

## Sociolinguistic meaning in code-switching between Mandarin and Cantonese:

Code-switching and borrowing are two sides of the same sociolinguistic coin, since there is a strong positive correlation between synchronic alternations from one language to another and the actual diachronic transfer of linguistic form/pattern from one to the other (see Matras' (2009) seminal work on language contact). In my [last article](#), I analysed some very common Cantonese terms borrowed from English and argued that they were adapted to native Cantonese grammatical rules which reveals some subtleties in the multilingual inventory of Hong Kong (HK) people. Code-switching between linguistic varieties is another prominent sociolinguistic phenomenon which may also have more intricacies than immediately meets the eye, since despite [all the fervor about Cantonese preservation from Mandarin intrusion](#), the relationship between these two dialects ([not languages](#)) is far more complex than a [simple antagonization](#), since Mandarin, being the official Sinitic variety in the whole of China (and most of the Sinosphere), may be more embedded into HK society than most people think, which makes certain code-switches highly significant and rhetorically effective.

The discourse factors behind [the code-switching between Mandarin and Cantonese \(and English\) in HK](#) have been extensively investigated, and this is especially relevant in the recent political climate where there have been numerous independence movements which form part of the so-called '[Umbrella Movement](#)', which contains many linguistic features which are socio-politically significant, as briefly explained in this video:

[https://youtu.be/2JE\\_68ITL\\_s](https://youtu.be/2JE_68ITL_s)

It has been widely observed that many of the political slogans and art forms contain Cantonese idioms, namely [the titular symbol of 'umbrella'](#), which is called 雨傘 (yusan) in Mandarin but 遮 (ze) in Cantonese, and while many international experts refer to the 'Umbrella Revolution' as 雨傘革命, the local expression is widely known as 遮打革命, which not only contains the local Cantonese word for 'umbrella' (遮) but also 打 'hit', symbolizing retaliation/resistance, and 遮打 is also homophonous with 'Chater', the name of the street (遮打道 'Chater Road') where the protests started in September 2014. Other important Cantonese features include the verb 撐 (chaang) which means 'to support/resist' in colloquial Cantonese and does not exist in modern Mandarin, and the exclusive use of traditional characters, which are mainly attested in HK, Taiwan and expat communities while the simplified characters are universally adopted in the mainland.

However, it is simplistic to interpret these Cantonese features as straightforward

antagonisms of Mandarin, and scholars seem to have overlooked the fact that, [some \(not all\) slogans and graffiti aside](#), most of the political expressions in HK are actually written **in Mandarin**. What most people do not realise about the Chinese language is that Mandarin is not just the official *dialectus francus* of China and much of the Sinosphere, it is also the accepted form of formal writing ever since the [54 movement in the 1911 nationalist revolution which standardized Chinese writing throughout China](#). Cantonese, on the other hand, though being the local vernacular in HK and much of the Guangdong province, is primarily a spoken register used mainly for colloquial purposes, and although [written Cantonese vernacular literature does exist](#), it is widely perceived as informal and possibly vulgar, as seen in Samuel Hui's (許冠傑) classic Cantonese folk-songs and various contemporary Cantonese raps, some of which are used during the protest movement:

<https://youtu.be/DjG0VHmCYzc>

The language choice in HK is hence to a certain extent self-contradictory, as HK people are faced with a sociolinguistic dilemma when choosing between Mandarin (literary/written + mainland) and Cantonese (colloquial/spoken + HK). On the geopolitical front, it makes sense to prioritise Cantonese (HK) over Mandarin (mainland), yet from a literary perspective Cantonese (colloquial/vulgar) is not really appropriate for serious political expression which surely requires Mandarin (literary/formal) as its literary medium. For these reasons, it is important to bear in mind that, with the exception of some forms of 'low' genres for which colloquial Cantonese is appropriate, all the Cantonese features mentioned above are actually embedded within literary Mandarin, even if it is read/sang aloud in Cantonese. Here code-switching between Mandarin and Cantonese becomes very striking and ingenious, since HK political artists, in embedding Cantonese within Mandarin, do so at highly significant junctures which effectively conveys their message. One of the main songs used during the Umbrella Revolution is 撐起雨傘, which is beautifully rendered in the following Acapella version:

<https://youtu.be/Fk7CPCzsknQ>

The lyrics of this song are entirely written in literary Chinese, which is Mandarin-based and every literate Chinese person can certainly understand it by [reading](#). In the chorus, however, there is a very striking, almost harshly inserted, use of the verb 撐 (Cantonese 'to support/resist', as explained above) in the melodic catchphrase 一起的撐 ('let's support/resist together') where 撐, being essentially a colloquial word, seems dissonantly incompatible with the rest of the lyrics, yet it is precisely this

verbal dissonance, used so sparingly (notice that the word for 'umbrella' here (一起舉傘 'let's raise our umbrellas together') is the standard Mandarin 傘, rather than the politically loaded 遮, as explained above), which marks it out so emphatically that one feels the full force of the meaning 撐 'to support/resist'. This is a breathtaking example of Mandarin-Cantonese code-switching which powerfully conveys the message of these HK protestors.

The subtle code-switching between Mandarin and Cantonese in these quasi-literary works further indicates [the linguistic creativity of HK people](#), since while they obey established sociolinguistic norms of using Mandarin (literary) and Cantonese (colloquial) accordingly, they also switch into Cantonese at artistically significant moments which underlies their political agenda. Moreover, this form of Mandarin-Cantonese code-switching reveals another dimension in HK Chinese which further complexifies the boundaries between these two dialects and [the whole issue regarding 'language' and 'dialect'](#), especially from a sociolinguistic perspective.