

Cantonese vs Mandarin: a political battle:

As Hong Kong (HK) is now part of China, there are numerous complex socio-political issues in contemporary HK-China relations, one of which, as discussed in my last article, is to do with language choice in HK, namely whether it should use Cantonese or Mandarin for certain sociolinguistic functions (e.g. education, as discussed last time). While the people have publicly voiced their concern over what they perceive to be an aggressive introduction of Mandarin into HK society, there are some propagandists who have been trying to promote Mandarin in HK by releasing videos such as the following educational programme:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aqmIfLFi0m0>

For those of you who do not speak Chinese (Cantonese or Mandarin), this requires a brief synopsis. The story tells of a young girl whose parents are about to make a long-anticipated trip to the mainland where they are glad to be able to use their long-practised Mandarin. As the girl is left at home alone, she expresses joy at her newly found online computer game which creates dialectal correspondences between Cantonese and Mandarin. In the game, she encounters this angelic figure who guides her through the Cantonese-Mandarin complexities, namely common and equivalent terms which are expressed differently in the two dialects e.g. 傾偈(C)/聊天(M) 'to chat', the Cantonese reflex (傾偈) is argued to be derived from Classical Chinese. Halfway through they are challenged by an evil force who enters the scene and claims to be a Mandarin-hater and wants to dominate the world with Cantonese. The angel and the devil fight it out by using Mandarin-Cantonese correspondences and the angel briefly subdues the devil with her Mandarin. In reality, the girl is threatened by a couple of burglars who have waited for this opportunity to burgle the house, and she quickly seeks refuge in the game under the angel's protection. When the burglars confront them on the screen, the angel, again, uses Mandarin-Cantonese correspondences to put fear in them and scares them away in Mandarin. As a final surprise, the evil demon comes out to attack them and the angel defeats him once and for all with her Mandarin correspondences and saves the day.

The propagandistic and exaggerated tone here is beyond ridiculous, as it is clearly intended to promote Mandarin by denigrating Cantonese, the former being portrayed as a force for good and innocence, (angel/young girl) whereas the latter besmeared with all kinds of negative connotations (devil/burglars). It is highly unlikely that this has had (or ever will have) any positive effect in promoting Mandarin in HK (if anything, material such as this is likely to have a counter-effect in demoting HK people's esteem for Mandarin, as seen in the recent Umbrella

movement). Nonetheless, there is more to this video than immediately meets the eye as there are several linguistic points here which are worth noting. First of all, throughout the episode Mandarin is used exclusively by all characters, something which is virtually unattested in HK and very rare in other parts of mainland Canton where Cantonese is firmly the local vernacular (it must be clarified that Cantonese is not just the local dialect of HK but of the whole Canton province in southeast China). Secondly, the enthusiasm shown by the daughter and her parents towards speaking/learning Mandarin is clearly propagandistic, as there is no sign whatsoever of language attrition of Cantonese in contemporary HK, even if there is much higher exposure to Mandarin than pre-handover in 1997. Furthermore, although this episode seeks to dichotomise Cantonese (evil) and Mandarin (good), it constantly makes use of dialectal correspondences which underscore their shared linguistic features, which means that ideological battle between Cantonese (evil) and Mandarin (good) is, paradoxically, made possible by the fact that these (and all Chinese dialect) are structurally and lexically similar enough to permit such neat correspondences. To put it simply: how can there be polar contrasts between Cantonese (evil) and Mandarin (good) if there were not such strong structural parallels in the first place? It is therefore the sociolinguistic meaning, not the linguistic form, that this type of propaganda is trying to twist and pervert, which brings us to the main point of this article. In my last article, I argued that Mandarin could be effectively taught in HK by improving people's (especially school children's) awareness of the linguistic relationship between them, and rather than trying to distance the two dialects as this video (unsuccessfully) tries to do, people can learn to complement one dialect with the other through dialectal correspondences and code-switching, which is demonstrated by the characters in this video (and to an amazingly high level!). Instead of adopting the destructive strategy of labelling Cantonese and Mandarin as 'evil' or 'good' respectively, it is much more constructive to explore their linguistic relationship and find a common ground where people know what the Mandarin-Cantonese correspondences are and learn how and when to use them appropriately. This, as argued in my last article, can raise not only HK people's level of Mandarin but may even aid their Cantonese and linguistic skills in general, since it gives them much more linguistic self-awareness. After all, propaganda such as this video, tasteless and hyperbolic aside, has as its aim the noble objective of improving the level of Mandarin in HK, which can be achieved constructively rather than destructively. Cantonese and Mandarin are not mutually exclusive, and as this video amply shows, and if people could adopt a different sociolinguistic attitude towards the linguistic varieties at their disposal, they could benefit from them much more.

This propaganda video portrays Cantonese and Mandarin in civil war with one another, when in actual fact it is entirely possible to put them together neatly in terms of linguistic correspondences (as this video shows). On a more general level, rather than seeking to exploit the differences in HK-China relations in a negative light, it is far better to promote their differences in a positive way that foments civic harmony and linguistic conscience. After all, I do not think HK people necessarily resent Mandarin (though they would do if they were continually fed such offensive material). They just want to preserve their native Cantonese and use Mandarin alongside it. It is therefore a question of accommodating two closely related varieties in people's lives, which can be effectively implemented in a sophisticated education system that is designed to present these two varieties to the people's advantage.