

The palatal nasal in Hakka

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There is an abundant supply of high-frequency Chinese characters with syllable-initial palatal nasal /ɲ/ sounds in Hakka¹ (see Table 1 below). The sound correspondences of these characters between Mandarin *r*- (Pinyin), Hakka /ɲ/ and Cantonese /j/ are quite regular, but there also exist a number of exceptions (Table 2). (Note: Tone marks are omitted in the transcriptions.)

Table 1 – Regular correspondences between Mandarin *r*-, Hakka /ɲ/ and Cantonese /j/

Chinese character	Mandarin (Pinyin)	Hakka*	Cantonese
人	ren	[ɲin]	[jɛn]
弱	ruo	[ɲɔkˀ]	[jœkˀ]
日	ri	[ɲitˀ]	[jetˀ]
熱	re	[ɲɛtˀ]	[jitˀ]
肉	rou	[ɲɔkˀ]	[jɔkˀ]
然	ran	[ɲɛn]	[jin]
讓	rang	[ɲɔŋ]	[jœŋ]
軟	ruan	[ɲɔn]	[yɛn]
忍	ren	[ɲun]	[jɛn]
認	ren	[ɲin]	[jɛŋ] / [jɪŋ]
染	ran	[ɲam]	[jim]

* The sounds transcribed here are of the *Sixian* dialect spoken by Hakka communities in Miaoli, Kaohsiung and Pingtung counties in Taiwan.

Table 2: Exceptions

韌	ren	[ɲun]	[jɛn]
月	yue	[ɲɛtˀ]	[yɛtˀ]
牛	niu	[ɲu]	[ŋɛu]
玉	yu	[ɲɔkˀ]	[jɔkˀ]
娘	niang	[ɲɔŋ]	[lœŋ] / [nœŋ]
爾/汝 (?)	爾 er; 汝 ru	[ɲi]**	爾[ji]; 汝[yɛ]
耳	er	[ɲi]	[ji]

** second-person singular pronoun in one dialect.

Note: The first time I learned the IPA symbol [ɲ] was also the first time I realized that Hakka [ɲ] was actually no different from the *gn* in the Italian word *gnocchi* (and also French *agneau*) and the Spanish sound indicated by *ñ*. I don't believe that this fact is widely known among Taiwanese students who have taken a course in Introduction to Linguistics, despite Hakka being the language of a significant minority group of this country.

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¹ According to *The Handbook of Chinese Linguistics*, edited by C.-T. James Huang et al., Wiley-Blackwell 2014, Palatal sounds are uncommon in Chinese dialects. Meixian Hakka (梅縣客家) and Liuyang 瀏陽 of the Gan dialect group (贛語) are the only two dialects of the 70 dialects in which the palatal stops [c cʰ], palatal fricative [ç], and palatal nasal [ɲ] occur (Section 3.4.1 of Chapter 14 on p. 392).