# Cantonese as a World Language From Pearl River and Beyond

Jiaqing Zeng[1] and Asif Agha[2]

[1]St. Paul's School, Concord, NH, USA
[2]University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA, USA

## ABSTRACT

In this paper, I will be comparing different registers of Cantonese from all around the world, mainly focusing on the Pearl River Delta region after the 1800s. Yet my larger purpose is to draw attention to how these different registers relate to the cultural values and social lives of the people living in those places. Max Weinreich, a pioneer sociolinguist and Yiddish scholar once said, "a language is a dialect with an army and a navy (Fishman)." Cantonese is no exception, and the state of this language has been dependent upon four factors: the geographic distribution of the Cantonese-speaking population, the economic development of Cantonese-speaking regions, official status, and international significance.

## Introduction

Cantonese is one of the Chinese dialects and the mother tongue for the *Guangfu* people of Han Chinese, who were originally from China's Lingnan region. The language has a complete set of nine tones, retaining many features of Middle Ancient Chinese since the area seldom suffered from wars and was unaffected by the nomadic minorities in northern China. It has a complete series of characters that can be expressed independently from other Chinese languages, and it is the only Chinese language that has been studied in foreign universities in addition to Mandarin. It originated from Canton (Guangzhou) because of the important role that Canton had played in China's important politics, economy, and culture since ancient times, and it still has official status in Hong Kong and Macau today. Overseas Chinese, who globalize the language, are important carriers of Cantonese culture as well: it is the fourth most spoken language in Australia, the third most spoken language in the United States and Canada, and the second most spoken language in New Zealand (Fan).

From the period of the late Qing dynasty (1800-1912), Cantonese had been influenced by western languages and carried around the world by early Cantonese merchants and immigrants. Because of those influences, different registers of the Cantonese language started to emerge. According to Asif Agha's definition of a register in sociolinguistics, it is a repertoire that is associated, culture-internally, with particular social practices and with persons who engage in such practices ("The Social Life of Cultural Value" 231-232). In the modern Cantonese language, many registers are used worldwide, but the most spoken ones have been developed in Guangzhou and Hong Kong. More specifically, due to the dominance of the British English during Hong Kong's colonial period, the Hong Kong Cantonese has developed code-mixing patterns with English, whereas Guangzhou Cantonese has been affected by the official language of mainland China, Mandarin. Cantonese in other areas, such as Macau and Malaysia, are affected by Portuguese and Malay (and other local languages) respectively. The significance of these contacts can be explained by Agha's concept of enregisterment, which is a "process whereby diverse behavioral signs (whether linguistic, non-linguistic, or both) are functionally reanalyzed as cultural models of action, as behaviors capable of indexing stereotypic characteristics of incumbents of particular interactional roles, and of relations among them" ("Language and Social Relations" 55). As historical circumstances change, so do different registers and the social settings in which they develop.

Max Weinreich, a pioneer sociolinguist and Yiddish scholar once said, "a language is a dialect with an army and a navy" (Fishman). Cantonese is no exception, and the state of this language has been dependent upon four factors: the geographic distribution of the Cantonese-speaking population, the economic development of Cantonese-speaking regions, official status, and international significance. Over time, a great variety of registers has developed, and all of them are closely linked to their users and their identities. In Chinatowns in the United States, for example, the Cantonese is different from traditional Cantonese because of the usage of different Cantonese words and because of code-mixing with English, which marks the speakers as Chinese Americans.

In this paper, I will be comparing different registers of Cantonese from all around the world, mainly focusing on the Pearl River Delta region after the 1800s. Yet my larger purpose is to draw attention to how these different registers relate to the cultural values and social lives of the people living in those places.

## Historical Background

The Chinese languages are commonly classified under a sub-branch of the Sino-Tibetan language family. Nowadays, the country's official language, Putonghua, or Mandarin, is spoken by more than a billion people, which is more than 20% of the global population, not only in mainland China but also throughout South-East Asia, as well as in other parts of the world. However, Mandarin was only one form of Chinese, which is a derived and modified variation of Northern Chinese dialects, or *fang yan*, around the Beijing Municipality area, a small part of Tianjin Municipality, the eastern part of Hebei Province, the western part of Liaoning Province and a small part of eastern Inner Mongolia. Being the standard language, as well as the language used for education in modern society, Mandarin is often viewed as the language of the elite, which encourages the public, especially the younger generation, to learn it (Kurpaska 1-3). Because of this classification, many people abandoned their local dialects in order to speak the language that is arguably more useful in today's society. Those abandoned local dialects are mostly southern Chinese dialects such as Cantonese, Hakka and Teochew, which bear about as much relation to Mandarin as French does to English (Erbaugh 79).

Cantonese is classified under the Yue group, which is the most spoken dialect in southern China. It is closer to ancient Chinese than Mandarin in pronunciation, with nine tones rather than four, still containing many ancient Chinese usages and characters. From the 1880s, the language was known in the West because of trading in Guangzhou. Since Guangzhou was the only port open for trade between China and the rest of the world under the Qing regime before the Opium War, the status of Cantonese was official (Stevens 1). Records show that westerners used Cantonese to produce Chinese-English dictionaries and books for the rest of the world to understand more about this mystical oriental nation. Around the same time, large numbers of Cantonese speakers from villages outside of Guangzhou began emigrating from China, thus making the language widespread around the world. In 1984, the Treaty of Nanking signed between the British and Qing changed the local development of Cantonese language and culture by placing Hong Kong under British control. Under British rule, Hong Kong gradually developed its own register of Cantonese, eventually setting the standard for the language.

In the late 1800s, Americans arrived at the coastal cities in southern China trying to hire workers to work on the west coast. As a result, the Cantonese people were the earliest immigrants to America, building the transcontinental railroad. They also immigrated to South-East Asia, Europe, even as far as South America (University).

The state of Cantonese remained stable during the time of Republican China, and it was valued highly during the early era of the Nationalists Party because many high-ranking officials, including Sun Yat-sen himself, were native Cantonese speakers. Nevertheless, in order to unify the nation, the leaders of the republic declared Mandarin the national language of China, thus enabling it to gain prominence throughout the country. The establishment of the People's Republic of China continued to introduce language policies mostly for the purpose of national unity and the eradication of illiteracy. Gradually, schools and public officials became obliged to use Mandarin for work and teaching (Twitchett 298-301). Cantonese then became a colloquial dialect in mainland China while remaining official in Hong Kong and Macau.

Before China's economic reform and reopening, Hong Kong acted as one of the centers of Asia's mainstream culture. Cantonese pop songs had their golden age during the 80s and 90s, affecting at least two generations of Chinese around the world. Famous Hong Kong movies also produced international superstars such as Bruce Lee and Jackie Chan. The culture continued to rise to its peak as Hong Kong maintained its role of a global center for trade and finance. After the handover of Hong Kong, foreign pop culture pushed local production to the edge, and, at the same time, the mainland Chinese market slowly became the dominant cultural center for entertainment. Singers and actors relied on the mainland market for revenue, which is why Mandarin pop culture and movies became overwhelmingly popular. After a number of economic reforms, mainland China surpassed Hong Kong in economic growth, and, as a result, Cantonese culture is no longer mainstream, but rather one of many parts of China's diverse culture.

## Registers in the Pearl River Delta

The Cantonese language is originated from the Pearl River Delta region of southern China, which is classified into different registers based on tone and phonemic changes in terms of phonology, and different grammar and word usages in terms of syntax. There are many dialects of Cantonese within this region, but the standard was set based on the Guangzhou accent. Later, as Hong Kong became a more important global trading and financial hub, the standard switches to the Hong Kong accent. In the more recent decade, native Cantonese speakers are declining to the dominance of Mandarin. Not only do people in Lingnan region feel the crisis of their native culture slowly disappearing, but they also hoped to protect and spread the influence of their mother tongue, hoping to attract universal attention to this declining phenomenon. The Cantonese language has unique advantages when it comes to understanding and reading ancient Chinese text, and the broad and profound Lingnan culture is worth digging into for one's better understanding of China's diversity. The rising importance of dominant languages and culture will inevitably push Cantonese culture and languages to a subculture position.

### *Early Registers*

During the late Qing dynasty, Guangzhou was the only port in China open for foreign trade. As a result, Cantonese was the first Chinese language that was exposed to the west through trade. The trading area was a restricted foreign residence with a set of Chinese-built warehouses on the banks of the Pearl River known as the Thirteen Factories (in Mandarin, *Shi San Hang*; in Cantonese, *Sup Saam Hong*). For a long time, the Guangzhou Cantonese was seen as the standard (Farris 66-68).

However, at the same time, different registers of both Cantonese and English were developed between the merchants and foreign traders. From my personal collection of a paper-made gold paint box from *Wang Hing* factory (see Figure 1), it shows that the Cantonese merchants knew English well enough to describe their product. This specific product was made in Germany and sold in Guangzhou as merchandise. The first phrase "孖鱼" on the back of the paintbox translates to "double fish" which is the brand name of the gold paint. In addition, the expression of using "孖" as double is a typical Cantonese usage which helped to localize the product. Since there was little promotion of the official Qing Mandarin, or *guanhua*, to the common people, Guangzhou merchants used Cantonese phrases and grammar on their labels.

Figure 1 *Gold paint box from Wang Hing factory*

The table below (See Table 1), from the Thirteen Factories Museum in Guangzhou, shows a conversation between a Cantonese merchant and a western trader. Although the Cantonese merchants spoke English, they used the Cantonese syntax to construct their sentences, and the westerners tried to respond with a Cantonese accent, reflecting the sentence structure used by the merchants. The language they spoke, which was a unique register developed between the Cantonese and foreigner traders, has obvious traits of both English and Cantonese.

Table 1 Guangzhou English dialogue

| Speaker | Guangzhou English | Standard English |
|---|---|---|
| Cantonese Merchant | Chin-chin, how you do long time my no hab see you. | Welcome, how do you do? Long time no see! |
| Westerner | I can secure hab long time before time my no have come this shop. | Long time no see, I did not come to your shop last time. |
| Cantonese Merchant | Hi-ya, so, eh! What thing wantchee? | Ah, yea, how can I help you? |
| Westerner | Oh, some litty chow-chow thing. You have got some ginger sweet-meat? | Oh, I want some small things. Do you have some ginger sweetmeat? |
| Cantonese Merchant | Just now no got, I think Canton hab got vela few that sutemeet. | I do not have it now. I think there is very little ginger sweetmeat here in Canton. |

With goods and culture exchange rapidly going on in the Pearl River delta, common English words soon became widely known to all Cantonese speakers in the area. Soon, after the First Opium War, Britain occupied islands

130 km away from Guangzhou on the east side of the Pearl River. Those islands are collectively known as Hong Kong, which is still a predominantly Cantonese-speaking society.

During the start of British colonization, Cantonese in Hong Kong was relatively traditional among the Chinese speakers, with words and phrases well written in Cantonese characters. Westerners who came to this region started to learn and analyze Cantonese, mostly for the purpose of easier communication and religious mission. "A Chinese-English Dictionary in the Cantonese Dialect" published in 1910 by Dr. Ernest John Eitel, later revised and enlarged by Immanuel Gottlieb Genährr of the Rhenish Missionary Society, is a piece of direct evidence which Cantonese was well studied by westerners.

In this dictionary (see Figure 2), authors accumulated characters used in both Cantonese and Mandarin, giving the definition of each character and its usages in Cantonese. On the left is a Cantonese character which means "none," "not" or "negative" (Eitel 621). It is not a character used in Mandarin, but arguably one of the most commonly used characters in Cantonese speech and writing. The character on the right is used in both Mandarin and Cantonese, meaning "the bleating of a sheep." However, it has one important usage in Cantonese that is not present in Mandarin: it is a final interrogative particle used in Cantonese sentences. A simple expression "is it?" in Cantonese would use the character "咩" to indicate its interrogative nature (Eitel 600).
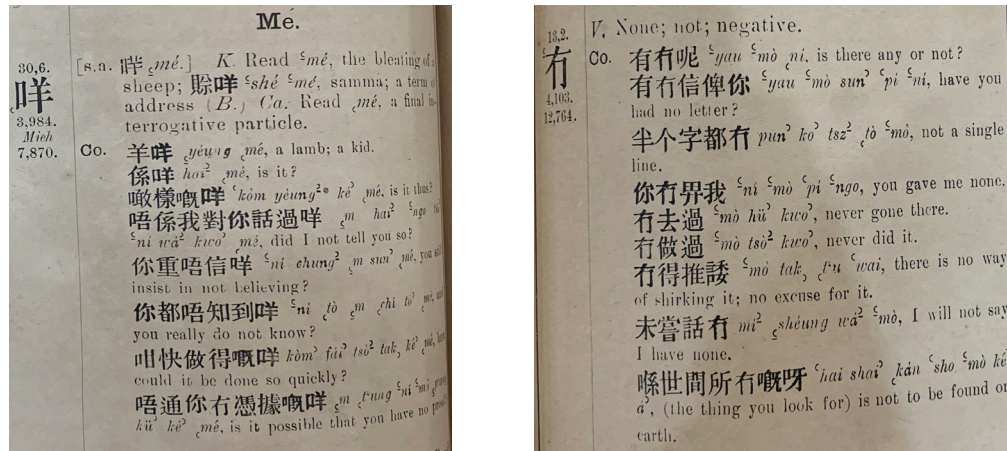


Figure 2 *Cantonese characters in the dictionary*

Some characters and phrases that were used in the early 1900s are no longer used by most people (see Figure 3). In other words, that specific register identifies the society and culture of the early 1900s and marks that generation. The character on the left is a verb meaning "to wipe away" or "to brush off," which is a Classical Chinese expression (Eitel 586). The expression "to wipe away tears" used to be man lui in colloquial Cantonese. Now, it is replaced by the character "抹" or "拭" (*mut* or *si*) for the expression to brush or rub off. Another character on the right is no longer used in modern Cantonese. The phrase "啡黜," meaning "confused," is replaced by "劣黜," which has a similar pronunciation but a negative connotation (Eitel 571).
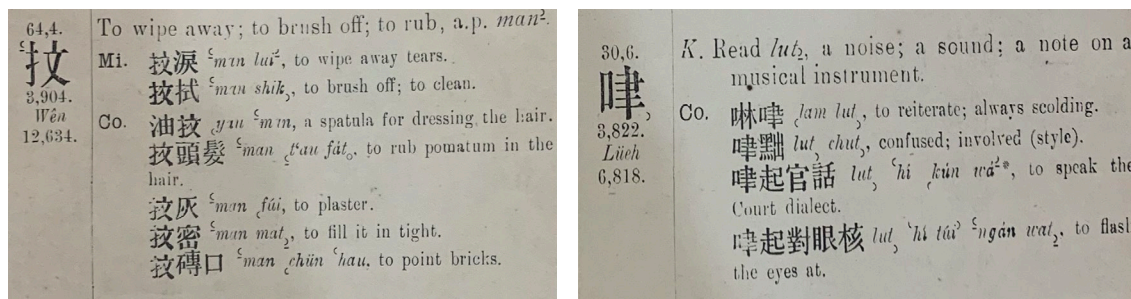
Figure 3 Outdated Cantonese characters and expressions

On the other hand, Cantonese apothegms during that period reflected the lives and the culture of the residents of the Pearl River Delta region during the early twentieth century. Back then, there was a famous saying "t'a sau kau ling yan hiú ch'ut t'in-tsz," (打瘦狗嶺因曉出天子) which translates to "shoot the Lean Dog Hill for it can produce Emperors" (literally: strike Lean Dog Hill because understands produce heaven-son). This is because the hill outside the Great East Gate of Guangzhou is cannonaded every year during the first two weeks of the eleventh moon. It is possible that target practice gave rise to this popular belief that shooting at this hill would produce an emperor in the family (Stevens 94).

Another saying "chap kwat ts'in tsong han yan fát-tát" (執骨遷葬後人發達) means "if the bones of one's ancestors are taken up, moved, and reburied, the descendants flourish" (literally: pick-up bones move bury after men flourish). This saying is a firmly-rooted superstition surrounding the fact that there are often large cultivated areas around golden pagodas (jars with human remains). Older Cantonese people deeply believed in geomancers, who were paid to determine an auspicious spot whereon or wherein to place the bones that have been dugout (Stevens 95).

## Romanization

This history of Jyutping (standard Cantonese romanization) dates back to the beginning of the 19th century when people from Europe and the United States came to Guangdong to preach or to trade. In his book published in 1828, R. Morrison established the first Cantonese romanization system (the Morrison system) to help Americans and Europeans learn Cantonese more effectively. Since the system is designed for English speakers, vowel spellings are divided into ten types similar to British English spellings. E. C. Bridgman adopted the system formulated by S. W. Williams in his book published in 1841. Since then, many textbooks and dictionaries have adopted this system one after another. The system of vowel spellings is very similar to the spelling of other Continental European languages. In addition to British or European spelling, there are many other proposals as well. From the late 19th century to the middle of the 20th century, Cantonese Bibles, dictionaries, and textbooks adopted the "Standard Romanization System," such as the Wisner system. It uses vowel spellings similar to the British system. Since the mid-20th century, the main users of Jyutping have been foreign civil servants working in the British government of Hong Kong and foreigners living in Hong Kong. Most of their Cantonese textbooks use the Sidney Lau System or the Yale System (Pian 10).

Today, the Hong Kong government is using a standardized "Hong Kong Spelling" system. Chinese teachers and secondary school students use the new Chinese dictionary in order to have access to the S. L. Wong System (set of phonetic symbols for Cantonese based on International Phonetic Alphabet). In recent years, the "Cantonese spelling," developed by the Hong Kong Linguistics Society in 1993, has attracted more attention and has been adopted in the dictionaries and textbooks. Hong Kong's road signs also use this type of spelling, which is why most people agree that Hong Kong has set the standard for modern Cantonese. Table 2 below shows the four different categories of romanization in Hong Kong (Pian 11).

Table 2 Four categories of Hong Kong romanization

| Catagory | Examples |
|---|---|
| Chinese names using Jyutping (romanization system for Cantonese developed by the Linguistic Society of Hong Kong) | Tsim Sha Tsui 尖沙咀<br>Sha Tau Kok 沙頭角 |
| Chinese names using spellings from other dialects or foreign languages | Woosung Street 吳松街 (Mandarin)<br>Swatow Street 南京街 (Postal / Hokkien)<br>Tonkin Street 東京街 (French / Vietnam)<br>Jat Min Chuen Street 乙明邨街 (Hakka) |
| Pure English | Waterloo Road 窩打老道 |
| No connection between Chinese and English names | Aberdeen 香港仔<br>Repulse Bay 淺水灣 |

## *Hong Kong Cantonese*

At the time of the British colonial presence in Hong Kong, a new register — Hong Kong Cantonese (HKC) — was formed, and was always changing due to British influence. As the densely populated city became the multilingual and multicultural financial and cultural hub in Asia, code-mixing with English became increasingly common in this register. In the example shown in Table 3 below, the traditional Cantonese noun, *mong kau*, is completely replaced by the English word "tennis," which differentiates HKC from traditional mainland Cantonese. According to "Language in Hong Kong at Century's End" written by Andrew Moody and Martha Pennington, this type of mixing could be subdivided into several categories. The first category is expedient mixing, in which expediency and pragmatic needs are the primary motivation, such as using common English words like "pizza", "program", "vocab" etc. The second category is orientational mixing, in which "identification with the better educated" and "a western outlook" are the primary motivations (Moody et al. 146).

Table 3 Code-mixing phenomenon in HKC

| **Traditional Cantonese** | 你識唔識打網球㗎? | **HKC** | 你識唔識打 **tennis**㗎? |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Jyutping** | nei$^5$ sik$^1$ m$^4$ sik$^1$ daa$^2$ **mong$^5$ kau$^4$** ga$^3$? | **Jyutping** | nei$^5$ sik$^1$ m$^4$ sik$^1$ daa$^2$ **tennis** ga$^3$? |
| **English Translation** | Do you know how to play tennis? | **English Translation** | Do you know how to play *tennis*? |

On the other hand, the choice of code-mixing is determined by which expression is syntactically easier, simpler, or less marked as shown in Table 4. Here the phrase "collect call" replaced the traditional verbose Cantonese saying "a toll call which is paid by the receiver". Because certain phrases are not present in Cantonese, the traditional saying is often a definition of the borrowed English phrase after code-mixing.

Table 4 Simplification of Cantonese by code-mixing with English

| **Traditional Cantonese** | 打一個由對方付款的長途電話。 | **HKC** | 打 **collect call**。 |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Jyutping** (a romanization system for Cantonese developed by the Linguistic Society of Hong Kong) | daa$^2$ jat$^1$ go$^3$ jau$^4$ **deoi$^3$ fong$^1$ fu$^6$ fun$^2$ ge$^3$ coeng$^4$ tou$^4$ din$^6$ waa$^2$** | **Jyutping** | daa2 **collect call** |
| **English Translation** | To dial a **toll call which is paid by the receiver**. (collect call) | **English Translation** | To dial a **collect call**. |

*Survey Results for Code-mixing in Hong Kong (see appendix for the survey)*

The purpose of the survey is to better understand the code-mixing phenomenon in HKC, specifically the relationship between different usages and age groups, and whether more or fewer syllables of words might affect people's choice. I sent out the questionnaire, including eight multiple-choice questions of common code-mixing words in HKC with one short answer question, to the principal of a public school in Kowloon, Hong Kong. He later distributed the questionnaire to 504 families including participants from all age groups. Ten days later, I received 367 samples from the families. Table 5 shows the percentage of code-mixing in HKC for four categories of age groups. The avenge percentage is calculated from the results of seven multiple-choice questions about code-mixing words (x out of 7). The result is different from my original hypothesis, which was that young people used more code-mixing. In fact, the survey demonstrated that code-mixing was not more common among the young generation. Rather, the phenomenon exists in all age groups. Since HKC code-mixed the most with English, the degree to which an age group used code-mixing was associated with the level of its exposure to English. As former British colonial subjects, many people from the older age groups had to use English in workplaces and other formal occasions. Gradually, they adopted common English words to simplify their communication. The age group from 18 - 30 experienced the handover of Hong Kong back to China in 1997 — people were encouraged to learn Mandarin for better working opportunities after the mainland had opened up its market. In correspondence, people's Cantonese became more traditional, with less code-mixing in their sentences. English usage in Hong Kong declined after 1997, as the number of Mandarin speakers continued to rise. For the youngest generation, their high percentage of code-mixing could be motivated by wanting to "cool" or "better educated," as mentioned in the previous section.

Table 5 Results for the relationship between code-mixing and age group (from the survey)

| Age | Average percentage of code-mixing | Most code-mixed word from the survey |
|---|---|---|
| under 18 | 71% | Wong Sir |
| 18 - 30 | 57% | OT |
| 31 - 55 | 85% | Contact |
| 55 or older | 71% | Friend |

According to the research led by Chu Chun Kau Patrick, a professor from the Chinese University of Hong Kong, simplification and convenience are the main reasons for code-mixing today. Their hypothesis is that code-mixing takes place when the phonology of English word is simpler than its Cantonese counterpart, in other words, there are fewer syllables in the English word than its Cantonese counterpart (Chu 7). This matches the result of the survey that the matrix rule of the lexicon choice is the number of syllables of a word. The words containing fewer syllables are more likely to be chosen.

### Registers From Macau and Malaysia

Macau and Malaysia are two other regions in which Cantonese developed its new distinguishable registers. Macau is a small Cantonese-speaking region on the west side of the Pearl River, which was a former Portuguese colony. One can tell the difference between Macau Cantonese and HKC based on tones. The word "there" in Cantonese is "嗰度," but native Cantonese speakers from Macau would tend to use the first tone rather than the standard second (see Table 6). The reason for the tone variation phenomenon is difficult to classify, but it is commonly believed that tone changes occur when there are unwitting influences from other languages. In the case of Macau Cantonese, the new register could be an effect of a gradual Portuguese influence on the local communities.

Table 6 Tone difference between Macau and Hong Kong Cantonese

| **Macau Cantonese** | 嗰度 | **HKC** | 嗰度 |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Jyutping** | **go$^1$** dou$^6$ | **Jyutping** | **go$^2$** dou$^6$ |
| **English Translation** | there | **English Translation** | there |

A comparison between the Cantonese registers in Malaysia and Hong Kong also reveals different word usages and grammatical structures (Din). In Table 7 below, word usage differences are divided into two categories, shown in red and blue. The first category (shown in red) represents the preferences of people in Malaysia and Hong Kong, but both are standard Chinese phrases. Because Malaysia is a diverse region where many languages are spoken, the second category (shown in blue) shows variations in words caused by the influences of other languages, such as Hokkien, English and Teochew.

Table 7 Vocabulary difference between Malaysia and Hong Kong Cantonese

| **Malaysia Cantonese** | 腳車<br>馬打 (Hokkien)<br>羅裡 (English)<br>teh (Teochew) | **HKC** | 單車<br>差佬<br>貨車<br>奶茶<br>食咗飯 |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Jyutping** | goek$^3$ ce$^1$<br>maa5 daa2<br>lo4 lei5<br>teh<br>sik$^6$ faan$^6$ zo$^2$ | **Jyutping** | daan$^1$ ce$^1$<br>caai$^1$ lou$^2$<br>fo$^3$ ce$^1$<br>naai$^5$ caa$^4$<br>sik$^6$ zo$^2$ faan$^6$ |

| English Translation | bicycle<br>police<br>truck<br>milk tea<br>eaten already | English Translation | bicycle<br>police<br>truck<br>milk tea<br>eaten already |
|---|---|---|---|

Table 8 Grammatical structure difference between Malaysia and Hong Kong Cantonese

| Malaysia Cantonese | 我食飯咗 | HKC | 我食咗飯 |
|---|---|---|---|
| Jyutping | sik$^6$ faan$^6$ zo$^2$ | Jyutping | sik$^6$ zo$^2$ faan$^6$ |
| English Translation | I ate already. | English Translation | I already ate. |

Table 8 above presents the variations of adverb position in a sentence in Malaysia and Hong Kong. In traditional Cantonese, the adverb is usually placed before the predicate of a sentence, while Malaysian Cantonese places it afterwards. Perhaps, it is due to the increasing number of Mandarin speakers in Malaysia that people are gradually adopting the habit of placing adverbs after verbs in their sentences. According to Agha's studies on register formation, "these discursive registers are typically fragments of broader schemes of semiotic enregisterment to which they are seen as belonging by users, and within which they play a role in establishing forms of footing and alignment" ("Language and Social Relations" 185). The effects of speaking such registers could shape characteristics such as power, status, etc., which linked closely to each other through those signs.

## Sound Changes in HKC from Mass Media

Back in the 70s, Cantonese pop music was not popular even within Hong Kong because Mandarin pop music from Taiwan attracted older listeners, and English pop songs were seen as the trend for modern music among the younger generation. Therefore, the Cantonese pop music before 1974 existed but was sung in ways similar to Cantonese opera, which originated in Guangzhou. This changed when Sam Hui gave the public an explosion of Cantonese songs, which not only made him an immortal legend in the Hong Kong music industry but also propelled Cantonese songs into the mainstream. Since then, all types of media and entertainment started to be available in Cantonese for a wider population in Hong Kong and to be exported to other parts of Asia at the same time.

### *Pop culture influences and slangs*

For the generation of Chinese people who grew up in the 80s, 90s, and even the early 2000s, whether they are Cantonese-speaking or not, Cantonese pop songs, movies, and stars from Hong Kong made up a significant part of the memories of their childhoods and youths. The Hong Kong music scene is like a knot of ropes of different thicknesses and colors, including the recording industry, entertainment media, culture and arts, and current affairs and politics, which all influenced its development. It started as early as the 70s, continued to develop during the 80s, reached the peak in the 90s, and twisted its course after the new century. Many songs produced during those decades — arguably the equivalent to *Bohemian Rhapsody* by Queen or *Can't Help Falling in Love* by Elvis Presley in English-speaking communities — are considered classic songs to all Chinese people before the mainland Chinese market started to open up (Chen 3).

On the other hand, movies also helped push the culture to its peak among both Chinese and western audiences. The famous Cantonese movies during the early stage of this trend's development are the kung fu movies, which are well known around the world. As early as the late 60s, Bruce Lee went back and forth from Hong Kong and America filming movies related to kung fu. His movies had a remarkable influence on both the Chinese movie industry

and Hollywood. Not only did he introduce Chinese culture to the rest of the world by using Kung Fu, but he also changed westerners' biased ideas of the Chinese people, eventually bringing a wave of kung fu fever worldwide. Following his work, Sammo Hung produced more martial arts films and Hong Kong action movies. He later became the kung fu choreographer for Jackie Chan. Jackie Chan himself who produced over 150 films, receiving stars on the Hong Kong Avenue of Stars and the Hollywood Walk of Fame, and became the first Chinese person to receive the Academy Honorary Award from Oscars in 2016 (Reuters). The other popular genres of Hong Kong movies included comedies with actors such as Stephen Chow, and gangster movies from Chow Yun Fat, Tony Leung, Louis Koo, and so on.

Those movies generated a great amount of Cantonese slang, which also helped the language become popular among the younger generation. With both English and the new slang words added to Cantonese, it became perceived as the "Hong Kong vernacular," which is a recent interloper into the categories of modern Chinese dialectology. For example, the phrase "倒掉冇滴墨水" (dou diu mouh dihk mahk seui) literally translates to "even if hung upside down, not a drop of ink will drip out," which was used in Hong Kong movies to describe someone unable to write properly, or culturally ignorant and unlettered (Hutton et al. 100).

### Lazy sounds

Although the HKC was seen as the standard because of Hong Kong's economic significance and cultural influence, speech sounds have been rapidly changing due to mass media. Young Cantonese speakers learn these variants, most noticeably, words with "lazy sounds" (懶音), from movies, TV shows, and other content on the internet. In Table 9, there are four examples of the "lazy sound" pronunciation: mixing "n" and "l," omitting rhinolalia (nasal sound "ng"), excluding compound initials, and changing tones. Typically, a Cantonese speaker may unconsciously use the "lazy sound" pronunciation if he or she is speaking at a fast speed. In talk shows or jingles in advertisements, "lazy sound" occurs more frequently, and, nowadays, this way of pronunciation is seen as the Hong Kong accent. Many Cantonese learners also purposely use the "lazy sound" pronunciation in order to show their fluency of the language.

Table 9 "Lazy sound" pronunciation

| Phrase & Meaning | Standard Pronunciation | "Lazy Sound" Pronunciation |
|---|---|---|
| 男女 Men and Women | **n**aam[4] **n**eoi[5] | **l**aam[4] **l**eoi[5] |
| 我 I | **ng**o[5] | o[5] |
| 廣州 Guangzhou | g**w**ong[2] zau[1] | gong[2] zau[1] |
| 想 Think | soeng[2] | soeng[5] |

Within Hong Kong, there are different opinions regarding phonetic variations and sound changes. While the general public does not fully understand sound changes in HKC, scholars doing research on the phonetic variations and sound changes in HKC advocate for the use of dictionary pronunciations (traditional Guangzhou accent) as they believe that these changes or variations are results of ''laziness'' and insist that ''correct pronunciations'' should be preserved (To et al. 334). At the same time, some other scholars consider sound changes and variations as natural phenomena and are interested in documenting non-standard pronunciations within the Hong Kong society.

## Conclusion: Modern Situation and Changes

From the language of trade in Qing dynasty's only open port to a marginalized language of a declining subculture, Cantonese owes its rise and fall to the geographic dissemination of Cantonese speakers, the financial prosperity and

global importance of Cantonese-speaking regions, and the official standing of this language in China. In the 1800s, early Cantonese merchants and immigrants brought their language to the west and around the world, and many of them returned at the turn of the 20th century to work for the unity of their motherland, which bolstered the status of Cantonese in China. The Pearl River Delta region of China, especially Hong Kong, continued to be wealthy compared to the rest of the country until the 90s, and its economic significance rose steadily along with the influence of the Cantonese language. The music and movie industry flourished as well, gaining unprecedented popularity worldwide. At the same time, Cantonese was suppressed in the mainland under language laws, which were designed to unify the nation. Therefore, Hong Kong and Macau were better able to preserve the Cantonese culture because the language still maintains an official status in those two regions.

The Pearl River Delta region of China, especially Hong Kong, continued to be wealthy compared to the rest of the country until the 1990s, and its economic significance rose steadily along with the influence of the Cantonese language. The music and movie industry flourished as well, gaining unprecedented popularity worldwide. At the same time, Cantonese was suppressed in the mainland under language laws, which were designed to unify the nation.

Dialects are considered languages only if they are officially used. Having lost political significance, the Cantonese language is only used orally in the mainland, while Hong Kong continued to be a global financial center and an exporter of Asia's pop culture around the world, thus preserving the global importance of the Cantonese language until the recent decades. After the recent opening of a larger mainland market after China's reforms sped up the decline of Cantonese because many people are no longer interested in Cantonese songs and movies. In the new century, Hong Kong's economy is no longer as significant for China as it had been in its glory years from the 70s to the 90s. As a result, the Cantonese language is now mostly used locally, and Cantonese culture has been nearly driven to extinction by many foreign influences.

People's sense of belonging is not only related to their physical homeland or to the wealth of their hometown, but also to the culture that they share. Each city is unique not only because of its ever-rising skyscrapers, but also its history, people, and language. Cantonese culture and language played a significant role in China's history and adds great diversity to the Chinese culture. Under the current circumstances, the crisis of Cantonese culture needs to be addressed, and the Cantonese language, which is central to the identity of millions in China and abroad, needs to be preserved before it is too late.

## Acknowledgements

## References

Agha, Asif. "The Social Life of Cultural Value." *Pergamon: Language & Communication*, 2003, pp. 231–273.
Agha, Asif. *Language and Social Relations*. Cambridge University Press, 2007.

Chen, Yidong, *When Perfection No Longer Exist (当世事再没完美)*. Beijing: Law Press, 2016, pp. 12-15.
Chu, Chun Kau. " Rules and Constraints of the Code-Mixing Patterns in Hong Kong Cantonese." Department of Linguistics and Modern Languages, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2018.

Din, Ha, director. 識飲識食的香港人也無法理解的大馬廣東話. *Youtube*, 24 Sept. 2018, www.youtube.com/watch?v=GjwcPLNeW8g&t=210s.

Eitel, Ernest John. *A Chinese-English Dictionary in the Cantonese Dialect*. Kelly & Walsh, Limited., 1910.

Erbaugh, Mary S. "Southern Chinese Dialects as a Medium for Reconciliation within Greater China." *Language in Society*, vol. 24, no. 1, 1995, pp. 79–94., doi:10.1017/s0047404500018418.

Fan, Chao. "A Treasure of Lingnan Culture: Cantonese (岭南文化的宝典：粤语)." *Chinanews.com (*中国新闻网*)*, 27 Dec. 2017, www.chinanews.com/hwjy/2012/12-27/4443636.shtml.

Farris, Johnathan. "Thirteen Factories of Canton: An Architecture of Sino-Western Collaboration and Confronttion." *Buildings & Landscapes: Journal of the Vernacular Architecture Forum*, vol. 14, no. 1, 2007, pp. 66–83., doi:10.1353/bdl.2007.0000.

Fishman, Shikl. "Mendele: מענדעלע." Mendele RSS, 8 Oct. 1996, web.archive.org/web/20110716174941/mendele.commons.yale.edu/wp/1996/10/08/a-geoyem-opshik-far-an-oftn-tsitat/.

Hutton, Christopher, and Kingsley Bolton. *A Dictionary of Cantonese Slang: the Language of Hong Kong Movies, Street Gangs and City Life*. Singapore University Press, 2005.

Kurpaska, Maria. *Chinese Language(s) a Look through the Prism of The Great Dictionary of Modern Chinese Dialects*. De Gruyter Mouton, 2010.

Moody, Andrew J., and Martha C. Pennington. "Language in Hong Kong at Century's End." *Language*, vol. 76, no. 4, 2000, pp. 145–149., doi:10.2307/417224.

Pian, Gangxin. "'Hong Kong Government Jyutping': An Orderly System in Chaos ('香港政府粵語拼音':一個亂中有序的系統)." *Newsletter of Chinese Language*, vol. 93, no. 1, Jan. 2014, pp. 9–25. *Hong Kong Institute of Education*, Jyutping (粵拼）.

Reuters, The Huffington Post. "Jackie Chan Finally Wins Honorary Oscar After 200 Films And 56 Years." HuffPost, HuffPost, 15 Nov. 2016, www.huffpost.com/entry/jackie-chan-wins-oscar_n_582a2057e4b02d21bbca1bae.

Stevens, R. J. *Cantonese Apothegms*. E-Shing, 1902.

The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica. "May Fourth Movement." Encyclopædia Britannica, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 14 Feb. 2019, www.britannica.com/event/May-Fourth-Movement.

To, Carol K. S., et al. "Phonetic Variations and Sound Changes in Hong Kong Cantonese: Diachronic Review, Synchronic Study and Implications for Speech Sound Assessment." *Clinical Linguistics & Phonetics*, vol. 29, no. 5, 2015, pp. 333–353., doi:10.3109/02699206.2014.1003329.

Twitchett, Denis, and John K. Fairbank. The Cambridge History of China: Volume 12 Republican China, 1912-1949, Part 1. Vol. 12, Cambridge University Press, 2008.

University, Stanford. *Giving Voice to Chinese Railroad Workers*. 15 Apr. 2019, news.stanford.edu/2019/04/09/giving-voice-to-chinese-railroad-workers/.

## Appendix 1: Questionnaire for Code-mixing Phenomenon in Hong Kong (Chinese)

調查香港粵語中的語碼轉換現狀

您好！感謝您百忙之中填寫此問卷。語碼轉化 (code-mixing) 是一個常見的語言現象，指個體在一個對話中交替使用多於一種語言或其變體。此問卷的目的是為調查當今香港粵語中有多大程度上受到語碼轉換的影響；共有八道單選題（請根據您的第一反應填寫）及一道簡答題。您的問卷數據對於我的調研具有重要意義。所有被採集的數據僅用於調研，且將進行保密，請您放心填寫，非常感謝您的悉心支持！

1.您的年齡？
A.18 歲以下
B.18 - 30
C.31 - 55
D.55 歲以上

2.選擇您會優先使用的說法 (如有其他說法，選擇最接近的）：
A.你屋企有無打印機
B.你屋企有無 printer

3.選擇您會優先使用的說法 (如有其他說法，選擇最接近的）：
A.佢今日很忙，可能會加班
B.佢今日很忙，可能會 OT

4.選擇您會優先使用的說法 (如有其他說法，選擇最接近的）：
A.阿強好快讀大學，佢話要攻讀心理學
B.阿強好快讀大學，佢話要攻讀 Psycho
C.阿強好快讀大學，佢話要攻讀 Psychology
D.阿強好快讀 Uni，佢話要攻讀心理學
E.阿強好快讀 Uni，佢話要攻讀 Psycho
F.阿強好快讀 Uni，佢話要攻讀 Psychology

5.選擇您會優先使用的說法 (如有其他說法，選擇最接近的）：
A.你有冇戴 Contact Lens 㗎?
B.你有冇戴 Contact㗎?
C.你有冇戴 Con㗎?
D.你有冇戴隱形眼鏡㗎?

6.選擇您會優先使用的說法 (如有其他說法，選擇最接近的）：
A.而今社會競爭好激烈，兼職都唔好搵到
B.而今社會競爭好激烈，part-time 都唔好搵到
C.而今社會好 competitive，part-time 都唔好搵到

7.選擇您會優先使用的說法 (如有其他說法，選擇最接近的）：

A.我有個 friend，佢疫情期間差點返唔到香港

B.我有個朋友，佢疫情期間差點返唔到香港

8.選擇您會優先使用的說法 (如有其他說法，選擇最接近的)：

A.王 sir 話佢係 lobby 等你，有嘢同你講

B.王 sir 話佢係大堂等你，有嘢同你講

C.王老師話佢係大堂等你，有嘢同你講

D.王老師話佢係 lobby 等你，有嘢同你講

9. 您身邊（包括您在內）會經常出現語碼轉化的現象嗎？如果有，請舉出幾個最常見的例子？

多謝！

# Appendix 2: Questionnaire for Code-mixing Phenomenon in Hong Kong (English)

Code-mixing phenomenon in Hong Kong Cantonese (Translated Version)

Hello! Thank you for taking time and filling out this questionnaire. Code-mixing is a common language phenomenon: the individuals use more than one language or its variations alternately in a conversation. The purpose of this questionnaire is to investigate the extent to which Cantonese in Hong Kong is affected by code-mixing. There are eight multiple choice questions (please complete according to your first reaction) and one short answer question in this questionnaire. All data collected will only be used for my research and will be kept confidential. Please feel free to fill it in anonymously. Thank you again for your support!

*The italic text represent code-mixing words and phrases

**1. How old are you?**
A. under 18
B.18 - 30
C. 31 - 55
D. 55 or older
**2. Select the sentence that you would use (if none, choose the closest one):**
A. Do you have a printer in your house? (Only Chinese)
B. Do you have a *printer* in your house? *(Code-mixing)*
**3. Select the sentence that you would use (if none, choose the closest one):**
A. He is very busy today and may work overtime. (Only Chinese)
B. He is very busy today and may work *overtime (OT). (Code-mixing)*
**4. Select the sentence that you would use (if none, choose the closest one):**
A. Ah Koeng will soon attend university; he wants to study psychology. (Only Chinese)
B. Ah Koeng will soon attend university; he wants to study *psycho. (Code-mixing)*
C. Ah Koeng will soon attend university; he wants to study *psychology. (Code-mixing)*
D. Ah Koeng will soon attend *university (Code-mixing)*; he wants to study *psychology. (Code-mixing)*
E. Ah Koeng will soon attend *university (Code-mixing)*; he wants to study *psycho. (Code-mixing)*
F. Ah Koeng will soon attend *uni (Code-mixing)*; he wants to study *psycho. (Code-mixing)*
**5. Select the sentence that you would use (if none, choose the closest one):**
A. Do you wear *contact lens? (Code-mixing)*
B. Do you wear *contact? (Code-mixing)*
C. Do you wear *con? (Code-mixing)*

D. Do you wear contact lens? (Only Chinese)

**6. Select the sentence that you would use (if none, choose the closest one):**

A. It's so competitive nowadays that it is difficult to find a part-time job. (Only Chinese)

B. It's so competitive nowadays that it is difficult to find a *part-time job. (Code-mixing)*

C. It's so *competitive (Code-mixing)* nowadays that it is difficult to find a *part-time job. (Code-mixing)*

**7. Select the sentence that you would use (if none, choose the closest one):**

A. I have a friend who almost couldn't come back to Hong Kong during this pandemic. (Only Chinese)

B. I have a *friend (Code-mixing)* who almost couldn't come back to Hong Kong during this pandemic.

**8. Select the sentence that you would use (if none, choose the closest one):**

A. *Mr. Wong (Code-mixing)* said he is waiting for you in the *lobby (Code-mixing)*. He has to something to tell you.

B. *Mr. Wong (Code-mixing)* said he is waiting for you in the lobby. He has to something to tell you.

C. Mr. Wong said he is waiting for you in the lobby. He has to something to tell you. (Only Chinese)

D. Mr. Wong said he is waiting for you in the *lobby (Code-mixing)*. He has to something to tell you. (Only Chinese)

**9. Do you realize people around you (including you) using code-mixing in daily conversation? If yes, what are some common examples you can give?**