

## Linguistic Creativity during times of Trouble:

It is common wisdom that difficult situations tease out the best in human beings, and it is often at points of desperation that humans reach their creative and spiritual best. The recent and ongoing protests against the extradition bill mark one of the most turbulent times in the history of Hong Kong (HK), and throughout the ongoing protests there have been some wonderfully creative and original uses of language, namely local Cantonese, that are worthy of mention, since, as with the [Umbrella Revolution](#), these have added to the inventory of HK Cantonese which is constantly evolving. Many of these examples of wordplay have already been discussed, such as the slogan [返送中](#) 'against extradition to the mainland' which plays on the southern Chinese taboo of gifting clocks 送鍾 as it is homophonous not only with 送中 'extradition to the mainland' but also with the highly ominous phrase 送終 'to see someone off in death' implying that extradition to the mainland is equivalent to certain death, or the prominent expression 光復香港，時代革命 'revive Hong Kong, revolution of our times' [coined by the famous activist Leung Tin-Kei in 2016](#) which resembles Donald Trump's presidential campaign slogan '[Make America Great Again](#)', or the famous dictum 'Be Water' once uttered by the famous Cantonese martial arts icon [Bruce Lee who encouraged creativity and flexibility in adapting to difficult situations](#). Much has been said about these by now well-known slogans and expressions, but just as the relationship status between HK and China is complicated, so is the linguistic relationship between Cantonese and Mandarin which, as I have argued [before](#), is not a simple dichotomy but a layered spectrum with many shades of implicature. The protest slogans seen in the past months may contain more subtlety than meets the eye, and there may be numerous fine details which have more significance than it seems.

As argued [before](#), the main dichotomy between the use of Mandarin and Cantonese in HK is such that the former, in addition to being an external variety for communication with Sinitic compatriots from elsewhere, is the written medium as taught in schools and used in all forms of literacy, while the latter is the local vernacular and is the default choice for everyday spoken interaction. This written and spoken distinction naturally entails differences in formality, since written registers are standardised and used for literary purposes while spoken ones are colloquial and tend to be informal if not vulgar in nature. This is not to say, however, that Cantonese cannot be written down and Mandarin cannot be spoken (for there would not be [Cantopop](#) if this were the case), but it remains the case that Mandarin and Cantonese are processed separately in the production and comprehension of written and spoken media respectively. Nevertheless, as sociolinguistic registers are not bound by inviolable laws of nature, there is inevitably code-switching of written and spoken features in either medium, just as we sometimes encounter colloquial features in written texts (e.g. low and informal genres such as tabloids or graffiti) as well as literary features in people's speech (if they are deliberately trying to sound smug or are trying emphatically to make a point). The recent protests, which have boiled up a lot of (anti-)nationalist feelings in HK, have likewise given rise to some innovative mixing of registers which are here explored.

Although one might have expected lots of pro-HK Cantonese language in the protests, it is striking that, as in the [Umbrella Revolution](#), the vast majority of protest slogans are actually in literary Mandarin, though there are some graffiti's of Cantonese

swearwords and curse phrases which are, interestingly, found side-by-side to literary expressions. This has created a strikingly incongruous mix of literary formality and colloquial vulgarity as seen below:

Tweeted by [@jeffielam](#)

<https://twitter.com/i/status/1163119517381214208>

Tweeted by [@yuenok](#)

In the first photo, the graffiti is written in literary Mandarin Chinese: 是你教我們和平游行是沒用的 'it was you who taught us that peaceful demonstration is futile'. This is clearly a mock message aimed at the police authorities who have been trying to suppress all acts of violence and vandalism, and the literary flavour here evidenced by the use of the copula 是, pronominal plural marker -們 for first person plural 我們 'us' and sentence-final particle 的 gives a sense of dignity and justification to the protesters' decision to resort to violence. In the second footage, right next to the protest slogan 光復香港, 時代革命 'revive Hong Kong, revolution of our times' there are sprayed graffiti's of the phrase 狗官 'dog officers' which is clearly a vulgar expression of anger and rage directed at the authorities whom the protesters now pejoratively and colloquially refer to as dogs. Furthermore, while literary Mandarin is

used as the default choice for written Chinese, it is interesting that some protesters have transliterated some of their graffiti's in phonetic Cantonese (as seen in the picture above the footage, though it is [difficult to read and interpret](#)), albeit inconsistently with standardised transcriptions such as the *jyutping*, which incidentally lends a more local and vernacular flavour to these written expressions:

<https://twitter.com/yuenok/status/1163089692075540484>

Tweeted by [@yuenok](#)

In the photo underneath, the protest slogan 光復香港，時代革命 is (erroneously) transliterated as *kwong fak heung kong si doi gak ming* (jyutping: *gwong fuk hoeng gong si doi gaak ming*) and in the two photos above the one on the left says *ng dai so kau quk I bag hall* (jyutping: *ng daai seoi kau kyut jat bat ho*) which stands for another prominent slogan 五大需求，缺一不可 'five demands, not one omitted', while the one on the right (*Hong Kong Yan Ka Yau! Kin Chi! But Fo Hei!*) is a message of support: 香港人加油！堅持！不放棄！ 'HongKongers, keep going! Hold on! Don't give up' (jyutping: *hoeug gong ga jau gin ci but fong hei*). These are all written in standard literary Mandarin but their Cantonese transliterations certainly make them feel very 'HK'.

Moreover, as in the [Umbrella Revolution](#) there are numerous Cantonese features which are deliberately embedded in some of the written messages in ways which rhetorically and effectively reinforce the protesters' message. Direct intrusions of Cantonese characters which belong strictly to the vernacular are seen in the use of 一齊 which is the spoken equivalent of Mandarin 一起 'together' are seen in several posters:



Posted by [CNN Style](#)

The political significance of 撐 'to resist from below' has already been discussed [in relation to the Umbrella Revolution](#), and here the expression 一齊撐 'let's resist together' is uniquely HK by virtue of its Cantonese flavour. Moreover, there are some rather creative uses of 齊 which conform to Chinese prosody and syllabification:

Posted by [CNN Style](#)

In this poster calling for demonstrations in Yuen Long (a district in HK), the four character phrase 齊上齊落 'let's go up and down together' (i.e. 'we are in this together') is distinctly Cantonese not only for the use of 齊 'together' but also for the antonyms 上 'to ascend' and 落 'to descend', the latter is uniquely southern dialectal and is equivalent to Mandarin 下. This four character phrase also mimicks well-known literary expressions such as 平起平坐 'to be at the same level' where the structure [[Adverb V1] [Adverb V2]] is followed and V1 and V2 are antonyms to each other (上落 'go up and down', 起坐 'to get up and sit down'). Similar rules of syllabification are also seen in the use of the duplicated adverb 齊齊 'altogether' in [this poster](#) which calls for mass demonstrations on the 1st July 2019, Handover Day. One could also point out that 天佑 'may God bless...' which is used in reference to Yuen Long and HK (天佑元朗 'God bless Yuen Long', 天佑香港 'God bless Hong Kong') is taken from a famous song by Cantopop singer Eason Chan (陳奕迅) 每一個明天 which has a popular refrain 天佑我的愛人 'God bless my lover' (1:55):

<https://youtu.be/WXrwxAZZnGM>

Another subtle and more striking use of Cantonese in these slogans is the way protesters try to mock Mandarin expressions in their calls for strikes and boycotts:



Posted by [CNN Style](#)

This poster is a parody of the traditional Chinese lunar calendar which typically contains superstitious forecast for each and every day, and the prominent character 罷 is an abbreviated form of 罷工 'to go on strike', which is rendered as 來罷 'come and strike', a homophonous play on words on the common Mandarin hortative phrase 來吧 'come on'. Even more ingenuity is seen in the creation of new characters which attests to the protesters' dislike of police brutality:

Tweeted by [@maryhui](#)



This newly coined character is an amalgam of the character for police (警) and that for [black \(黑\)](#) and it is even given a dictionary definition for a policeman who corruptly collaborates with street gangs and mafia known collectively as 'black society' (黑社會) in Cantonese. And, of course, one cannot neglect the role of English in a [multilingual international hub such as HK](#). Much fanfare has been made of the phrase *add oil*, which is a literal translation of the popular Chinese phrase 加油 'keep going' and has even [made it into the Oxford English Dictionary](#). Its English rendition is significant on several levels, since it may be intended to mark Hong Kongers apart from other groups of Chinese people who do not have the same level of exposure to and proficiency in English and western culture. This can be seen in the [high-profiled incident when a pilot of Cathay Pacific used this phrase as he was preparing for landing in HK international airport which may have led to his redundancy](#), and one may speculate that the pilot used this phrase not simply as a message of support to HK protesters but also as a reminder to his passengers flying from abroad of the international cosmopolitan profile of HK as well as a reference to the [ongoing protests happening in the airport](#).

All in all, the HK protests of 2019 which have been labelled as ['Colour Revolution'](#) have indeed given rise to many colourful expressions in Cantonese and beyond, which is testament to the impressive linguistic creativity of HK people in finding ways to express themselves as forcefully as possible during the biggest turmoil in their city's history.