

Hong Kong Cantonese: a fascinating hybrid:

The Sinitic family consists of [thousands of varieties](#), many of which differ from each other minimally, and their small and fine differences may be regarded as dialectal micro-variations which often show the structural limits of human language (see Richard Kayne's work on microparameters, or Ian Roberts' distinction between micro-, meso- and macroparameters which also fall into this type of linguistic inquiry). Hong Kong (HK) Cantonese is particularly interesting in this regard in that it is notorious for its colloquial usages, as seen in the following video where a foreign kid is trying to learn some Cantonese slang:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2iaBEbpIJ54>

HK Cantonese differs most notably from neighbouring Cantonese varieties in ways which attest to its unique history of geopolitical mix from its old days of being a trading-port delivering incense (hence Hong Kong, literally 'scentful port'), its former days of being a British colony for close to a century, and now its status as a cosmopolitan city right in the economic/financial hub of East Asia. While HK falls short of being a bilingual society in that the majority of its population, even the literate sections, [do not have equal proficiency in both Cantonese and English](#) (or [Mandarin](#)) (contrast literate Catalans, who are true bilinguals between Spanish and Catalán), its level of English is relatively high in comparison to mainland China and many parts of the world where English is externally imported as an international *lingua franca*. This intermediate level of English coupled with native Cantonese and a significant level of Mandarin has given rise to some very interesting linguistic borrowings which attest to the linguistic creativity of the people of HK in forming new expressions. Here are a few such ways:

Prosody:

Linguistic borrowing is not mere transfer of linguistic form from one language to another (see Matras (2009)). Rather, there is attested to be copious evidence for loanword adaptation where the foreign term (usually technical) undergoes some morphophonological adjustments in accordance with the native language. This is richly attested in the English borrowings into HK Cantonese where all the relevant terms, let it be mundane concepts (e.g. food, social) or technical terms (e.g. academic disciplines, transportation, scientific terms) are all adapted to suit the prosodic structure of Cantonese (or pan-Chinese) morphophonemics, namely bisyllabicity (noun-noun/verb-noun) and trisyllabicity (verb-noun-noun). In Chinese, it is common to form phrasal compounds which consist of either two or three syllables, and this is

seen in nearly all the English borrowings where an extra vowel is included to make up the number of syllables e.g. 巴士 [basi] (< bus), 多士 [dosi] (< toast), 士多 [sido] (< store), 芝士 [dʒisi] (< cheese). The converse is also attested where vowels in the English original are truncated to fit the Chinese syllabic structure e.g. human [humən] (< humanities), assem [asəm] (< assembly), econ [ikhon] (< economics), 燕梳 [yinso] (< insurance), head P [hədpi] (< head prefect), profe [profɛ] (< professor). The native prosody is hence a strong determinant in loanword adaptation which creates a characteristically Cantonese-style English which is often taken for HK accent.

Morphology:

In addition to syllabic structure, Cantonese adaptation of English loanwords retains native morphological rules in compounding, which, in the case of verbal compounds, almost invariably consists of verb-noun or verb-noun-noun e.g. 上 U/入 U ‘attend university’ (notice the massively truncated form of ‘university’ here to fit the prosodic structure), 落 pool ‘enter the pool’, 讀 compu ‘study computing’, 補 phy/chem/bi ‘have tuition in chemistry/physics/biology’, 去 shopping ‘go shopping’. The native verbal morphology is particularly striking when foreign terms take on local Cantonese aspectual morphemes which further embed them into the local vocabulary for productive use e.g. 飲咗 soup ‘finished drinking soup’ (completive), 焗完 sau(na) ‘finished having sauna’ (terminative), keep 緊 fit ‘keeping fit’ (progressive), 戴著 con ‘wearing contact lenses’ (stative), print 過 doc ‘have printed documents before’ (anterior). This mixing of English terms with Cantonese morphemes has nativized these originally foreign terms to such an extent that probably not all HK people realise that these and similar terms come from another language (I certainly did not when I was a child).

English-Cantonese hybrids:

The creativity in linguistic borrowing in HK Cantonese is particularly marked in Cantonese-English hybrid formation where an English element and a Chinese element are combined to form bisyllabic compounds e.g. O 記 ‘police bureau’ where O is derived from the English phrase ‘Organised Crime and Triad Bureau’ and 記 is the standard colloquial way of referring to institutions (e.g. 麥記 ‘Macdonald’s’, 七記 ‘7-eleven’), 搞 gag where *gag* is clearly derived from colloquial English meaning ‘joke/goof’ and 搞 is the standard colloquial term for denoting activities, 升 le where *le* is short for English *level* and 升 means ‘elevate’ i.e. ‘up a level’. This attests to a sound command of English among HK people, which brings us to the final type of linguistic borrowing.

Calque formation:

In linguistic borrowing, ‘calques’ refer to the imitation of morphosyntactic patterns and not necessarily the borrowing of linguistic forms, and this is attested in the

striking borrowings of English discourse and temporal particles into Cantonese syntax (usual rules of morphophonological adaptation apply here) e.g. after 你上完堂... 'after you finish class' (the Chinese construction for temporal posteriority is clause final ...之後 i.e. 你上完堂之後), either 你咁做, or 你咁做 'either you do it this way or you do it that way' (no obvious Cantonese equivalent, perhaps the use of 一係 i.e. 你一係咁做, 一係咁做), although 我想咁做... 'although I want to do it this way' (for Cantonese concessive particle 雖然 'although'), 我想咁做, whereas 佢想咁做 'I want to do it this way, whereas he wants to do it that way' (*whereas* for 相反 'but, on the other hand'), 你想咁做, equally 我亦都想咁做 'you want to do it thus, equally I want to do it thus too' (here for 同樣地 'equally')). These morphosyntactic 'intrusions' indicate a more advanced type of linguistic transfer where the grammatical constructions of a foreign language, not to mention a totally different one (English), are inserted straight into Cantonese, especially when the English constructions are used in contexts where there is no obvious Cantonese counterpart (e.g. 'either... or...' above). This is a sophisticated type of borrowing that is commonly seen in bilingual/trilingual societies.

Hong Kong Cantonese: near-bilingualism:

These uniquely HK linguistic forms show the creative side in the borrowing of English forms which not only marks HK Cantonese out from all the closely related Cantonese varieties (either in the mainland or among southern Chinese emigrants abroad) but also demonstrates a very interesting bilingual threshold of many HK-ers whose English may not be nearly as fluent as their native Cantonese but is nonetheless good enough to permit them to do such 'clever' things with their linguistic inventory. Such linguistic evidence may, therefore, be used to explore further the structural limits of human language, especially of multilingual speakers who have uneven levels of command in different languages and are hence capable of creating such fascinating hybrid forms.