

Speaking in Tongues

by

Stephanie Han

English standards are falling! If you concur and believe that the city is facing a linguistic crisis, you are in the majority. What you might be surprised to hear is that in 2001, 40% of the population identified themselves as bilingual. Language skills all around have improved. If you're a typical Hong Konger there's a good chance your grandmother, like 78% of the women in 1931, couldn't read or write in any language.

Perhaps the illusion of halcyon days of Hong Kong when everyone was speaking "good English" offer sanctuary in difficult times. Prof. Kingsley Bolton of the University of Hong Kong's Department of English, editor of *Hong Kong English: Autonomy and Creativity* says, "People need to take a broad view. They have this idea of a mythical golden age they thought existed, when everyone spoke perfect English, maybe in the 1960s when Anson Chan and Martin Lee were at the University of Hong Kong. But I highly suspect that the English they used wasn't different than the English that Hong Kong students speak today."

Part of the problem is Hong Kong's increased expectations is that its base has switched from manufacturing to technology and financial services; more people are speaking multiple languages than ever before, but there's also a demand for a high level of fluency. Fulfilling the government mandate of a trilingual (English, Cantonese and Mandarin) bi-literate (Chinese and English) society in order to keep step with the changing times is impossible without fully examining questions of nationalism and facing the reality of globalized business.

Our History

The history of language in Hong Kong has always been tied to politics. After 1949, the People's Republic of China promoted Putonghua language and simplified script, while Hong Kong stuck to the traditional style of writing (like Taiwan) and Cantonese. Primary and secondary education was guaranteed in the 1970s and the colonial government encouraged instruction in Cantonese, but parents demanded English as it was a way up the economic ladder. The government didn't want to be viewed as imperialistic by imposing English, nor could they argue against the parents and enforce Cantonese. The end result was a deliberately vague language policy, an unfortunate harbinger of times to come.

Tony Luk, 42, of the Louvre Gallery says, "I spoke Cantonese at home, learned English at school, and went to the UK for 14 years." Luk returned with the Chinese wife who uses English as her primary language. Their bilingual children study Putonghua at school. Luk speaks a bit of Putonghua, but says, "I don't use Mandarin in my business. I'd like to learn it for social purposes, it has nothing to do with being a patriot." Hong Kong was and continues to be a multilingual society. Until 1980 Hong Kong had a "touch base" policy for immigration – literally "touch base" in Hong Kong and you had a right to abode. Immigrants legal and illegal were

learning Cantonese and continuing to speak Hakka, Putonghua, Chiu Chau, Sze Yap or any number of other dialects in their home. English was often a second consideration if any.

John Wong, 35, CEO of Action-H.Q.com, was a typical child of those immigrants. His mother arrived in Hong Kong in the keel of the ship with water up to her knees, giving her eldest son to the captain's wife to hold for safekeeping. "My parents spoke to each other in Shanghainese. My dad also spoke Mandarin. They learned Cantonese here. As a kid I spoke a hodgepodge of Cantonese and Shanghainese, and some Mandarin." He learned English as a child when his family went to the US, later studying German and Japanese.

Daniel Zigal, 53, managing director of ICD says, "40 years ago I was speaking Russian to my parents, English at school, and Cantonese to the people around me. At social events in the 70s, English was the main language. Now you really have to be fully bilingual, if not trilingual, and Mandarin is a language one must know."

During the 1970s Canto Pop culture was in full swing. The radio was blaring Eliza Chan's *Tonight* and Johnny Yip was reminding you to *Forget About Everything Inside Your Heart* while your entire family was glued (for the next 21 years) to the telly for all 200 episodes of RTHK's *Below The Lion Rock*. Hong Kong's film industry had yet to peak. A strong local Cantonese identity was emerging, undoubtedly raising the ire of Beijing – the Cantonese language was spreading, and the majority of the population would soon claim Hong Kong as a birthplace, and its culture the only it had known. Cantonese was the language that spoke to the hearts and minds of Hong Kong's people.

Today's Hong Kong

The current trilingual/bi-literate mantra influenced RTHK to set up a Putonghua channel in 1997, encouraged the Workplace English Campaign and the Standing Committee on Language Education and Research (SCOLAR) – an acronym certain to make teachers cringe – and spawned schools like those run by Ella Lau. Founder and headmistress of the Parkview International Pre-School, Lau is a firm believer in the linguistic dexterity of children, "Children can easily handle three languages. They speak Tagalog or English with their *amahs*. Cantonese with their parents. Often Mandarin with their grandparents."

For all of this enthusiasm there are a few kinks. Ask anyone what the government would like them to write and they'll answer Chinese and English. Ask him if that Chinese should be complex or simplified characters and they'll draw a blank. Arthur Li, Sec. of Education and Manpower says, "We're not encouraging Cantonese script... It's only a difference of 300 to 400 characters."

It makes perfect sense given Hong Kong, unlike Taiwan, is in Beijing's fold, but it may be news to the children who are still learning complex characters in school. Since you need roughly 4000 characters to read the newspaper it means you won't understand about 10% of the news. A university professor admitted to comprehending "90% of the material in books from the Mainland." If you don't have a higher degree? A quick ask around the office had the

Mainlanders understanding about 60 to 70% of the Hong Kong papers and vice-versa.

Since 1997, government policy has been changing with surprising frequency, initially heralding the promotion of Chinese or “mother tongue” as a medium of instruction and allowing 114 schools to continue to teaching English. Yet despite the trilingual trumpeting, the government has not declared a policy of bilingual education or the use of English as a medium to teach other subjects not just as a language. “Most parents want their children to have access to the best English instruction and best Chinese, however you define it, Putonghua or Cantonese,” says Bolton.

Nelly Fung, a founder of the Chinese international school, and in English, Spanish and Tagalog trilingual, hold strong opinions about educational policy. “You can’t say, we will just give an exam to test understanding. Growing up, we had mixed assemblies. English one day, Tagalog the next. And if the government is going to be serious about being bilingual they need to do things bilingually. Usually forms and information are in one language or another. They need to be both. Everything is an educational exercise.” Overcrowded classrooms and unclear language policy, and the fact that many civil servants dictating the language measures send their own children to schools overseas, leave many in despair about Hong Kong’s linguistic present and future.

Despite these difficulties, Hong Kong verse of managed to come out ahead and should commend themselves on their language abilities. An in-depth 1993 survey revealed Cantonese-English-Mandarin trilinguals at 39%, and English-Cantonese bilinguals at 21%, and while there has been an exodus of native English speakers, the society is increasingly at home in English. A contributing factor to this phenomenon has been Filipino domestics, a population that’s on the decline due to a currently debated tax measure. “It is because of them that quite a few Hong Kong people use English and daily life,” states Dr. Anita Perrone of Hong Kong Baptist University’s Department of Education.

It sounds like linguistic upheaval, but it is merely the continuing unfolding of a society that is slowly moving towards its trilingual goal, through the combined forces of economics, national policy, and unpredictable circumstance. One obstacle that seems to be holding up progress is the definition of “good English.” English speakers in India, the Philippines, and Singapore take pride in their accents, particularities and histories. “The problem is that Hong Kong English is not recognized as a variety of English. There is the perception we have here that British English is the only standard. Since Hong Kong is not a country we did not use English like they did in Singapore to integrate the nationalities,” says Poon. Hong Kong others feel that only those who sound like native English speakers use “good English,” a narrow view that others in the region have long overcome.

Learning Putonghua is beginning to be as important as learning English, and it’s not only the affluent who are sending their children to Putonghua classes. A late-night knock on the window of a sleeping taxi cab driver and a short ride yielded a telling conversation. “I don’t know what happened to the economy,” he said helplessly pointing to the other empty cabs. “No business. I’m saving my money for my children to help them move to Shanghai I want them to learn Putonghua. More chance there. No future in Hong Kong for them.” Hong Kong has always been

a place of people coming, but as China's economy beckons, Putonghua is increasingly important. Still many parents prefer English as a teaching medium.

Where We Are Headed

While some are thinking of trying their language skills in another city, in Times Square you might bump into Hong Kong's trilingual future in the form of James Tsui, who like 43% of the local population, has never gone by his Chinese name. A student at an ESF school, he has just returned from his holiday visiting relatives in Canada (57% of Hong Kong others have a relative in an English-speaking country). Listening under his headphones to Canto pop on RTHK 2, he chats (code-switching) with his friends in a perfect North American English accent. At home he speaks Cantonese to his parents whose English language skills he has long surpassed, and English and Tagalog to the *amah* who raised him. He's getting ready to follow the path of his older sister and head to the US for college. He doesn't read or write much Chinese and has recently switched his language study from French to Mandarin, which he says is easier, and which undoubtedly pleases his father whose company, recently expanded to Shanghai, he will eventually run.

James' trilingual present and future has never been in doubt as he is a child of the elite. These children set many of Hong Kong's trends and are mimicked by those who aspire to their station and lifestyle. The current growing pains with trilingualism will be experienced by Hong Kong's middle and lower classes whose futures will hinge on their abilities to master English and Mandarin, and the government's ability to formulate and maintain consistent policy. Hong Kong people have demonstrated a remarkable capacity to reinvent themselves, first learning Cantonese, and now speaking more "good" and "bad" English than ever before. As statistics prove, Mandarin is following. The real challenge will be to dispel the self-defeating myths of "good English" and to produce enough trilingual speakers to keep pace with the economic demands.

For now, Hong Kong holds a preeminent place in China given its language heritage. As Bolton says "Hong Kong is just about the only city in China we can arrive set up and do business to English. This is the major English-speaking city in China and you need to balance that with the rhetoric about low or falling standards. Try to imagine a city in the US we can walk in and do business in Chinese give Hong Kong people credit for their adaptability and use of language."

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