

## Cantonese/Mandarin education: duplicity and integration:

I have written [before](#) that one of the reasons why it is difficult to distinguish Cantonese and Mandarin as separate varieties ([let alone different languages](#)), other than the fact that [they share many formal linguistic similarities and are used concurrently in a multiglossic configuration of H\(igh\) vs L\(ow\) sociolinguistic domains](#), both varieties are so deeply entrenched and entangled with one another in modern Hong Kong (HK) society (and presumably elsewhere and anywhere in the Sinosphere where standard Mandarin is used side-by-side with the local vernacular) that it is meaningless to talk of them as dichotomous language varieties. Moreover, I have pointed out [before](#) that Mandarin and Cantonese in HK are not simply categorised as ‘mainland’ and ‘local’ but ‘written’ and ‘spoken’ registers respectively, since Mandarin is not only the official dialect for spoken communication in contemporary mainland China but is also the standardised norm for written/literary composition, which places Mandarin on a par with Classical Arabic in the Middle East, standard Italian in modern Italy and High German in the German-speaking world. It is hence impossible to disentangle Mandarin totally from the linguistic conscience of (literate) Cantonese-speakers, since whenever they code-switch into Mandarin, they are not merely switching into the ‘mainland’ variety (as opposed to ‘HK/local’) but also into the ‘literary’ register (as opposed to ‘spoken/colloquial’), which gives Mandarin and Cantonese a double sociolinguistic identity in contemporary HK. This duplicity makes the sociolinguistic situation in HK all the more complex, fascinating and perhaps even [self-contradictory](#).

These sociolinguistic complexities are well examined in [the following educational video](#), which, in my view (though there are those who disagree with me as seen in the number of dislikes on youtube), is much less offensive and propagandistic than [the ones previously examined](#), and if we pursue some of these sociolinguistic approaches further and develop them in the right way, we may come close to formulating [an effective and constructive system for multilingual education in HK](#), namely [conscious and deliberate code-switching which is neither detrimental to children’s acquisition of their native Cantonese nor derogatory to the learning of Mandarin in HK](#).

Here is the video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z46hilHTCY4>

In contrast to [the other educational video](#), this one is conducted entirely in Cantonese and hence feels much more realistic and intimate for HK viewers. In the likelihood that the reader does not know Cantonese, this requires a detailed summary: it is mentioned [before](#) that Cantonese and Mandarin have historical reality in forming the current geographical distribution of Chinese dialects, and in this video it is interesting to see the two main characters dressed in ancient costumes proclaiming to be martial artists (女俠) as seen in historical Chinese literature. One of them, conveniently called ‘the heroine of colloquialism’ (口語女俠), is pro-colloquial Cantonese as she argues that Cantonese has deep historical roots with thousands of years of history and she hence claims seniority (0:18-0:30). The other girl, on the other hand, is pro-literary (aka Mandarin) Chinese as she calls herself the heroine of literary written Chinese (書面語女俠) and she believes that written Mandarin has prestige and primacy over dialectal colloquialisms (0:35-0:43). They hence enter into a debate, and, as

in [the other video](#), they engage in a typical fight of words in Mandarin-Cantonese dialectal correspondences. They start off by mentioning some lexical correspondences, such as 'centipede' (1:53), which is rendered literally as 'one hundred feet' 百足 in Cantonese but as a particular term 蜈蚣 in Mandarin, or 'spider' (2:19), which is 螞𧈧 in colloquial Cantonese but 蜘蛛 in written Mandarin, or some common phrases like 'to mess up' (2:58), which is colloquially rendered as 擺烏龍 in Cantonese (this can also mean 'to score an own goal (football/soccer)') but much more elegantly as 弄錯了 in written Mandarin, or 'to be in a mess' (3:10), which is 倒瀉籬蟹 in spoken Cantonese but 狼狽不堪 in Mandarin. As they reach an impasse, they decide to go back in time and examine historical Chinese where they discover some dialectal features (3:42), like the famous couplet 明月幾時有，問君能有幾多愁 'when will there be moonlight, I ask how much nostalgia can there be?' The interrogative forms 幾時 'when' and 幾多 'how much' are retained in contemporary Cantonese, which is a point in support of the pro-colloquial girl's agenda (3:43), but the pro-literary girl believes that they should be substituted by the modern Mandarin forms 什麼時候 and 多少 respectively (4:08). Other differences include differences in word order (次序不同) (4:25) in bisyllabic phrases, like 'swing' (noun) 鞦韆 (Cantonese)/鞦韆 (Mandarin), 'cock' 鷄公 (Cantonese)/公鷄 (Mandarin), 'spoon' 匙羹 (Cantonese)/羹匙 (Mandarin). Another type of difference lies in the number of syllables in phrases, as there are many monosyllabic terms which are attested in historical Chinese but are disyllabic in contemporary Chinese (音節單雙有別), such as the nouns in the following verses 眼須明 耳須聰 衣襪裙褲須潔淨 稻麥橙李奉雙親 'one's vision must be clear, one's listening should be sharp, one's clothing from top to bottom should be clean and tidy, and crops and fruits are to be presented to one's parents' (5:20). The nouns here (眼 'eye', 耳 'ear', 衣 'clothes', 襪 'sock', 裙 'skirt', 褲 'pants') have become disyllabic in contemporary written Chinese (眼睛, 耳朵, 衣服, 衣襪, 裙子, 褲子) (5:51). This leads to the point about the differences between Old Chinese and Modern Chinese (古今有別/古今差異), the former of which has characteristics that have been retained in contemporary dialects such as Cantonese while the latter is standardised on the model of Mandarin.

When they return to modern times (6:32) and continue their debate, they begin to discover another type of dialectal correspondence, namely phrases that are formally written the same but semantically different (字形相同, 字義不同) e.g. 班房 (6:55), which means 'classroom' in Cantonese but 'jail' in Mandarin (this gives rise to the misunderstanding (7:10) where 入班房 is misinterpreted as 'to go to jail'); 馬蹄 (7:42), which means 'potato' in Cantonese but literally means 'horseshoe' in Mandarin, or the very common phrase 打尖 (8:32), which means 'to cue-charge' in Cantonese but 'to take a break while travelling' in Mandarin. As the pro-colloquial girl gets agitated, she proposes to disambiguate Cantonese by eliminating all Mandarin-related terms (8:48), which leaves them wondering whether pure written Cantonese can be used for effective communication (8:58). The result, however, is negative, since when they test some common Cantonese phrases on non-local, Mandarin-speaking tourists (9:11), such as 濕濕碎 'easy-peasy' and 囉囉嚟 'uneasy', they simply cannot understand them, which leads to their consensus that they should have used the standard literary equivalents 零零碎碎 and 焦躁不安 respectively (9:47), as these terms are widely recognised by all and can hence be used for universal communication (10:01).

In the final section of the video (10:18), they decide to reinforce the dialectal conscience of HK schoolchildren and make sure that they write literary Chinese (Mandarin) correctly with

as few dialectal (Cantonese) intrusions as possible, and as they delve into the correspondences between spoken Cantonese and written Mandarin, they discover some rather sophisticated correspondences which go [far beyond the lexical and phrasal](#). These include the use of the directional motion verbs (10:48), which are used as main verbs in spoken Cantonese but as postverbal particles in written Mandarin e.g. 'to go to the museum' 去博物館 (Cantonese)/到博物館去 (Mandarin), 'to go to Guangzhou two days from now' 後日上廣州 (Cantonese)/後天到廣州去 (Mandarin), 'to take stroll on the streets' 落街行下 (Cantonese)/上街去走走 (Mandarin). They then disguise as students in class (11:31) where they are conveniently called 方言 'dialect' and 舒文 (pun on 'written register') respectively. Several complex constructions are analysed here, namely ditransitive constructions like verbs 'to give' (12:00), which show alternating positions for the direct and indirect objects (cf English *I give a flower to you/I give you a flower*) and while Cantonese places the indirect object after the direct object (物前人后), Mandarin does the reverse (人前物后) e.g. 'I give you a flower' 我俾朵花你 (Cantonese)/我給你一朵花 (Mandarin), 'please give me a cup of tea' 唔該俾杯茶我 (Cantonese)/請給我一杯茶 (Mandarin); comparatives (12:34) where Cantonese puts the object of comparison after the adjective (形容詞在比較對象前) whereas Mandarin puts it before (形容詞在比較對象后) e.g. 'I am fatter than you' 我肥過你 (Cantonese)/我比你胖 (Mandarin), 'MTR is faster than bus' 地鐵快過巴士 (Cantonese)/地鐵比公共汽車快 (Mandarin). The two girls then proceed to correct the schoolchildren's written Chinese (13:10), such as the positioning of adverbs 多 'more' and [先 'first/before'](#) (13:54), which are postverbal in Cantonese but preverbal in Mandarin e.g. 'wear more clothes' 著多見衫 (Cantonese)/多穿件衣服 (Mandarin), 'I eat first' 我食先 (Cantonese)/我先吃 (Mandarin); yes-no questions where Cantonese uses A-neg-A whereas Mandarin uses sentence-final particles 了 or 沒有 (14:30) e.g. 'have you been to Beijing?' 你有沒有去過北京呀 (Cantonese)/你去過北京沒有 or 你去過北京嗎 (Mandarin), 'have you bought the movie tickets?' 你有冇買戲飛呀 (Cantonese)/你買了電影票沒有 or 你買電影票了嗎 (Mandarin). As they correct the students' written Chinese (14:48), they feel that they have accomplished their mission in raising the literary standard and dialectal awareness of these schoolchildren and the video ends on a high and positive note.