

## MASTER'S THESIS

### A contrastive study in Cantonese and English modality by analyzing the modal auxiliary, ho yi 可以

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**A CONTRASTIVE STUDY IN  
CANTONESE AND ENGLISH MODALITY  
BY ANALYZING THE MODAL AUXILIARY: *ho yi* 可以**

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## Abstract

One aspect of the Cantonese language that has received little attention from linguists is its modality. This paper attempts to redress this neglect by focusing on a comparison of the modal *ho yi* 可以 *may* in Cantonese with its equivalents in English, to show its syntactic and semantic features.

The data under study mainly come from two sources: (i) published materials including magazines, textbooks and leaflets, and (ii) unpublished materials such as road signs or conversations. These authentic data show that there are significant differences in syntactic features between Cantonese and English modality. At the semantic level, the interpretation of the modal as epistemic or deontic is open to ambiguity in both languages. The real meaning can be interpreted by providing more context details, namely the roles of the interlocutors, or the topic discussed, etc.

By comparing the data, a framework for the study of Cantonese modality is suggested. Some of the implications should be interesting enough to arouse attention and to motivate further study of this topic. The findings should also be useful for teaching modality to EFL/ESL students.

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**Table of Content**

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<b>Chapter 1 Introduction</b> .....	P. 1 - 4
<b>Chapter 2 Literature Review</b>	
2.1 Modality in English .....	P. 5 - 12
2.2 Modality in Cantonese .....	P. 12 - 16
<b>Chapter 3 Methodology</b>	
3.1 Framework of This Study .....	P. 17 - 20
3.2 Source of Data.....	P. 20 - 21
3.3 Presentation of Data .....	P. 21 - 22
<b>Chapter 4 Data Analysis</b>	
4.1 Comparison on Syntactic Structure	
4.1.1 Grammatical Structure .....	P. 23 - 26
4.1.2 Negation .....	P. 26 - 30
4.1.3 Question Form .....	P. 30 - 34
4.1.4 Tense of Modals .....	P. 34 - 35
4.2 Comparison of Semantic Differences	
4.2.1 Epistemic vs Deontic .....	P. 35 - 39
4.2.2 Scope of Negation .....	P. 39 - 41
4.2.3 Scope of Modality .....	P. 42 - 43
<b>Chapter 5 Conclusion</b> .....	P. 44 - 46
<b>Bibliography</b> .....	P. 47 - 48
<b>Appendix</b>	
Appendix I - TVB Weekly .....	P. 49
Appendix II - A Chao Yat Comics .....	P. 50
Appendix III - Cantonese Conversation Grammar .....	P. 51