Orality in Hong Kong Print Media*

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine how the societal and the genre-specific constraints of the media genres have led to the use of orality in the Chinese print media of present-day Hong Kong. The data presented in this study include both commercial and political advertising, and both local and entertainment news texts. Three different forms of orality that are mingled in the different types of written media discourse are identified: 1) question-answer pairs; 2) general emphatics, first person pronouns and second person pronouns; 3) colloquial Cantonese. Besides their interpersonal function of involvement and the social functions of solidarity and in-group identity, these orality features and strategies are found to 1) help the success of an advertisement by enhancing its attention value, readability, memorability, and consequently selling power, 2) enhance the immediacy, credibility, and objectivity of the news reporting by foregrounding the individual's voice, style or comments. Finally, implications and suggestions are provided for a dynamic approach towards language use and cultural expressions in society.

1. INTRODUCTION

It is generally acknowledged that written and oral communication involve very different kinds of linguistic features and strategies: What works orally does not

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usually work in print, and vice versa. The use of orality-oriented features or strategies in the writing of Hong Kong students or in the Chinese print media of Hong Kong has led to worries and fear among educationalists (e.g., 卢丹怀等 1998; 曾志雄 1998) that Chinese is at the risk of being impoverished, literacy is at the risk of dying, and civilization as we know it is doomed in Hong Kong. Nevertheless, little attention has been paid to the different values and advantages associated with the speaking mode versus the writing mode of communication in Chinese; and even less work has been done on systematically investigating and explaining the positive aspect of orality in written discourse in Hong Kong.

The present chapter therefore aims to: 1) identify the different forms of orality used in the Chinese print media of postcolonial Hong Kong; 2) investigate the functions and values of orality in relation to both the macro-context (i.e., the socio-cultural context) and the micro-context (i.e., the context of the genre) in which they are produced; and 3) provide implications and suggestions for a dynamic approach towards language use and cultural expressions in society.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Over the years, sociolinguists, anthropologists as well as literary scholars have shown great interest and done a great deal of work in relation to the orality/literacy issue. Earlier studies by sociolinguists tended to focus their attention on identifying the specific features that distinguish the two modes. Among the dichotomies between speaking and writing are: one is structurally simple while the other is structurally complex (e.g., Akinnaso 1982); one is implicit while the other is explicit (e.g., DeVito 1966); one is unplanned while the other is planned (e.g., Ochs 1979); one is contextualized while the other is decontextualized (e.g., Olson 1977); one is more personally involved while the other is more personally detached (e.g., Chafe 1982), and so on.

Nevertheless, in the last two decades, sociolinguists and literary scholars have also recognized that there are complex relationships between orality and literacy and that simple dichotomous classifications or polarization of speech and writing are not able to explain the multi-faceted and multi-sensory forms of language and cultural expressions in the society. Anthropologists and literary scholars such as Goody (1968, 1977), Goody and Watt (1963) and Ong (1971, 1977, 1982) have written extensively on the orality/literacy question in relation to the development of communication in history. They pointed out that our verbal communication moved from orality to literacy and on to what they termed the “secondary orality” with radio and television, and that orality and literacy
mutually enriched each other in the evolution of human consciousness. Sociolinguists such as Lakoff (1982) also found that with social change and the development of electronic media after the printing technology, there was a deliberate mingling of oral strategies by younger writers in written communication. Furthermore, Linn (1995) and Horowitz (1995) indicated that bilingual and bicultural writers tended to use vernacular expressions and other orality features or strategies for expressing affect and their ethnolinguistic identity.

In recent years, scholars studying media discourse have also demonstrated the mixing of different genres or a large amount of stylistic variation in media discourse production. Fairclough (1995) found that the Midnight Special program on politics in Britain manifested a mixing of political discourse with the elements of simulated conversation and entertainment performance act. He attributed such a phenomenon of domestication or conversationalization of the mediated political discourse as embedded within the shift in social practice: “Media consumption has evolved as an important element of leisure activity, in which audiences expect relaxation and entertainment, and in which audiences are increasingly constructed as consumers rather than citizens” (Fairclough 1995: 179).

Regarding the mingling of orality in written discourse in Chinese, some studies have also been done. Lo and Wong (1990) found a polyglossic situation of language use in Hong Kong print media: The quality press in Hong Kong tended to adopt the literacy-oriented discourse strategies, conforming to the standard Chinese language, while the popular press tended to adopt the orality-oriented discourse strategies, being more similar to the use of Cantonese as the spoken dialect. Wu and Hui (1997) and 吳東英﹑許謙文 (2000) also found that, compared with their counterpart in mainland China, print entertainment news discourse in Hong Kong used more orality-oriented discourse strategies. But their explanation of the phenomena was rather brief: Hong Kong press is market-oriented and the use of on-line interaction features and strategies helps to entertain and attract a larger and wider audience. Nevertheless, Snow (1994) pointed out that the emergence of Cantonese literature in Hong Kong after the 1980’s was an indicator of a population identifying with their dialect region, that is, a stronger sense among Hong Kong people of Cantonese as a symbol of Hong Kong’s culture and their own identity.

We can observe that, while a great deal of attention has been paid to not only documenting but also explaining the phenomena of mingling orality with literacy and of hybridization of genres/discourses in English or in different varieties of English, little has been done in Chinese. Furthermore, even though Fairclough (1995: 167) has pointed out that the generic mixture of the discoursal practice is
realized textually in heterogeneity – the text is heterogeneous both in its meanings and in the realizations of the meanings in the forms of the text – little further work has been done in systematically studying the heterogeneous forms and meanings involved in the interdiscursive practice of today. In the following section, I will try to systematically investigate (i) the different forms of orality as they are mixed in the Chinese print media of postcolonial Hong Kong, and (ii) the heterogeneous functions/meanings that these forms of orality serve in both the socio-cultural context of Hong Kong (the macro-context) and the specific news or advertising genre contexts (the micro-contexts).

3. THE PRESENT STUDY

3.1 Defining orality

Orality/literacy are polysemous terms which can cover two different but related aspects of communication: the “medium” versus the “mode” of communication. The purpose of this study is to examine the use of oral mode of communication in the print/writing medium of Hong Kong media. The definition of orality is based on Raible (1996). According to Raible (1996), the typical oral mode of communication, no matter whether it is in the spoken or the written media, manifests a differential level of cognitive and linguistic simplicity and is represented by use of the linguistic features that are found in small-talk and everyday conversation between two friends (Raible 1996: 20). The possible linguistic features that represent typical speaking/orality can be many; but for the purpose of the present study, I will focus mainly on 1) question-answer pairs, as they represent the typical conversational structure (Sacks et al. 1974, Stenstrom 1994); 2) general emphatics, first person pronouns, and second person pronouns, as they indicate orientation to person and co-involvement which are critical elements of conversation (Biber 1988, Chafe 1982, Fairclough 1995); 3) colloquial Canton-

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1 It should be noted that the difference between orality and literacy is not absolute but is more like a continuum between two poles. The linguistic features listed here as representing typical speaking may in fact occur in writing as well; but the distribution of such features in typical writing is statistically much lower and they are thus typically associated with orality/typical speaking. The reader can refer to Biber (1988) for further details on the statistical distribution of the different linguistic features in various genres or registers.

2 General emphatics refers to the particles expressing enthusiastic involvement in what is being said, e.g., exclamation mark “!” and words like “just” and “really”, etc.
ese, as they represent typical linguistic choice or style in informal conversation between friends in Hong Kong.

3.2 The data

The data covers the period from January, 1998 to January, 2000. The types of Hong Kong print media data reported in this study include those of advertising and news. The sample of advertising texts include both commercial and political advertisements, while the sample of news texts include both local and entertainment news in the quality as well as popular press.

3.3 Forms of orality in Hong Kong print media

One important evidence for the use of orality in the print media of Hong Kong is the use of question-answer pairs. “Questions and answers constitute the backbone of conversation” (Stenstrom 1994: 1). And this structure of questions and answers is often used in print advertisements in Hong Kong. For example:

1. (a)  
   深圳  邊度  見？  梗係  香格里拉！
   Sam1zan3 bin1dou6 gin3? gang2hai6 hoeng1gaak3lei5laai1
   Shenzhen where meet of-course Shangrila

   香宮又得，咖啡園又得。
   Hoeng1gung1 jau6 dak1, gaa3fe1jiyun4 jau6 dak1,
   Xianggong OK Coffee Garden OK

   西村又得...
   Sai1cyun1 jau6dak1...
   West Village OK

   ‘Where should we meet in Shenzhen? Shangrila of course. We can meet at Xianggong, or Coffee Garden, or West Village...
   (香格里拉酒店 / Shangrila Hotel)

(b) 咁到底  邊個  第一  呢？
   Gam2 dou3dai2 bin1go3 dai6jiat1 ne1
   PART on-earth who first PART

   知道SUNDAY 第二 就夠 喔。
   Zi1dou3 SUNDAY dai6ji6 zau6 gau3 lak3
know Sunday second is enough PART

如果講你聽邊個第一，
jyu4gwo2 gong2 nei5 teng1 bin1go3 dai6jat1,
if tell you hear who first,
我哋咪好瘀？
go5dei6 mai6 hou2 jyu2
we then lose-face
So who is in fact the first? It’s enough to know that we are the
second. If I tell you who is the first, won’t we lose face?
（Sunday）

(c) 太太，請問你會投邊個票呀?
taa1taai2, ceng2man6 nei5 wui3 tau2 bin1go3 piu3 aa3
Madam, excuse-me you will caste who vote PART
唔知喎，是但揀啦。
m4 zi1 wo3, si6 daan6 gaan2 laa1.
ot know PART random choose PART
Madam, who will you vote for? Don’t know. Will randomly
choose one.
（南昌西區候選人廣告 / Candidate for district board election）

News stories, both local news and entertainment news texts, are also frequently
framed by questions and question-answer pairs, as in illustration (2).

2. (a) 她當官數十年，
taa1 dong1gwun1 sou3sap6 nin4
she be official several ten year
可有遺憾？
ho2 jau6 wai4 ham6,
possible have regret
她說：「我覺得很多事，
taa1 syut3, “ngo5 gok3 han2do1 si6
she say I think many thing
已經盡了本分，
ji5ging1 zeon6 liu5 bun2fan6
already try ASP duty

都應該是問心無愧。

dou1 jing1 goi1 si6 man6 sam1 mou4 kwai5.

should be no-regret

‘After being the government official for many years, has she had any regret? She said: “I think I have tried my best to do many things, so I should not have any regret”.’ (明報 / Ming Pao Daily News, 18 January, 2000)

(b) 「如果有 一 日， 劉 少 君 浪子回頭
jyu4 gwo2 jau5 jat1 jat6, lau4 siu3 kwan1 long6 zi2 wui4 tau4
if have one day Lau Siu Kwan regret

走到你 母 女 面前 求 你 原諒,
zau2 dou3 nei5 mou5 nei2 min6 cin4 kau4 nei5 jyun4 loeng6
come you mother daughter face ask-for you forgive

你 會 原諒 他 嗎?
nei5 wui3 jyun4 loeng6 taa1 maa1
you will forgive him PART

在 經濟上， 你 會 施以 援手 嗎?
zoi6 ging1 zai3 soeng6, nei5 wui3 si1 yi5 wun4 sau2 maa1
in finance you will give support PART

冷笑了一聲的 周 秀 蘭 說:
lang5 siu3 liu5 jat1 seng1 dik1 zau1 sau3 laan4 syut6
sneer ASP one DE Chow Sau Lan say

「如果 你 係 我， 你 會 唔 會 呀?
jyu4 gwo2 nei5 hai6 ngo5, nei5 wui3 m4 wui3 aa1
if you be me you will not will PART

唔使 我 多 講 仙， ......」
m4 sai2 ngo5 do1 gong2 laa1
no-need me more say PART
“If one day Lau Siu Kwan regretted and came back to ask you and your daughter for forgiveness, would you forgive him? Would you give him financial support?” Chow Sau Lan sneered and said, “If you were me, would you? I don’t have to say more about that...”'(蘋果日報 / Apple Daily, 9 November, 1998)

問到黎明將來如何教導兒女呢?
man6 dou3 lai4 ming4 zoeng1 loi4 jyu4 ho4 gaa4 dou6 ji4 neoi5 ne1
ask Lai Ming future how teach children PART

他則說：「可能到時勇敢面對.....
taa1 zak5 syut3, “ho2 ne4ng4 dou3 si4 jung5 gam2 min6 deoi5...
he then say probably arrive time courage face

用人腦輸入程序記憶法！
jung6 jan4 nou5 syu1 jap6 cing4 zeoi6 gei3 jik1 faat3
use computer input program memory method

唔好問我個仔啦。
m4 hou2 man6 ngo5 go3 zai2 laa1
Do-not ask me CL son PART

話唔定幾年後呢！
waa6 m4 ding6 gei2 nin4 hau6 ne1
say not-sure several year later PART

‘When asking Lai Ming about how he would teach his children in the future? Lai Ming then said, “Will probably have to face the problem with courage then. Use computer programming! But please don’t ask me about children now. They probably won’t happen to me till a few years later!”’（明報 / Ming Pao Daily News, 9 November, 1998）

From illustration (2), we can observe that though the question-answer format in the print news texts may not exactly correspond with the one occurring in actual spoken interaction, the framing of the news story or the description of the event or the person with the question form is a significant linguistic style of the present-day news reporting that is worthy of attention.
Typical spoken interaction/orality is also characterized by orientation to person and co-involvement and is represented by the use of linguistic features such as general emphatics, first person pronouns, and second person pronouns (Biber 1988, Chafe 1982, Fairclough 1995). Such linguistic features – general emphatics, first person pronouns and second person pronouns – are also often exploited in the print advertisements of Hong Kong. For example, in illustration (1), we can already observe many uses of the general emphatics in the print advertisements: the use of exclamation mark “!” in (1a) and (1b); the use of words “梗系” (of course) in (1a) and particles “咁, 呢, 喺, 呀” in (1b) and (1c) for expressing enthusiastic involvement in what is being said.

Some further examples for the use of first and second person pronouns as well as of the general emphatics in the print advertisements can also be observed in the underlined expressions in illustration (3):

3. (a) 總有燃亮您我心中的太陽。
zung2 jau5 jin4loeng6 nei5 ngo5 sam1zung1 dik1 taai3joeng4
always have light you me heart DE sun

There is always the sun that ignites our hearts.
(Sun Life of Canada / 加拿大永明人壽保險公司)

(b) 啱哂您找啲口味﹐
ngaam1 saai3 nei5 ngo5 ge3 hau2mei6
just you I DE taste

Exactly suits our taste!
(Samsung / 三星)

(c) 您的支持, 就是我的堅持！
nei5 dik1 zi1ci4, zau6 si6 ngo5 dik1 gin1ci4
Your support is my persistence

Your support is the reason for my persistence.
(下城門選區候選人廣告 / candidate for district board election)

Quotations, either in direct or indirect forms, are favored in both hard and soft news texts; and the features of general emphatics, first person pronouns and second person pronouns are often found to be distributed within the quotations in the news reports. From illustrations (2a) to (2c), we can observe the use of first and second person pronouns such as “我” (I/me) and “你” (you); we can also
observe the use of general emphatics such as exclamation mark “!” in (2c) and particles “呀、啦、呢” in (2b) and (2c).

Colloquial Cantonese, the preferred language style and choice among friends in conversation in Hong Kong, is also often utilized in the print media of Hong Kong. Instead of using the grammar of standard written Chinese, the media writers deliberately use that of colloquial Cantonese in their writing of advertising scripts and news stories. They use colloquial Cantonese expressions in their lexical selection, such as the underlined expressions in (4a) and (4b); moreover, they also use the syntax of colloquial Cantonese such as the underlined expressions in (4c) and (4d).

4. (a) 再 送 150 分鐘
        zoi3 sung3 jat5baak3ng5sap6 fan1zung1
        again give 150 minute
        打 呼 美、加、法、德
        daa2 wan4 mei5 gaa1 faat3 dak1
call all-around America Canada France Germany
        中國 仲 有 新 低 價
        zung1gwok3 zung6 jau5 san1 dai1gaa3
        China still have new low rate

‘(We) give you another 150 minutes to call all around America, Canada, France, and Germany. In addition, there is a new lowest rate for calling China’. (Ad for 香港電訊 / Hong Kong Telecom)

(b) 中國 入 世貿 香港 有 推旺
        zung1gwok3 jap6 sai3mau6 hoeng1gong2 jau5 paa4 wong6
        China enter WTO Hong-Kong have prosperity
        China entering WTO will bring prosperity to Hong Kong.
        (蘋果日報 / Apple Daily, 16 November, 1999)

(c) 關注 多 D、回應 快 D。
        gwaan1zyu3 do1 di1, wui4jing3 faai3 di1
care more a bit respond quick a bit

Pay closer attention, and respond more quickly.
(Ad for 民建聯 / Candidate for district council election)
The expressions or words in standard written Chinese for "勻" (wan4) and "仲" (zung6) in (4a) should be "遍" (pin3) and "還" (waan4) respectively; and the expressions or words in standard written Chinese for "排旺" (paai4wong6) in (4b) should be "興旺" (hing1wong6). The word order in (4c) in standard written Chinese should be “多關注” (do1 gwaan1zyu3) instead of “關注多” (gwaan1zyu3 do1); and the comparative construction in (4d) “好過賣泳衣” (hou2 gwo3 maa6 wing6ji1) should be “比賣泳衣好” (bei2 maa6 wing6ji1 hou2) in standard written Chinese. The reader can also refer to the italicized expressions in illustrations (1) – (3) for further exemplification of the prevalent use of colloquial Cantonese in the Chinese print media of Hong Kong.

3.4 Functions and values of orality in Hong Kong print media

This section will discuss the functions and values of the different forms of orality that have been identified in section 3.3 in relation to both the macro-context and the micro-contexts in which they take place. The macro-context here refers to the development of media technologies and the general sociolinguistic values or trend in Hong Kong, while the micro-context refers to the contextual constraints by the advertising and news genres.

I would argue that, similar to what has happened in the west, the development and massive use of electronic media – radio and television (termed as “secondary orality” by Ong 1982) – have led to an increasing public preference for the oral mode of communication in Hong Kong. “The trend is to be casual about things, ... to be unpretentious, flexible and feasible for the tastes of the audience” (Tsang 2000, cited in Tsui 2000). Moreover, with Hong Kong economic and cultural growth and status, there is a general tendency for the people in Hong
Kong, especially of the younger and better educated, to identify more closely with Hong Kong than with China. Instead of worrying about the low-class connotations for certain use of orality in written discourse, the writer today is more concerned with using the features and strategies of orality such as colloquial Cantonese in building solidarity with the audience, creating an in-group identity, and consequently reaching across a wider audience.

Furthermore, the use of orality features and strategies serve very well the micro-contexts, specifically the purposes of the advertising and the news genres. An advertisement operates under certain temporal and spatial constraints to inform and to persuade people to use the product or service. To fulfill the aim(s) of the advertisement, its language use has to accomplish “attention value”, “readibility”, “memorability”, and “selling power” (Leech 1966: 27-31). We can observe that the use of the orality features and strategies such as the question-answer pairs, the emphatics, the first person pronouns, the second person pronouns, and the colloquial Cantonese in illustrations (1), (3), (4a) and (4c) enhances the attention value and readibility of the advertising messages by the masses. In other words, these orality features serve very well in attracting the readers’ attention and inviting response from them, in building a closer relationship between the addressee, and consequently, enhances the memorability of the advertising messages and the possibility of reader action in response to the advertising message.

News also operates under certain temporal and spatial constraints to inform and involve a massive audience. Therefore, we can find similar features of orality occurring in the news texts as in the advertising texts. For instance, the use of the question-answer pairs, the emphatics, and the colloquial Cantonese in the news stories in illustration (2), (4b) and (4d) has the values of attracting the reader’s attention and enhancing the accessibility of the news information.

In addition to attracting the readers’ attention and enhancing the audience accessibility of the news information, the use of orality in written news discourse has other important values. As the goal of news is to present an accurate and factual account of a recent event, immediacy, objectivity, accuracy and credibility are emphasized in news story writing. The use of orality features, such as the question-answer pairs, the emphatics, the first and second person pronouns embedded within the quotations, and colloquial Cantonese, thus not only plays a significant role in foregrounding the individual’s voice, style, and/or comments and

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3 See Mencher (1996) for further details on the rules and principles of news media writing.
improving the immediacy of the news reporting, but also in enhancing the accuracy, credibility and objectivity of the news reporting.

4. CONCLUSION

This study has identified and focused on three different forms of orality that are mingled in the advertising and the news texts of present-day Hong Kong: 1) question-answer pairs, for representing the typical conversational structure; 2) general emphatics, first person pronouns, and second person pronouns, for representing orientation to person and co-involvement which are critical elements of conversation; 3) colloquial Cantonese, for representing typical linguistic choice or style in informal conversation between friends in Hong Kong. Furthermore, the study takes a positive approach towards the issue of orality in literacy and discusses the functions and values of orality in relation to both the macro-context and the micro-context in which it takes place. Orality is found to serve the interpersonal function of involvement and the social functions of solidarity and in-group identity. Furthermore, it helps make an advertisement more effective by enhancing its attention value, readability, memorability, and consequently selling power. It also helps to enhance the immediacy, credibility, and objectivity of the news reporting by foregrounding the individual’s voice, style, and/or comments.

It is apparent that in Hong Kong society and culture today, there is a shift from being written-oriented to being oral-oriented. As parents and educators, we may complain that this is due to the decline in educational standards or the influence of mass media; and it is tempting to conclude that we should revert the trend. But as sociolinguists, we know that just as language changes nothing before its time, the change in the communicative style/mode will not occur unless there exists in the language the potential for the change. In fact, we are living in a society and a time which no longer value literacy like the time of early imperial China (see Connery 1998). People are becoming much more socially sensitive and audience/consumer-minded than literacy-minded. Therefore, let us stop deploring what is happening but adapt to the changes.

It is also obvious that the structure of the discursive practices today is often realized by mixing or hybridization of the different modes of communication available in the society and culture. As sociolinguists or language professionals, we need to investigate these heterogeneous forms of discursive practices in order to better understand their related meanings, values, advantages and disadvantages. We should try to further describe and explain what and why changes in different
modes of communication are taking place, and predict what the gains as well as losses are likely to be in the long run.

**Abbreviations Used in Interlinear Glosses**

ASP aspect marker  
CL classifier  
DE particle de in Chinese  
PART discourse particle

**REFERENCES**


