in the southwest of the Pearl River Delta.

The Siyi dialect generally employs bianyin (diminutive tone change) as the basic device for diminutives. Three types of bianyin forms are found in Siyi: the high level, the high rising and the Yangshang Pattern Bianyin (YPB). Among them the most prevalent type is the YPB, which is unexceptionally aligned with the lexical tone category of Yangshang, though its actual value varies from the low [21]/[11] to the high rising [35] or high falling [53] across divergent Siyi varieties. The TPB is attributable to an underlying pan-Siyi stratum at an earlier historical stage. The high level bianyin is the least productive type, attributable to a superficial stratum nonnative to Siyi, and most of the words in this type of bianyin are borrowed from Cantonese. The high rising bianyin has an inconsistent distribution across various Siyi dialects, suggesting that it belongs to an intermediate stratum. Its origin could be traced to a diminutive suffix, possibly the most prevailing diminutive suffix er 儿 found in the majority of Chinese dialects.