IMPLEMENTING MOTHER-TONGUE EDUCATION AMIDST SOCIETAL TRANSITION FROM DIGLOSSIA TO TRIGLOSSIA IN HONG KONG

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Abstract  Hong Kong is a homogeneous community both in terms of race (98% Chinese) and language (over 80% speak Cantonese as their mother tongue). However, the historical and sociolinguistic dynamics there are such that English is the dominant medium of instruction at secondary level and above, while Modern Mandarin, a non-indigenous Chinese (standard) dialect, provides the norms for both the use of Chinese as an instructional medium and the measurement of literacy in Chinese. In 1986, owing to the combined effect of pedagogical problems resulting from the over-selection of English-medium secondary schools, persistent lobbying from groups committed to promoting the status of the Chinese language in Hong Kong and political changes, the government announced its adoption of a policy of positive discrimination in favour of secondary schools that use Chinese as an instructional medium. This new policy is generally perceived as a major break-through for the local mother-tongue education movement and that it marks the beginning of a move away from English-medium education to mother-tongue education at the secondary level. It is the contention of this paper that the issue of instructional medium in Hong Kong is much more complex than what is generally perceived and that the situation epitomises how the implementation of mother-tongue education for vernacular-speaking students could be complicated by diglossic and other conditions.

Introduction

Sociolinguistic conditions in Hong Kong approximate double overlapping diglossia as they encompass both Ferguson’s (1972: 232-3) and Fishman’s (1971, I: 286ff) conceptualisation of diglossia. One finds in Hong Kong a differential functional distribution over complementary domains of both two different languages and two varieties of the same language respectively. Or to use the taxonomy developed by Fasold (1984:54), Hong Kong has both cases of superposed bilingualism and classic diglossia. At the same time, as a result of language policy changes which began in 1968¹ and decolonialisation processes which started in 1982², these diglossic conditions have been destabilised although the direction of future development is still not within focus. It is predicted in this paper that the emergence of triglossic conditions is perhaps the trend that is most likely to occur.
Typical of colonial societies entering their post-colonial era, the pedagogical role of students’ mother tongue in Hong Kong has become not only an educational, but also a political issue the resolution of which will serve to crystallise the outcomes of the current sociolinguistic realignment process. These in turn will be a function of the nature of the political system designed for Hong Kong by the Beijing Regime after June 1997, when Hong Kong comes under the sovereign rule of China.

This paper attempts to show that the issue of instructional medium in Hong Kong epitomises how the implementation of mother-tongue education for vernacular-speaking students could be complicated by an inter-play of forces generated by: (1) diglossic conditions; (2) the economic-political value of the high language(s); (3) the local elite’s tendency to adopt an unitarian orientation in linguistic issues; (4) an exonormic approach to educational language matters; and (5) poor educational language planning.

**Diglossic Conditions: Superposed Bilingualism**

As mentioned, one finds in Hong Kong both cases of superposed bilingualism and classic diglossia. The former case is a product of the combined forces of British colonialism, the post-1949 infrastructural changes in Hong Kong, and the post-1945 sociolinguistic status of English in the world.

Hong Kong is a monolingual (Cantonese-speaking) and racially homogeneous (98% Chinese) society. English was superimposed over Hong Kong to function as a high language in the administrative and legal domains when Hong Kong became a British colony in 1842. From then on, for more than 130 years, English was the exclusive linguistic medium of communication within the domains of administration, judiciary and law, as well as within the legislature.

The first tentative step towards realignment between the high language (English) and the low language (Chinese) in the political domain came when both Chinese and English were made official languages by the Official Languages Ordinance enacted in 1974. (However, the meaning of Chinese was left undefined.)

The next push towards realignment between the said languages came when the Sino-British Joint Declaration on the Future of Hong Kong, signed in December 1984, stipulates that ‘In addition to Chinese, English may be used in organs of government and in the courts of Hong Kong Special Administrative Region’ (Annex I:I). (Similarly, the meaning of Chinese was again left undefined.) In other words, within the administrative and legal domains, Hong Kong will be heading away from English-Chinese bilingualism and towards Chinese-English bilingualism.

Between 1974 and 1987, changes in the realignment of the two languages within these two domains include the achievement of the use of Chinese and English in all routine written communication with the public; the provision of translation, consecutive and simultaneous interpretation services for major government departments, the legislative and municipalcouncils, district boards and government advisory committees; allowing Chinese to be used to conduct
proceedings at the magistracy (Hong Kong’s lowest court) level, and the commitment undertaken by the government to have all statute law available in both Chinese and English before 1997 (Thomas, 1986:6).

In spite of the developments mentioned, English remains the principal linguistic medium of communication within the administrative and legal domains, especially in the case of written communication.

A similar situation is found in the business domain. It is evident that the dominance of English usage in formal business communication is due, to a large extent, to the fact that it is the language of the administration and the law. However, there are other additional factors. First and foremost are the post-1949 evolution of Hong Kong from an entrepot to a leading international commercial and financial centre; and the post-1945 corresponding development of English into the leading language of wider communication, especially in business and international trade (see Fishman et al., 1977). Also, most business personnel in Hong Kong are either from or trained in English-speaking countries such as Britain, Canada or the USA. As a result, corporations with English management\(^8\) dominate the local private sector. For example, in 1979, the eight leading corporations with English management together accounted for 21.3% of the total profits reported by incorporated companies (Cheng, 1982:69). Also, many leading conglomerates adopt English management even though the majority of their major shareholders and employees are Chinese.

The above is reflected in a survey conducted in 1983 to find out the pattern of language usage among business firms in Hong Kong (So, 1984: 154). As shown in Table 1, as far as written communication is concerned, English or English with Chinese translations were used 91 and 100% of the time in internal and external communication respectively.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Context</th>
<th>Chinese</th>
<th>English</th>
<th>English &amp; Chinese</th>
<th>Others</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Within the firm Face to face communication</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Written communication</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>34*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With client or customer Face to face communication</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Written communication</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>34*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* One respondent did not respond to this item.
The dominance of English in the aforementioned domains contrasts sharply with the size of the local English-speaking community and the low level of individual bilingualism. For example, at the end of 1986, the number of American, Australian, British and Canadian residents in Hong Kong, who together more or less make up the local English-speaking community, totalled 46,500 or 0.8% of the population (Ismail, 1987:291-2). Very few members of this community understand Cantonese, let alone speak it.

On the other hand, proficiency in English among the local Cantonese-speaking community is much lower than one would expect. For example, in a survey conducted in 1972 among 170 undergraduates at Hong Kong University, only 4 and 6% of the respondents indicated that they were ‘competent’ in speaking and writing English respectively (Cheng et al., 1973: 51).

The existence of two distinct speech communities in Hong Kong prompted Luke & Richards (1982) to posit that Hong Kong offered ‘an example of societal bilingualism supported by two largely monolingual communities co-existing in relative isolation”, with high degrees of both social distance and enclosure.

Such a pattern of parallel co-existence with little cross-ethnolinguual interaction may be party attributed to the colonial nature of the origin of contact between the two communities. As Cheung (1983) observed, to most Hong Kong Chinese, using English ‘for intra-ethnic communication is regarded as being in very bad taste and an indication of severance from the Chinese community along with its traditional culture’. Indeed, English is rarely used among local Cantonese-speaking Chinese in ordinary social discourse, code-mixing notwithstanding.

The above diglossic conditions and the limited spread of individual Chinese-English bilingualism have given rise to a privileged class of linguistic brokers whose English skills are at a premium in the local English-managed private sector and whose bilingual skills are often in demand for fulfilling mediation needs between the two communities. As a result, among the local Chinese, English is very much a mobility language – its mastery is an asset for social mobility. In a survey conducted in 1977 among 3,784 Hong Kong Chinese, the positive correlation between English proficiency and income has been documented (Wescott, 1979).

**Superposed Bilingualism and Mother-Tongue Education**

The status of English both as a mobility language and as a language of science and technology, and the perception that there is a positive correlation between English proficiency and English-medium education have tremendous influence on the pattern of English usage in the domain of education. While most Hong Kong students start their primary education at Chinese-medium primary schools where English is taught as a foreign language, over the past 35 years, an increasing number of primary schools leavers have opted to continue their secondary education in English-medium secondary schools (Anglo-Chinese Secondary Schools), instead of Chinese-medium secondary schools (Chinese Middle Schools). For example, the percentage of students enrolled in Chinese Middle Schools (CMS) has dropped from around 60% in the early 1950s to less than 10% in 1985. This dramatic decline of the CMSs tends to have the effect of confining mother tongue education advocates’ concern to the secondary sector.
In addition to sociolinguistic and policy factors mentioned earlier, the decline of the CMSs is also a function of complex historical forces. Here, it may suffice to point out that when Chinese-medium modern education was introduced in Hong Kong in the 1920s, it was done in such a way that it functioned very much as an extension of the larger education system in China. For example, before 1949, most students from CMSs received their certification from educational authorities in China and for those who opted to further their education at the tertiary level, they tended to do so at the tertiary institutions in China. After 1949, when such ties were severed, CMSs have been suffering from the image of being an appendage to a larger system which is no longer there.

On the other hand, in addition to being perceived as providing an education that imparts better English skills, Anglo-Chinese Secondary Schools (ACSS) are seen as providing students with better linkage to local public-funded tertiary institutions, and to tertiary institutions in English-speaking countries that are popular destinations for Hong Kong students who opt to study overseas.

Given the limited spread of individual bilingualism among the local population, it is evident that, as a consequence of their popularity, the ACSSs are overloaded with students whose mastery of English is simply too inadequate to benefit from an education in that medium. The situation became worse when Nine Year Free and Compulsory Education was introduced in 1978 and the traditional elitist character of secondary education was lost. At present, while all ACSSs use English textbooks for most of the academic subjects, classroom linguistic conditions in most schools vary from spending the entire lesson in translating the text into Cantonese to extensive use of code-mixing and code-switching (So, 1984:226-249). And it appears that such classroom linguistic patterns depend more on idiosyncracies of individual teachers than on planned pedagogical methodologies.

As early as 1973, the question of whether such use of the English-medium in secondary education might have adverse effects on students was raised (Cheng et al., 1973). In 1979, a large-scale study comparing students studying in Chinese and English respectively under experimental conditions showed that learning in the English-medium could have adverse effects on students with average and below-average abilities (Siu et al., 1979:130-1). Accordingly, the study recommended that steps should be taken by the government to implement mother tongue education, which it equated with Chinese-medium education, in secondary education (pp. 134-5).

However, subsequent studies using a similar research design have yielded conflicting findings, with some failing to detect a significant difference in achievement test results between subjects who studied in the English-medium and those who studied in the Chinese-medium respectively (Ho, 1980; Lui, 1986). Others indicated that the effects of English-medium instruction on junior secondary students’ academic performance appeared to be dependent more on students’ English proficiency than on their overall academic capability, albeit the two are correlated, and that students with above-average achievement in English appeared to be able to manage their studies in the English-medium, while those with average and below-average achievement did not (Johnson et al., 1984; Brimer, 1985).
On the other hand, studies that used non-experimental designs have yielded findings that show some degree of divergence from the aforementioned studies. In an *ex post facto* study, students from nine CMSs and nine ACSSs were matched by their levels upon entry into secondary education. Then, their results in the Certificate of [Secondary] Education Examination were compared. It was found that those from ACSSs on the whole showed better performance than their counterparts from CMSs in the subjects compared – Geography, History, EPA, Biology and Maths (Chan *et al*., 1979). In another non-experimental comparative time-series study on junior secondary ACSS and CMS students’ academic progress that covered a two-year period, it was found that ACSS students showed superiority in English proficiency while CMS students achieved significantly better results in Chinese and History, whereas the subjects’ performance in Science and Maths did not indicate consistent differential patterns (Lo *et al*., 1985).

Understandably, such divergence in findings are due to a variety of factors. However, findings from the non-experimental studies indicate that there are two factors that may account for the divergence. First, those researchers that adopted a quasi-experimental approach to study the issue tend to define the research problem in a dichotomous (Chinese-medium vs. English-medium) fashion and, as a result, fail to take into account the micro-sociolinguistic conditions in the schools which could affect students’ educational outcomes. For example, in a correlational analysis of the relationship between the English language skills and academic performance of students at Hong Kong University, Ho (1979) found that most of his subjects’ English ability was below the requisite standard of English-medium university education and yet few of the students failed to obtain a first degree from the university. The paradox posed by this finding could at least be partly resolved by looking into the actual educational linguistic environment – although the instructional medium in the lecture halls of the university is English, the language outside the halls remains Cantonese. Therefore, one may surmise that even if some of the students do have problems with the instructional medium used, they can always seek help in Cantonese from their fellow students, and from their teachers if they happen to speak the language. And many of them do. To a large extent, the situation in the ACSSs is similar.

Second, many local proponents of mother-tongue education tend to equate it with Chinese-medium education and at the same time leave the precise meaning of Chinese and the mother tongue of local students undefined. Such practice not only complicates the interpretation of findings of local research on the issue, but also hampers the implementation of authentic mother-tongue education in Hong Kong, an issue to be addressed in the next section.

Actually, in spite of the fact that findings from studies on the instructional medium issue are far from homogeneous, the desirability of mother-tongue education has never been disputed within the local education community. The value of mother-tongue education was further affirmed by a team of overseas education experts headed by Sir J. Llewellyn when they were invited by the Hong Kong government in 1981 to undertake an overall review of the local education system (Llewellyn *et al*., 1983:28). Regrettably, the precise meaning of mother-tongue education in Hong Kong was omitted in the review.

After years of deliberation and small steps that were meant to arrest the decline of the CMSs\textsuperscript{13},
the government made its first decisive step towards a policy for Chinese-medium secondary education when the Department of Education announced, in April 1986, that a policy of ‘positive discrimination’ in favour of secondary schools using Chinese as the medium of instruction would be implemented with effect from September 1988. As noted in the Department’s General Administration Circular No. 13/86: ‘The key feature of this policy is that additional teachers of English and additional resources will be provided, on a scale which will depend on the extent to which individual schools use Chinese as the medium of instruction for subjects other than English’. In the same circular, it was revealed that ‘Consideration is also being given to making the Hong Kong Advanced Level Examination\textsuperscript{14} available in the medium of Chinese’. It also hinted that the proposed new educational language policy would eventually ‘put an end to the traditional distinction between ACSSs and CMSs’.

At the same time, a government-financed Chinese Textbook Committee headed by a legislative councillor with educational credentials was set up to devise measures and incentives to encourage local publishers to publish quality textbooks in Chinese.

Evidently, the government has taken into account the public’s perception of the relationship between English proficiency and English-medium education and other factors that have inhibited the growth of the CMSs into consideration in the formulation of the policy. However, in spite of the incentives offered, initially, only 21 out of the existing 350 ACSSs responded positively to the Department by agreeing to make a total switch to Chinese in the school year 1987-88; another 95 ACSSs indicated that they would make the same switch in 1988-89 (\textit{South China Morning Post}, 18\textsuperscript{th} November, 1986).

Among the host of factors that account for the majority of the schools’ reluctance to make the switch immediately, one significant factor is that, despite the Department’s policy and the potential sociolinguistic changes associated with the impending return of Hong Kong to the sovereign rule of China, an ACSS education remains popular. Two surveys on students’ choice of schools to pursue their secondary education have been conducted respectively in February – June, 1983 and July, 1986 and their findings, as shown in Table 2, are similar (So, 1984: 259; 1986a: 23): Similar preferences have been shown by parents. For example, in 1967, among the 11,080 candidates of the Secondary School Entrance Examination who were allocated secondary school places, only 6.7% of the parents opted for CMS places for their children (Cheong, 1970: 204). In 1980, the percentage of parents who opted for CMS places under the Secondary School Placement Assessment scheme was 6.1 (Gibbons, 1982:117).

Obviously, the local sociolinguistic dynamics have given rise to both a mismatch between an educational axiom and the public’s choice of school for secondary education, and a paradox of Chinese members of an essentially Chinese society shunning a Chinese-medium education. An intriguing aspect of this paradox is that learning problems associated with English-medium instruction appear to have failed to affect the popularity of getting an ACSS education. In the two aforementioned surveys, for example, respective 41 and 44.5% of the subject
Table 2  Hong Kong students’ choice of school for secondary education

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Students’ choice</th>
<th>Year of survey</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1983</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anglo-Chinese Secondary School</td>
<td>422</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese Middle School</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>519</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The 1983 survey was conducted in two CMSs & six ACSSs. The 1986 survey was conducted in three ACSSs.

indicated that they have learning problems associated with the use of the English-medium (So, 1984:259; 1986a:23). However, as shown in Tables 2, the majority of the students still preferred to pursue their education in ACSSs. Similarly, in face-to-face interview that they were aware that their children might have learning problems related to the use of the English-medium (So, 1986:23).

Nevertheless, the paradox may not be that hard to resolve when those factors that mitigate the negative effects of English-medium instruction in ACSSs are known. Briefly, these factors are: First, English-medium secondary education in Hong Kong approximates the model of additive bilingualism in that it does not effect language shift at the societal level or loss of mother-tongue at the individual level. Hong Kong people opt for an ACSS education mainly because they want to acquire an additional language in the course of their education. Second, the school linguistic environment in most ACSSs is similar to what one finds in Canadian immersion programmes, which have shown success in providing an education in an non-native medium. For example, ACSS students in Hong Kong are receiving English-medium instruction not among native-speakers of English, but among fellow Chinese youngsters whose proficiency in English is at comparable levels, at least at the start of secondary education. Therefore, in this respect, their plight is different from that of non-English speaking immigrant children in US bilingual education programmes. Also, the absolute majority of the teaching personnel are bilingual and as mentioned earlier, many of them are quite ready to switch to Cantonese as far as classroom speech is concerned when the situation warrants it. Third, as already indicated, the ACSS students are there by self-selection; as a result, most of them do not have the kind of resentment that minority students often have when they are being deprived of their right to mother-tongue education.

Conversely, since the 1920s, the CMSs have prided themselves on providing local students with a secondary education in their mother tongue. Similarly, from the perspective of the majority of the local mother-tongue education advocates, implementing mother-tongue education at the secondary level means switching the ACSSs into CMSs. The question is, In Hong Kong, is mother-tongue education equivalent to Chinese-medium education?
Classic Diglossia and Mother-Tongue Education

What is at issue here is not the relative effectiveness of English-medium vs. Chinese-medium instruction under *ceteris paribus* conditions, but rather, what should be the precise meaning of mother-tongue education in Hong Kong?

To many local mother-tongue education advocates, mother-tongue education means using Cantonese for oral instruction and using Modern Mandarin as the written medium for both textbooks and homework.

However, if one accepts the definition of mother tongue adopted by the 1951 Conference on Mother-Tongue Education convened by UNESCO in Paris (Fishman, 1968:689)\(^{15}\), then the aforementioned approach is at best a watered-down version of mother-tongue education. It is estimated that the mother tongue for over 80% of the local Chinese is Cantonese, which is the dialect of Guangzhou, the capital of the southernmost province of Guangdong. Other major dialects are Chiuchow, Hakka, Hoklo, and Szeyap (T'sou, 1980a). *Modern Mandarin is not a local language*. For example, its standardised oral form – Putonghua – derives its phonology from the dialect of Beijing, the national capital in the North, and is spoken as a mother tongue by less than 2% of the local population. Furthermore, Modern Mandarin derives its norms of usage from the Northern Mandarin dialects and from the corpus of prestigious literature written in plain Mandarin (Bai Hua) since 1919. In other words, as far as reading and writing are concerned, the medium used is not the mother tongue of most local students.

Local mother-tongue education advocates’ stock response to this complication is: ‘Foreigners love to exaggerate the degree of divergence both between Chinese speech and writing, and among the dialects. Actually, all these linguistic varieties share the same origin and, therefore, problems caused by the divergence among them should not be too difficult to overcome. So it is not appropriate to equate the problems of learning a foreign language to problems caused by such divergence’ (translated from Siu, 1981:37).

However, the assumption that the degree of divergence among the Chinese dialects would not be great because they are related languages needs to be challenged because it leads to an unwarranted view that Hong Kong students should have little problem coping with the divergence between their mother tongue and Modern Mandarin.

The degree of divergence among languages that share either a hypothetical or an existent protolanguage is dependent on a variety of factors. Among these factors, three decisive ones are: first, geographical separation; second, the length of divergence; and third, the degree of contact with other languages. For example, both English and German are Germanic languages. The divergence between these two languages can be tracked back to the fifth century AD when the Germanic people began to emigrate to the British Isles. In other words, the length of divergence between these two languages is about 1,500 years. During this period, both of them have been under the influence of Latin and French. In the case of English, however, the Celtic and Scandinavian languages have also left their marks on the language. As a result, to date, few would dispute the fact that English and German are two mutually unintelligible languages.
Whereas, among the Chinese dialects, documentary evidence of divergence relative to the existence of a standard dialect can be dated back to the Zhou Dynasty, circa 1,100 BC – 256 BC. For example, in the teaching of Confucius (551 – 479 BC), the sage already referred to the presence of a cultured/standard variety which was probably based on the dialect spoken by the people living in the vicinity of today’s city of Changan in North-West China (Yuan, 1980: 16—19). In other words, the length of divergence among the Chinese dialects can be more than 2,500 years.

During this period, the standard dialect in China went through at least five stages of fundamental change with the geographical base of the standard variety moving away from Changan (North-West China), to Nanjing (East China) and eventually to Beijing (North China) (Norman, 1988: 23). Among these five standard dialects – ‘Old Chinese’. ‘Middle Chinese’. ‘Old Mandarin’, ‘Middle Mandarin’, and ‘Modern Mandarin’ – ‘Old and Middle Chinese’ had the greatest influence on the evolution of the Cantonese language as the province of Guangdong was first colonised by people speaking these varieties, whereas Modern Mandarin is largely a direct descendant of the East-based and North-based Old and Middle Mandarin. In other words, Cantonese is primarily a cross-product of the varieties spoken by the indigenous population of Guangdong at the time of their conquest by the Qin Regime (221 BC – 207 BC) and the standard dialects spoken by the conquerors. For 2,000 years, Cantonese was allowed to evolve in relative isolation from the North because of the great physical distance, the rugged terrain that separates the two areas, and the peripheral nature of the province. Historically, Chinese regimes have been mostly northward-looking as external threats mostly originated from that direction.

In addition to their respective development in different locales, the evolvement of the Sinitic Northern Mandarin dialects had been influenced by Altaic languages such as Mongolian and Manchu (Hashimotom, 1983), while that of Cantonese had been influenced by Tai languages of minority groups in South-West China such as Dong and Zhuang (Yuan, 1980: 179). Moreover, the variety of Cantonese in Hong Kong has been heavily influenced by English in the past 140 years (Chan & Kwok, 1982). Therefore, like English and German, Cantonese and Modern Mandarin are mutually unintelligible languages. In fact, Western-based linguists tend to view Cantonese and Modern Mandarin as different languages (Bauer, 1984: 294), a view rejected by China-based linguists (Zhou, 1981:3—6).

However, despite the lack of agreement between the two camps of linguists, the fact remains that Cantonese and Modern Mandarin have extensive differences in phonology, in lexis and in syntax. For example, Cantonese is a tonal language with nine tones. It has 20 ‘initials’ and 53 ‘finals’, i.e. it has 73 distinctive sound segments. Putonghua is also a tonal language. However, it has only four tones; two of them can be found in Cantonese. It has 22 ‘initials’ and 38 ‘finals’, i.e. it has sixty distinctive sound segments. These two languages share only twelve and five cognates respectively in their ‘initials’ and ‘finals’.

In terms of the lexes of the two languages, although their basic lexis is similar, the usage of lexical items has considerable difference. Furthermore, each of these two languages has numerous lexical items that are unique to itself. For example, Rao et al. (1980) has documented about 6,000 Cantonese lexical items that cannot be found in Modern Mandarin.
As for syntax, Cantonese also has numerous features in its noun, pronoun, verbal, adverbial and adjectival phrases, as well as in its word order such as direct and indirect object positions, that differ from Modern Mandarin (Yuan, 1980: 211 – 231).

In general, local mother-tongue education advocates are more prepared to accept that there is substantial divergence between Cantonese and Modern Mandarin in phonology. However, they tend to insist that the divergence between the two languages in lexis and syntax is negligible. This attitude may be due to a lack of understanding of the local classic diglossic conditions.

One unusual aspect of the social distribution of Cantonese in Hong Kong is that its usage can be found in almost all the domains where only a high language is used. For example, high Cantonese is used in the local legislative council, in the local magistracy, as well as used as the medium of formal discourse in administration, education, academia, and business. In fact, Cantonese usage spans the whole social spectrum, from discourse of highly academic and/or technical nature to that of a mundane, and personal nature. Both varieties have written forms. The diglossic nature of the distribution rests upon the fact that high Cantonese is rarely used in ordinary, non-formal, social discourse.

As a result of its sociolinguistic status, high Cantonese has been under the exonormic influence of Modern Mandarin. Therefore, it is not surprising to find that there is a high degree of convergence between high Cantonese and Modern Mandarin in lexis and syntax. The problem is, in terms of sequence of acquisition typical under diglossic conditions, Chinese children in Hong Kong acquire the low variety first, i.e. most local people’s mother tongue is low Cantonese, which has not been under any exonormic control and exhibits all the divergence features relative to Modern Mandarin mentioned earlier.

Indeed, had it not been for the unification of Chinese orthography by Qin Shi Huang Di, who united the Han states of China in 221 BC, and the subsequent development of a corpus of prestigious literature written in a similar orthography, which together exerted a certain degree of constraint on the divergence of the dialects, the divergence could have been more serious. What is intriguing is that while none of the local mother-tongue education advocates would fail to acknowledge the contribution of Qin Shi Huang Di in reducing the linguistic diversity of China, most of them would take it for granted that the local students are receiving mother-tongue education if they are enrolled in a Chinese-medium school. That may explain why these advocates have focused their attention on the secondary sector, and why they have chosen to ignore the fact that to the majority of Hong Kong youngsters, there is a disjunction between the linguistic environment of the home and that of the school, no matter whether it is English-medium or Chinese-medium. It may also partially explain why CMSs’ appeal of mother-tongue education has had little effect so far.

Consequently, the status of mother-tongue education in Hong Kong has an almost uncanny similarity to that in India where ‘The issues concerning the facility of expression in mother tongue have been highlighted in rather simplistic terms, by juxtaposing mother tongue against English …. The advocates of mother tongue ideology have not cared to define the bounds of mother tongue; nor has adequate attention been paid to accounting for the diverse patterns of language hierarchy prevailing in multilingual plural societies….. In the thrust of canvassing mother tongue medium,
experts did not fully comprehend the plural character of Indian society at large, where a child’s earliest first-hand experiences of life do not necessarily resemble the formal “school version” of his mother tongue’ (Khubchandani, 1978:109, 113).

**Triglossia and Mother-Tongue Education**

Abdulaziz (1972) first introduced the term triglossia to capture a sociolinguistic condition in Tanzania where local/vernacular languages are used in oral intergroup communication, while a local standardised lingua franca and a world language are used, each for ‘half’ of the high functions. However, the term is used here with a meaning that is closer to T’sou (1980b:269) who applied the term to China where one finds ‘(1) a Low Language which is the home language, (2) a High Language which is the language of the regional centres and (3) yet a Supreme Language ….’ and that there is extensive overlapped usage of both the High Language and the Supreme Language is formal domains. The two languages are therefore not differentiated by function but by geographical coverage with the Supreme Language [Mandarin] having wider coverage.

Furthermore, in addition to geographical dominance, the term triglossia is also used here to denote the trend of differential domain dominance that may be the new relationship towards which the two competing High Languages in Hong Kong are moving. As described earlier, in the domains of administration, law, primary and secondary education, the swing away from English dominance towards greater use of Chinese is already under way. This movement is further facilitated by the policy of localisation in the recruitment of administrative, legal and educational personnel. Consequently, as Hong Kong is moving towards and beyond 1997, few would doubt that the domains of English dominance will be restricted to only those of the international sector of business, tertiary education and, perhaps, the high courts. It is inevitable that the current conditions of Superposed Bilingualism are disappearing, the only question is how fast? Time is on the side of Modern Mandarin.

Another question to be asked is – in the midst of this sociolinguistic realignment process, will Hong Kong continue to cope with a three-language situation within a political-cultural framework that reckons that, officially, it has only a two-language system? From the policy of positive discrimination mentioned earlier, it can be seen that the government has acknowledged the mistake of having assumed that local students, after having learned English for six years in Chinese-medium primary schools, would then be able to cope with English-medium secondary education. But will it move on and also acknowledge that it is necessary to provide local students a linkage between their Cantonese-speaking homes and their Modern Mandarin-oriented schools?
It is clear that the question on both the status of Cantonese in both primary and secondary education of Hong Kong, and the provision of authentic mother-tongue education to the local students at both primary and secondary levels will not be satisfactorily resolved if local mother-tongue education advocates refuse to give up their unitarian and exonormic mentality in dealing with educational language matters. Also, the issue will not be satisfactorily resolved unless the powers-that-be reckon the importance of the distinction between Cantonese and Modern Mandarin in the overall administrative framework and accept the significance of language planning in this monolingual society which happens to have complex linguistic needs and issues.

At this moment, the future of the status of Cantonese in Hong Kong education is at a crossroads. While the conferees representing Hong Kong and eight other countries in the First Conference on Language Policy and Language Planning in Hong Kong unanimously affirmed the importance of making a distinction between Cantonese and Modern Mandarin, and called for measures to plan for the former’s proper role and status in the sectors of administration, law and education, there also exists a body of opinion in China which believes that ‘Any plan by Hong Kong educators to emphasise Cantonese would be a step backward’ (S. Thomas, 1986).

Nevertheless, in the Sino-British Joint Declaration on the Future of Hong Kong, Hong Kong has been granted autonomy in making policy decisions on its educational language issues for 50 years after 1997 (Annex I:X). This could be the last chance for the Hong Kong people to make the necessary distinction between Cantonese and Modern Mandarin in education and to sort out the problems created by the mismatch between the standard dialects (both Modern Mandarin and English) taught and used in schools and the language of most local Chinese homes – Cantonese.

Notes
1. In 1968, the Colonial Secretariat sent out General Circular 13/68 to all government departments emphasising the policy of replying in Chinese to letters received in Chinese and that all routine written communication with members of the public ‘who may not understand English should be treated in the same way’.

2. On the occasion of the visit of the British Prime Minister, Mrs. Margaret Thatcher, to China, the Beijing Regime made its first official announcement on its determination to reclaim its sovereignty over Hong Kong in July 1997. The announcement started a series of diplomatic talks between the two governments on the future of Hong Kong which culminated in the signing of the Sino-British Joint Declaration on the Future of Hong Kong in December 20, 1984.

3. The Sino-British Joint Declaration stipulates that after June 1997, Hong Kong will be declared a Special Administrative Zone and its people will enjoy a large measure of autonomy. In July 1985, a Committee, consisting of both Chinese officials and Hong Kong citizens appointed by Beijing, was set up to undertake the task of drafting the Basic Law which will provide the constitutional framework for the post-1997 political system of Hong Kong.
4. In 1949, the Chinese Communist Party gained political control over Mainland China and pushed the Nationalist regime to Taiwan. The Communist revolution triggered a flight of people, capital and expertise from China to Hong Kong. As a result, the socio-economic fabric of the colony was drastically transformed.

5. The term is used here in the same sense as it is used in Harris (1980). In other words, it refers to the demographic, techno-economic and occupational structures of a society.


7. One of the indicators of ethnicity in Hong Kong is citizens’ place of origin. According to the 1981 Census, citizens with place of origin from either Hong Kong or China amounted to 98% of the total population (Hong Kong Census & Statistical Department, 1983:112).

8. They were the Hong Kong & Shanghai Banking Corporation, Jardín & Matheson, Hong Kong Land, Hong Kong Electric, The Swire Group, Hutchinson & Whampoa, China Light & Power, and Hong Kong Telephone Co., Ltd.

9. In 1951, total enrollment at secondary level was 25,281 with 15,285 (60%) enrolled in Chinese Middle Schools and 9,996 in Anglo-Chinese Secondary Schools. In 1985, the total enrollment was 405,910 with 35,295 (9%) enrolled in Chinese Middle Schools and 370,615 enrolled in Anglo-Chinese Secondary Schools.

10. See So (1986b).

11. They are the University of Hong Kong, the Chinese University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong Polytechnic, the City Polytechnic of Hong Kong and the Baptist College. All of them adopt English as the usual medium of instruction.

12. For example, between 1985-86, a total of 9,547 Hong Kong students left for Australia, Britain, Canada and the USA to further their education (Ismail, 1987:298).

13. These steps were (1) since 1979, the same Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination Syllabuses have been offered to both Chinese Middle Schools and Anglo-Chinese Secondary Schools, (2) in 1986, the medium indicator on the Certificate of Examination was deleted so that its holder’s schools background, i.e. whether he is from a Chinese Middle School or an Anglo-Chinese Secondary School, is no long immediately obvious.

14. It is in effect the entrance examination to the University of Hong Kong and is offered mainly in the medium of English. The Higher Level Examination, in turn, primarily caters to the Chinese University of Hong Kong and is offered in the medium of Chinese mainly.

15. In the Conference, mother tongue was defined as ‘the language which a person acquires in early years and which normally becomes his natural instrument of thought and communication’.

16. Students of Chinese phonology largely favour the practice of viewing most Chinese words as consisting of two sound segments. The first segment is termed ‘initial’ which is more-or-less equivalent to an English consonant. The second is termed ‘final’ which is similar to an English vowel/diphthong with/without consonantal ending.

17. These figures are based on the phonetic analyses of these languages provided in Norman (1988: 139, 141 & 216) and Hashimoto (1972: 90).
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