

Cantonese and Mandarin correspondences: more than we think:

I wrote some time ago about [a propagandistic educational video in Hong Kong \(HK\)](#) in which Cantonese was personified as evil whereas Mandarin was glorified as sacred and a force for good. All the tastelessness aside, I did argue that there were some useful positives to be drawn from the video, namely the intricate linguistic relationship between Cantonese and Mandarin (and all Chinese dialects) on the basis of which it should be possible to use Cantonese and Mandarin complementarily and hence constructively for [the multilingual education in HK](#). I recently chanced upon the sequel to the video which is equally tasteless and bombastic but nonetheless contains some interesting linguistic points which further illustrate the parallels between Cantonese and Mandarin which go beyond the lexical and the phrasal and run deep into the universal Sinitic grammar which is important to understand for all learners of Chinese, both Cantonese and Mandarin and both native and foreign. Here is the clip:

<https://youtu.be/dYE4ruplQ94?list=LLU2ptz85NSbMdu2kdpzJCYA>

All our favourite characters have returned, namely the innocent girl who is the perfect model student as she speaks impeccable Mandarin, her angelic companion whose Cantonese-Mandarin proficiency allows her to subdue all the evil forces in the world, the comical Mandarin-hating Cantonese-loving devil who makes a brief cameo in this clip, and the boss of the thieves who tried to steal the family's beloved vase in the first clip and this time he has come to execute the task himself. As before, this video is delivered entirely in Chinese (Cantonese/Mandarin) and so a brief synopsis is needed:

After the girl and the angel save the day with their Cantonese-Mandarin correspondences at the end of the previous clip (7:27), the villains are determined to strike back (7:36), namely the crime boss who is outraged by his gang's failure to steal the family's vase in the absence of the girl's parents as they cannot even deal with a little girl staying at home alone. Meanwhile (7:53), the girl continues her online conversation with her angel friend and they delve into their discussion about the historical origins and relationship between Cantonese and Mandarin. It was mentioned before (1:36) that Cantonese and Mandarin had historical origins in Old Chinese and Cantonese could even be traced in Classical Chinese where numerous Cantonese idioms were attested. This time (8:20) they go back in time to the dynastic age and the angel explains that Mandarin was made the official dialect of China (官話) in the final three dynasties (Yuan (13th-14th century AD), Ming (14th-17th century AD), Qing (17th-20th century AD)). They encounter (8:51) a group of children reciting phrases, though apparently in Cantonese as they do not seem to have grasped the Mandarin classifier system. They are then confronted (9:55) by the Cantonese villain who follows them to the past and hounds them with Cantonese phrases as before, but the angel easily subdues him with corresponding Mandarin phrases. When they return to the present time (11:11), the girl is confronted (11:25) by the crime boss who tries to trick her into surrendering the much-coveted vase, but when his faulty Mandarin gives him away (13:05), the girl sees through his trick and when he pulls out a gun (13:25) the angel comes to her rescue (13:44). The story ends happily with the girl and angel walking along the beach (14:30).

There is no improvement in dramatic quality in this sequel, which is as comical, if not offensive, as the previous clip, though there are some new points of linguistic interest that are worth noting. First of all, when the girl and her angel companion correct the kids in olden times (9:01), they notice that they are not reciting in correct Mandarin as they have generalised the classifier 隻 for animals, which is a feature of Cantonese. Chinese, along with Japanese, is a classifier language where special unit morphemes are used when counting and quantifying nouns and these morphemes are usually idiosyncratic to the type of noun they quantify (cf English collective nouns e.g. a **pile** of books, a **pack**

of wolves, though in Chinese classifiers are used much more commonly as they are used for all singular nouns too). The girl and the angel hence point out (9:19) that in correct Mandarin there should be a differentiation of classifiers when they refer to different animals e.g. 一口豬 'one pig', 一匹馬 'one horse', 一頭牛 'one cow', 一頭大象 'one elephant'. This may actually be a misrepresentation of Cantonese classifiers since it has been proven by leading linguists that Cantonese and southern dialects have many more classifiers than northern, standard Mandarin (Matthews and Yip (1994:92ff), Yue (2003:85)). Similarly, when the girl is confronted by the crime boss (12:01), she suspects that he is not who he says he is (namely her father's friend from Beijing) when he uses the morpheme 'snow' 雪 for terms like fridge (雪櫃), ice-stick (雪條), ice-cream (雪糕), and soft drink (雪藏汽水), since in Mandarin the morpheme 'ice' 冰 is used for these terms instead (冰箱, 冰條, 冰淇淋, 冰鎮汽水 respectively). These are instances of morphological correspondences, which are productive rules that run through the system of Chinese grammar. Furthermore, there are phrasal correspondences, namely when the Cantonese-loving devil uses the Cantonese phrase 水滾瀉 'water boiling over', the angel immediately throws back at him the Mandarin equivalent 水潑了 (10:28), and also when the crime uses the Cantonese colloquial 講大話 'to lie/deceive', this gives him away as the correct Mandarin phrase is 撒謊 (12:50). All in all, this clip may be ridiculous in its propagandistic portrayal of Chinese dialects, but it is nonetheless interesting that between Chinese dialects there are formal parallels that are bigger than just individual words. Sinitic grammar is hence more complex than merely lexical/morphemic substitution, since there are also morphological and phrasal parameters (not to mention phonological and syntactic) which characterise Chinese dialects. Finally, one must not neglect the many similarities between Cantonese and Mandarin either, as the episode ends on a heartwarming note (14:19) where the girl and the angel note that terms such as friendship 友誼 and affection 真情 are the same in both dialects and are hence Chinese universals.