

Cantonese or Mandarin? False dichotomy- how do we go from here?

In recent years, there has been much heated debate about the intrusion of Mandarin in Hong Kong (HK) and neighbouring Canton regions which has allegedly resulted in the marginalization or even endangerment of local Cantonese dialects. This was seen in [the 2010 protest in Guangzhou](#) and more recently in HK in response to [the proposal that Mandarin be used for education in schools](#). This debate has been heightened by the political movement in HK in recent years ('[Umbrella Movement](#)') which has seen the formation of localist political groups in HK that openly oppose the central government's part in interfering with the political election of HK top officials and have even proposed, in some of its extremist forms, [regional independence and secession from the rest of China](#). It is no secret that the use of language correlates with sociopolitical issues, as seen in the major branch of theoretical linguistics known as sociolinguistics which deals precisely with these issues, and the debate regarding the uses of Mandarin and Cantonese neatly represents the political spectrum of left-wing liberal populism ('HK regionalism/autonomy/democracy') versus right-wing pan-nationalism ('Chinese identity/Greater China'). The choice between Cantonese and Mandarin, therefore, consists at its core of how and to what extent the people of HK want to assert their regional identity in the form of the local vernacular (Cantonese) or recognize their roles as citizens of China and adopt its official norms in the form of the official dialect (Mandarin), which has sparked much controversy and international media attention in the past decade.

Before one delves into the debate, one needs to understand the basic assumptions of societal (macro-) and individual (micro-) sociolinguistics and language acquisition. In multilingual societies which currently far outnumber monolingual ones, language use is traditionally categorized in terms of different sociolinguistic domains, namely [H\(igh\) and L\(ow\) domains in Ferguson's classic model of diglossia](#) where language use is dichotomously (and simplistically) divided into formal/written/literary versus informal/spoken/intimate respectively. Under this framework, it has perhaps gone unnoticed that HK, being a Special Administrative Region (SAR), already enjoys a relatively high level of sociolinguistic autonomy, as it has its own parliamentary government, media (both private and public) and education system, all of which are conducted primarily in Cantonese and secondarily in English. There is hence little to no evidence that Cantonese is on the decline in HK or in the Canton province, as it is still firmly and unequivocally the standard default variety for almost all sociolinguistic domains, including those that are traditionally represented as H by Ferguson, namely education, public broadcasting and public political discourse. This is even more so in HK which has its own media and press to the almost total exclusion of central government channels such as the CCTV, which begs the question as to when and where Mandarin is employed in contemporary HK, and with the general (though controlled) influx and movement of population between HK and the mainland, the main domain for the use of Mandarin is communication with mainland Chinese either when they set foot in HK or when HK people visit the mainland. Mandarin is also obligatorily taught in most schools, though mainly as a foreign language in that most schools do tend to use Cantonese to conduct the teaching of almost all subjects apart from Mandarin, which is unlikely to change in view of [the backlash to the government's proposal to install Mandarin as the language of education](#), and the teaching of written literary Chinese (白話) which is standardized on the model of Mandarin. Other than external communication and certain specialized

functions in education, the use of Mandarin in HK is generally minimal, which makes Cantonese the unequivocal dominant linguistic variety in HK with English as its second language as it is used as the standard *lingua franca* for foreign global affairs and, given HK's British colonial roots, in education where, in contrast to Mandarin, it is not solely confined to the teaching of English but also for the general teaching of most other subjects at many schools. The number of domains reserved exclusively for Mandarin is hence surprisingly small in contemporary HK, which somewhat reverses the picture depicted by many pro-HK activists that Cantonese is being endangered by Mandarin and is in desperate need of preservation.

The choice which HK people face with regards to language use is hence not between Cantonese and Mandarin, as Cantonese is firmly the local vernacular used in almost every walk of life, but where Mandarin fits in in contemporary HK society, and here the traditional debate between the political left and right becomes relevant, as the people of HK can consider either further asserting their local identity in an even more robust sociolinguistic form of Cantonese to yet more marginalization of Mandarin (if that is desirable or even possible) or recognize the fact that HK is now a part of China (and has been for twenty-two years) and its people being citizens of China should embrace Mandarin to a greater extent. There are numerous intermediary positions to take in this sociolinguistic spectrum and either extremes tending towards the right or left are impractical if not dangerous. I have argued [before](#) for peaceful integration between HK and China where Mandarin and Cantonese should not be dichotomized as an either-or, which is patently untrue not only because HK is a part of China but also since [they belong to the same linguistic family known as Sinitic where they share many formal linguistic similarities](#), but a dynamic dialectal duo in which [Mandarin can be acquired effectively through a sophisticated method of language teaching to the non-detriment of Cantonese](#). The core of the widespread misconception that learning new languages damages one's native proficiency lies in the fact that people often confuse foreign language (L2) acquisition with the demise of one's native (L1) language, which is totally mistaken. Multilingualism is so prevalent, especially in today's digital age, that monolingualism is the exception and learning a new language certainly does not entail any loss in one's native proficiency (exceptional circumstances aside e.g. total social isolation/seclusion), and introducing Mandarin to a greater extent into the language inventory of HK, which has always been multilingual from its days as a British colony if not before as a trading port for foreign countries, does not really cause any problem for the acquisition of native Cantonese. While there can be [much legitimate debate about the adoption of Mandarin as the main literary language of education in HK schools on grounds of effectiveness \(i.e. it is generally ineffectual to use a non-native variety, as is the case of Mandarin in HK, for general education\)](#), there is no such ground for HK people's refusal to learn Mandarin at other levels of education or life e.g. at university where there has recently been [a high-profiled protest against Baptist University's proposal of Mandarin language proficiency exams, which stems more from anti-Mandarin/mainland sentiments than anything else](#). Furthermore, for all the improvement in the level of Mandarin in HK, it can always get better to bring it on a par with the mainland. It is hence the author's moderate position that Cantonese, being the local vernacular and as yet robustly so which does not (and indeed should not) need to change at all, and Mandarin, being the official dialect of China and the *lingua franca* of the Sinosphere which also encompasses numerous other autonomous regions such as Taiwan, Singapore and foreign expat communities, should be used side-by-side in a healthy

equilibrium, and in the current climate of widespread hostility from certain sectors of HK society towards all things mainland Chinese, HK people should learn to accept and embrace Mandarin as the national language in order to foment a healthy and close relationship with the rest of the worldwide Chinese community. This need not be in the form of an abrupt acceptance of Mandarin as the default language for every single sociolinguistic domain, which is not only impossible in a society as Cantonese-heavy as contemporary HK but also unsophisticated and contrary to the wishes of the vast majority of HK population (it is certainly **not** the author's position that HK should lose or in any way be diminished in terms of its unique localism as a highly autonomous SAR, for which its local form of Cantonese can serve wonders), but an incremental and gradual increase in HK people's general willingness to learn and use Mandarin either in education or in daily life. Unless, of course, they persist in talking of political separation and independence, in which case they have no business with Mandarin at all, though this is [a dangerous and hypothetical position](#) which is destructive to Chinese pan-nationalism of which people of HK should seek a part rather than refuse its fair share.