

## **Cantonese, English and Putonghua in a Hong Kong Secondary School: Language use and language attitudes**

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### **Abstract**

This article presents a case study of the roles of Putonghua, English and Cantonese in a Hong Kong secondary school ideologically committed to the promotion of Putonghua, and relates this to the general problem of the relative position of the different languages in Hong Kong. It examines the history of language policy in the school, in which the author himself once worked, and presents the results of a questionnaire survey of the practice and opinions of current members of staff. Efforts to promote a Putonghua-speaking atmosphere, like those to promote English, have to a large extent been frustrated by the strong attachment to Cantonese of an overwhelmingly Cantonese-speaking school community. The existing pattern of language use is similar to that in many Hong Kong educational institutions and workplaces and would be very difficult to change without the presence of a significant proportion of non-Cantonese speakers within the institution.

### **Introduction**

The subject of this study is one of a number of schools run in Hong Kong by a mutual-aid organisation which was set up by mainlanders arriving in Hong Kong after the establishment of the People's Republic of China. This institution is particularly appropriate for a language survey with a trilingual rather than bilingual focus since the organisation has always placed high value on the use of Putonghua and this is the official medium of instruction for Chinese Language and Literature and for Chinese History in the school. As the use of Putonghua in Hong Kong society generally is expected to increase under Chinese sovereignty, the pattern of language use in this school might provide some indication of how the situation is likely to develop in Hong Kong schools generally over the next few years. An additional reason for selecting it is that I was already familiar with the institution as a member of staff there from 1987 to 1991.

### **Language use patterns in Hong Kong**

There is a large body of research on the division of functions between English and Cantonese in Hong Kong, much of which, including John Gibbons' 1987 monograph, is conveniently summarised in Pennington (1994), while a good, non-technical overview is provided by Cheung (1985) and the most recent trends are covered by contributors to Pennington (1998). This body of work confirms the lay observer's impression that for the Cantonese community English is valued instrumentally as a key to professional success, whilst Cantonese itself is the language of solidarity and intimacy. For this reason, and also because many educated people are "functional" rather than fluent bilinguals, Cantonese is the preferred choice for communication among Cantonese people and the use of English outside certain prescribed, formal settings would be interpreted as "showing off" or as deliberate social distancing. This resistance to the use of English with fellow Cantonese has been observed even amongst teachers training specifically for work in (genuine!) English-medium teaching, although it is less strong amongst those who teach English as a subject (Hoare & Kong, 1995, p. 25).

Gibbons (1987, pp. 25-6) also notes a reluctance on the part of English-speaking Chinese to use Cantonese with Westerners who have some knowledge of the language and compares this with the similar unwillingness of educated Indians to speak with foreigners in Hindi, linking these attitudes to the status implications of English proficiency in a colonial society. This aspect of the Hong Kong situation was the subject of correspondence in the press in early 1997. My own experience in Hong Kong and India bears out Gibbon's analysis to some extent, but there are other complicating factors at work, including the degree of formality of the occasion, the relationship between those involved and their relative proficiency in each other's language. The role of Cantonese in both intra- and inter-ethnic communication is also shifting with social changes such as the growing number of ethnic Chinese in Hong Kong who are not fluent in Cantonese.

Much attention has also been paid to the use of "mixed code" (or "mix" in Gibbons' terminology). This consists essentially of a Cantonese base with loans from English assimilated to a greater or lesser degree to Cantonese phonology and serves as a kind of compromise between the two languages, providing a badge of identity for educated Cantonese. The use of mixed code has been much decried by purists (see, for example, Lau, 1987) but appears firmly entrenched (Li, 1998). Its existence can cause some confusion in language use surveys since a phrase such as "English with some Cantonese" could refer either

to “mixed code” or to what is better termed as code-switching, viz. the alternation between complete utterances in English and in Cantonese.

Compared with Cantonese and English, Putonghua has hitherto not played an essential role in Hong Kong and its use is the “luxury” referred to in the title of Cheung’s 1985 study. Even in Mainland China, the promotion of a uniform spoken language was not a major government objective until this century. Government officials, and those who aspired to such status were expected to be able to converse in *guanhua* (“officials’ speech”, i.e. Mandarin). Although the emperor Yongzheng issued an indignant decree in 1728 castigating the failure of the Cantonese and Fukienese to speak comprehensibly (Ng, 1983, pp. 74-5), it was not until 1932 that a standard based on Beijing pronunciation was officially promulgated (as *guo hua*) and only after 1949 that its adoption in schools throughout China was vigorously promoted, now under the name of “Putonghua”. Before this time, Chinese had certainly been aware of their Chinese cultural identity but this was seen as rooted in the written language of the classics; and the educated classes of each region were content to use their own local dialect both as a reading pronunciation and for everyday communication (Barnes, 1982). Even today, regional varieties, particularly Cantonese, remain vigorous and it is claimed that in Guangzhou, Putonghua is used as the language of school administration only in the elite, “key-point” institutions (Kwo, 1992, pp. 210-1).

This background and Hong Kong’s former separate political status ensured that Putonghua never gained a key role, whilst even in the entertainment world its earlier importance declined with the socialisation into a Cantonese community of the children of the elite refugees who had arrived from the north in 1949 (Pierson, 1992, p. 187). This pattern has now shifted somewhat with the general recognition that Putonghua will become increasingly important under Chinese rule: even before 1 July 1997, economic integration with the mainland had already increased the language’s instrumental value and it became a compulsory school subject in autumn 1998. Pierson’s 1992 analysis of attitudes towards Putonghua revealed by post-secondary students’ compositions suggests that there may now also be rather more “ideological” support for Putonghua as a mark of Chinese identity. However, there also seems to be a determination to retain Cantonese as the territory’s principal working language. A survey of opinion among secondary and tertiary students and secondary school principals conducted in 1985/6 showed respondents anxious for Cantonese to have the status of “legal vernacular” in the Hong Kong SAR (Yau, 1992; cited in Pennington, 1994, p. 67). Since 1997, there have been occasional calls by academics for Putonghua to be used more widely in the education system and

there is now some provision to train teachers to use it as a medium of instruction. Nevertheless, Cantonese still retains a predominant role in schools generally and at present there seems little likelihood of the government seeking to challenge this (Whelpton, 1999, pp. 46-47).

### **Methodology of the Present Study**

Information about present language use and attitudes at the school studied was obtained on three personal visits in February 1997. A questionnaire (copy at Appendix) was distributed to teaching staff on my behalf by the English Panel Chair and 15 forms (about 33% of the total) were actually returned. I also conducted interviews with the principal, with the English and Chinese panel chairs and with one other teacher of English and one of Chinese. This was done in English except for one Chinese teacher, with whom I used Cantonese. I explained that the information was needed for a project as part of my M.A. but might eventually be published in some form or other. Informants were later given a chance to comment on the draft research report and, although the principal found the interpretation "rather subjective," there were no objections to specific statements. With the exception of the English panel chair, who had joined the school on returning from degree studies in the USA in 1995, all those interviewed were known to me from my own time working in the school (1987-91). There was no convenient English panel meeting to tape record, but my impression from the three visits was consistent with statements suggesting an almost totally Cantonese atmosphere outside certain formal settings.

### **Findings: School Policy and Practice**

Whereas the primary school run by the same association appears to operate a Putonghua-medium system across most of the curriculum, the practice in the secondary school investigated is to encourage rather than enforce the use of Putonghua. The contracts of teachers of the Chinese-medium subjects (viz. Chinese Language and Literature, Chinese History) stipulate that they must teach in Putonghua but in general, policy is left to the principal's discretion. The first holder of this position was a Putonghua-speaker from Taiwan who had previously worked as an academic in the USA. He was not fluent in Cantonese and he attempted to establish a Putonghua/English atmosphere in the school, instructing teaching staff that they should not use Cantonese to speak to each other in the staff room. Some teachers also claimed that he deliberately chose to speak in Putonghua to members of staff who he knew were stronger in English and to use English with those who were more comfortable in Putonghua. One

(English-speaking Chinese) teacher was said to have resigned as a result. In contrast, the present principal was unable to speak Putonghua when appointed and was asked by the association to take lessons. He now claims to be reasonably fluent but continues to make speeches on formal occasions in English, which remains his stronger language. English or Putonghua are still the languages used for functions such as the annual graduation ceremony. General announcements at assembly, which were made in Cantonese when I first joined the school and in Putonghua or English during my final year, are now made in Putonghua only.

In the general life of the school, the overwhelmingly Cantonese-oriented nature of Hong Kong society has easily resisted institutional pressure to boost the use of English and Putonghua. Although the original principal's appointment of an American expatriate at one stage as English panel chair made some use of English amongst teachers inevitable, the instructions completely banning Cantonese from the staff room were ignored except when the principal himself walked by. Now even the contractual requirement to teach the Chinese-medium subjects in Putonghua is generally disregarded. The Chinese Panel Chair explained that it was difficult to get the students to pay attention even when speaking to them in their mother-tongue and that widespread use of Putonghua was therefore impractical. Although she did not mention this factor, parental wishes may also have counted against Putonghua, as I remember seeing an internal school document in about 1990 suggesting that parents might press for the use of Cantonese in its place. The other teacher of Chinese with whom I spoke claimed that he himself and one other member of the panel did use Putonghua extensively but that the others routinely employed Cantonese. His own method was to give explanations of the textbook in Putonghua, but he allowed the students to answer questions in Cantonese and used Cantonese himself to explain particularly difficult points. He expected to see greater emphasis on Putonghua in the future but, like the present principal, was against trying to impose the language.

Responses to the questionnaire (see Table 2 below) indicate the pattern of "code-switching" prevalent throughout most of Hong Kong's "Anglo-Chinese" schools. Two of the English teachers did, however, claim to use English on some occasions with students outside class, something I had observed a previous panel chair doing with Sixth Form students when I was on the staff myself. In addition, English panel meetings are still conducted in English. Although the panel chair stated that this should ideally happen in any case, she admitted that the determining factor was actually the presence of a Malaysian-Chinese who is not fluent in Cantonese (her mother-tongue is a Fukien dialect but English is

now her dominant language). This teacher herself, who had been in Hong Kong for nine years, told me that she still normally used English for all one-to-one communication with other teachers and that although she sometimes spoke in Cantonese with students she preferred to use English when scolding a class because they might laugh at her Cantonese pronunciation. She had particular difficulty with the more formal Cantonese vocabulary and in full staff meetings (conducted, as in my own time, in Cantonese) she could not understand properly but asked for interpretation if she thought an item was particularly important. Although an ethnic Chinese, she was thus to some extent playing the same role as western expatriate teachers had formerly done in the school: providing an occasion for greater use of English than would otherwise have occurred, but at the cost of remaining a partial outsider in a Cantonese community. Her "semi-foreigner" status was reinforced because she was not literate in Chinese and therefore could not take advantage of TV subtitles etc. to aid her acquisition of Cantonese.

The detailed results of the questionnaire are presented below in Tables 1-3. It should be noted that to assist distribution of the forms the English Panel Chair or an assistant had written individual teachers' initials on them and this may have inhibited the frankness of responses, especially since the whole issue of language use (particularly in the classroom) is a sensitive one and since many of those asked to respond already knew me personally.

**Table 1: Respondents' Subject and Language Background**

Subject(s) taught:	Chinese/Ch. Hist:	2	English:	4
	Economics:	1	Eng/Maths:	1
	Chemistry:	2	Eng/Maths/Comp:	1
	Geography:	1	Art:	1
	Biology:	1	Art & Design/Hist:	1
Mother tongue:	Cantonese:	14	Cantonese/Putonghua:	1
Other languages				
spoken fluently:	English:	1 <sup>1</sup>	Putonghua:	2

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1. This total includes the four English teachers, who did not fill in the item, presumably because they assumed "other languages" excluded the language they taught as well as their mother-tongue.

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Other languages spoken well  
enough for one-to-one  
conversation with a  
co-operative listener:

English: 1 Putonghua: 4

**Table 2: Language Use in Specific Situations:**

KEY: C = Cantonese; E = English; P = Putonghua (Where one symbol appears in brackets after another (e.g. E(C)) it denotes normal use of the first and subsidiary use of the second.<sup>2</sup> Where two languages are entered in the "Used normally" column, they are linked with + (e.g. E + C).

	E	E(P)	E(C)	E+C	C(E)	C	C(P)	C(P,E)	P+E	P(C)	P(E)	P(C,E)	P
Explaining the content of a textbook in a Chinese-medium subject. <sup>3</sup>						7	1						
Explaining the content of a textbook in an English-medium subject	3		6	2	1	1							
Classroom management in an English-medium subject	2		5	2	1	3							
Classroom management in a Chinese-medium subject						8	1						
Speaking to students out of class			1		1	13							
In formal staff meetings						12	2	1					
In panel meetings	4		1			10							
Informal communication in school													
(i) to Cantonese colleagues or visitors						15							
(ii) to Chinese colleagues or visitors who understand Cantonese but have another mother-tongue	2				1	6	3		1	1			
(iii) to a foreigner who understands Cantonese	8		3	1	1	2							
(iv) to Cantonese colleagues or visitors in front of a Chinese who does not understand Cantonese	1	1	1		1	1				1	2		3
(v) to Cantonese colleagues in front of a foreigner who does not understand Cantonese	8	1	1		1	1		1			1		

**Table 3: Attitudes Towards Language Use Outside the Classroom.**

2. As indicated in the introduction, some respondents may have reported use of Cantonese with some English vocabulary as "Cantonese with subsidiary use of English".

3. Some of those responding to this question were teachers of (nominally) English-medium subjects and were presumably thinking of practice in previous schools or in the hypothetical situation.

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(1 Strongly agree; 2 Agree; 3 No opinion; 4 Disagree; 5 Disagree strongly)

	1	2	3	4	5
a) Cantonese people should normally speak Cantonese to each other	9	6	0	0	0
b) Chinese people should use Putonghua to each other as much as possible	1	5	7	2	0
c) I feel comfortable speaking English to foreigners	5	8	1	1	0
d) I feel comfortable speaking English to Chinese who do not understand Cantonese	3	8	2	2	0
e) I feel comfortable speaking English to Cantonese people	1	4	3	5	1
f) I feel comfortable speaking Putonghua to Westerners who understand it	3	5	3	4	0
g) I feel comfortable speaking Putonghua to Chinese who do not understand Cantonese	3	5	2	5	0
h) I feel comfortable speaking Putonghua to Cantonese people	3	5	2	5	0
i) The school should make teachers speak only Putonghua or English in the staff room	0	0	6	7	2

The responses indicate both a generally low level of proficiency in Putonghua and a strong preference for continuing to operate principally in Cantonese; out of an aggregate 157 settings, respondents indicated predominant use of Cantonese in 110. This result may be slightly skewed since I had not prepared a Chinese version of the questionnaire and at least two of the Chinese panel (including one of my interviewees) had minimal English, but it is still probably broadly representative of the staff as a whole. It is also significant that one of the 2 teachers of Chinese who returned the form (not one of my interviewees) claimed only the ability to converse one-to-one in Putonghua, not full fluency.

A high percentage claimed fluency in English (14 out of 15) and also that they felt comfortable when speaking English to foreigners (13 out of 15). The latter statistic contrasts with Hirvela & Law's 1990 survey of secondary school teachers (cited in Pennington, 1994, p. 72), which indicated only 50% felt comfortable in this situation. Again, sample bias might be a factor since those with less confidence in their English would probably be less willing to answer an English-language questionnaire.

Only 5 out of 15 respondents claimed to be "comfortable" or "very comfortable" when speaking to other Cantonese in English. Bearing in mind that those more proficient in English are probably over-represented in the sample, this



result does not necessarily contradict Hirvela & Law's finding that only 20% of local teachers were comfortable speaking English to "other Chinese" (viz. Hong Kong Chinese.) In contrast, the majority (11 out of 15) would be happy to use English to a Chinese who did not understand Cantonese; this presumably reflects the fact that their poor command of Putonghua makes English seem a less embarrassing option and also probably most of the respondents' experience using English with their Malaysian colleague over several years. Data on this point would, however, be more complete if the questionnaire had also asked which language they actually used when speaking directly to a Chinese who did not know Cantonese but was proficient in both Putonghua and English.

As Table 2 indicates, there was also a clear majority preferring to use English rather than Cantonese when speaking with a Westerner who understood Cantonese. As discussed in the introduction, this may reflect a simple concern with asserting their own status as proficient users of English but other considerations may be important, in particular their estimate of the degree of Cantonese proficiency any foreigner they were likely to meet might have. Both my own experience and reports I have heard from others suggest that native speakers of Cantonese are often simply intolerant of less-than-perfect Cantonese rather than opposed in principle to using it with non-native-speakers. On the other hand, the fact that the teacher with the most native-sounding English (the English panel chair) was one of the two opting for Cantonese is perhaps an indication that status considerations are highly salient: as a U.S.-returned graduate, whose own English proficiency is beyond question, she does not have to prove anything and can therefore afford to use the vernacular.<sup>4</sup>

Finally, in answering the questions about speaking to another Cantonese in the presence of someone who did not understand the language, the majority of respondents indicated that, as far as their own proficiency allowed it, they would chose a language understood by the third party. Westerners in general often complain that English-speaking Chinese colleagues frequently fail to do this in a work situation.

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4 When I telephoned her to arrange a meeting I began the conversation in Cantonese, not being sure who had answered the phone, and although my pronunciation made it obvious that I was a foreigner she seemed comfortable continuing in Cantonese until I myself initiated a switch to English.

## Conclusion

Although both the Hong Kong SAR and the Chinese central government at present show a relaxed attitude to the predominance of Cantonese in Hong Kong society, sterner voices are sometimes heard. In a radio interview shortly after the announcement of his appointment, Liu Zhenwu, the commander of the Hong Kong PLA garrison, said that “as Chinese, the Hong Kong people should regard [Putonghua] as their principal language for communication” (*Far Eastern Economic Review*, 27/2/97). Actual practice at an institution ideologically committed to Putonghua underlines the fact that such aspirations must reckon with the continuing “ethno-linguistic vitality of Cantonese”. Within the school, as in Hong Kong society generally, Cantonese remains the “principal method of communication” and it is unlikely that any action by the government or by the school authorities could alter this in the short term. An institution’s written “output” can be switched by fiat between English and Chinese, but the means by which people communicate to each other face-to-face is a different matter.

In terms of spoken communication, working environments in Hong Kong can be divided into three classes: “local”, with almost exclusive use of Cantonese; “old colonial”, with Cantonese used amongst colleagues but English required for communication with superiors; and “international”, where those working at the same level have differing language backgrounds and English therefore becomes the natural lingua franca. Staff in a Hong Kong secondary school normally work in a local environment. The appointment of a non-Cantonese-speaker as the first principal of the school in this study transformed this situation into the “old colonial” variety, but with Putonghua as well as English in the “high” position. The appointment as ordinary members of staff of non-Cantonese speakers, whether Westerners or ethnic Chinese, shifted the environment in the “international” direction, as shown, for example, in the continuing use of English for English Panel meetings. In their discussion of the Expatriate English Language Teacher scheme introduced in 1987, Tang and Johnson (1993) argued that the schools involved functioned as a (Cantonese) ecological system, isolating and minimising the effect of a non-Cantonese intrusion, and they suggested that placing non-Cantonese-speakers in positions of power would be a more effective means to engineer radical linguistic change. The evidence from this study shows rather that such a return to the “old colonial” model would not have much effect on “horizontal” communication patterns, which would only be shifted substantially by introducing a significant number of non-Cantonese speakers as ordinary members of staff. Given the demographic facts, such a change in workforce composition is not a practical possibility for most Hong Kong schools or for other workplaces. Those setting goals for the educational system therefore

need to take into account the fact that the students within it are in most cases destined to spend their careers in a "local", that is a Cantonese environment.

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## Appendix

### Language Use Survey: Cantonese, English and Putonghua

Dear Teacher,

I would be very grateful if you could spare a few minutes to help me with a survey I am conducting as part of coursework for an M.A. in Applied Linguistics at HKU. If any of the questions refer to situations you have never experienced, you can just write "N/A" (= not applicable) on the line. If you have any additional comments of your own, I would be very grateful for those also.

Thank you for your help,

[John Whelpton]

1. What subject(s) do you teach?
2. What is your mother tongue?
3. What other languages can you speak fluently?
4. What other languages can you speak well enough to hold a one-to-one conversation with a co-operative listener?
5. Please indicate in the columns below the language you normally use in each of the following situations and also any other language(s) used occasionally:

Situation	Language normally used	Other language(s) used
Explaining the content of a textbook in a Chinese-medium subject		
Explaining the content of a textbook in an English-medium subject		
Classroom management in an English-medium subject		
Classroom management in a Chinese-medium subject		
Speaking to students out of class		
In formal staff meetings		
In panel meetings		

Speaking in the school but not in class or a formal meeting:

	Language Normally Used	Other language(s) used
(i) to Cantonese colleagues or visitors		
(ii) to Chinese colleagues or visitors who understand Cantonese but whose mother-tongue is a different dialect		
(iii) to a foreigner who understands Cantonese.		
(iv) to Cantonese colleagues or visitors in front of a Chinese who does not understand Cantonese		
(v) to Cantonese colleagues in front of a foreigner who does not understand Cantonese		

6. Please indicate with a tick (✓) whether you agree or disagree with the following statements referring to conversations outside the classroom.  
(1 Strongly agree; 2 Agree; 3 No opinion; 4 Disagree; 5 Disagree strongly)

	1	2	3	4	5
a) Cantonese people should normally speak Cantonese to each other.					
b) Chinese people should use Putonghua to each other as much as possible.					
c) I feel comfortable speaking English to foreigners.					
d) I feel comfortable speaking English to Chinese who do not understand Cantonese.					
e) I feel comfortable speaking English to Cantonese people.					
f) I feel comfortable speaking Putonghua to westerners who understand it.					
g) I feel comfortable speaking Putonghua to Chinese who do not understand Cantonese.					
h) I feel comfortable speaking Putonghua to Cantonese people.					
i) The school should make teachers speak only Putonghua or English in the staff room.					