

# **Biliterate and trilingual : actions in response to the economic restructuring of Hong Kong**

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Objektyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **Bulletin suisse de linguistique appliquée / VALS-ASLA**

Band (Jahr): - **(2005)**

Heft 82: **Villes bilingues = Zweisprachige Städte = Bilingual Cities**

PDF erstellt am: **15.08.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-978497>

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# Biliterate and Trilingual: Actions in response to the economic restructuring of Hong Kong

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Depuis le transfert de souveraineté de la Grande-Bretagne à la Chine en 1997, les structures politiques, sociales et économiques de Hong Kong ont subi de rapides changements, entraînant un réaligement linguistique au sein de la société. Le putonghua (la langue nationale de Chine) occupe une place de plus en plus importante, en partie à cause des liens politiques avec la Chine, mais surtout à cause de la dépendance grandissante économique de Hong Kong vis-à-vis d'elle. Le dialecte local, le cantonais, est la langue maternelle d'environ 90% de la population. En vue de ce contexte linguistique, le gouvernement s'est engagé à poursuivre une politique linguistique de "double alphabétisation et de trilinguisme". Dans le dernier rapport sur l'enseignement linguistique (SCOLAR 2003), plusieurs propositions sont faites afin de promouvoir la compétence des étudiants et de la population active en anglais et en putonghua. Le dialecte local fait l'objet de peu d'attention. Dans cet article, je soutiens que ces diverses propositions favorisent l'anglais et le putonghua afin d'assurer la compétitivité de Hong Kong dans l'économie mondiale. Le succès de la promotion du putonghua n'est pas lié aux questions d'identité nationale mais dû à une combinaison d'affinités culturelles et de rationalité économique. Pour la plupart de la population locale aux vues pragmatiques, les langues sont considérées comme des produits. Le peu de valeur accordée au cantonais peut mener à l'abandon de cette langue dans l'enseignement.

**Mots-clés:**

double alphabétisation et trilinguisme, plan d'action, politique linguistique, produits, putonghua et cantonais, restructuration économique.

## Introduction

In Hong Kong, the tug-of-war over language issues between English as an instrument for social mobility and economic advancement and Chinese as a sign of national identity and cultural affinity has always resulted with English winning the major share of the linguistic market. Although Chinese language was "granted" an official status in 1974, the society as a whole showed a preference for English because of pragmatic reasons related to its status as an international language for communication, trade and academic pursuit. It was not until 1984, after the signing of the Joint-declaration between China and Britain, that there was a surge in the use of Chinese by the government. The faster pace of Chinese language development in Hong Kong coincided with the opening up of China in the nineteen eighties. However, moves towards improvement in Chinese language education and for the increased use of Chinese within the society were regarded as political gestures directed towards a future change of national identity and the shift of political power from Britain to China. Most parents still preferred to send their children to English medium schools or overseas schools.

In Hong Kong, English is regarded as an economic commodity that has a higher value than the Chinese language. However, with near double-digit economic growth in China in the past two decades, and China's more active participation in the international scene, the exchange value of the Chinese language has increased considerably. In the context of linguistic commodification, this has implications for the meaning and status of Chinese-English bilingualism in Hong Kong. Bilingualism itself becomes a commodity. A person who commands two or more languages is attractive to businesses competing in multilingual markets (Block & Cameron 2002; Heller 2002).

The rapid political, social and economic changes in Hong Kong in the years immediately preceding and following the hand-over of Hong Kong's sovereignty to China in 1997 have forced a degree of linguistic realignment in the society. In 2001, the Standing Committee on Language Education and Research (SCOLAR) began a review of language education policy in Hong Kong, and the final report known as *Action Plan to Raise Language Standards in Hong Kong* (hereafter called the Plan) was submitted to the government in 2003. The government stated clearly that it accepted the recommendations and is committed to their implementation. It is the most important document on language strategy laid down by the post-colonial government.

In this paper, I shall first give a brief description of the linguistic background of Hong Kong and the economic changes she has undergone in the last few decades. Key points of the Plan will be introduced. Then I shall point out how some of the actions suggested in the Plan are responses to the economic situation in Hong Kong. In the last part, I shall argue that the success in promoting Putonghua (the national language of the People's Republic of China) is not a result of belonging to or identification with China after the change of sovereignty, but due to a high demand for a marketable linguistic commodity. The local dialect, Cantonese, one of the three languages included in the language policy, does not receive much attention in the Plan due to its lower economic value.

### **Linguistic background of Hong Kong**

Hong Kong has a population of over 6.7 million (Census Report 2002), of whom 94.9% are Chinese. Of these, 89.2% claim to use Cantonese, which is a dialect of the Chinese language, as their usual language. (Please refer to

Appendix I for the linguistic map of China<sup>1</sup>.) The two most popular second languages in Hong Kong are English (39.8%) and Putonghua (33.3%).

The term "Chinese" in Hong Kong refers to the spoken language of Cantonese and a written form based on Modern Standard Chinese (MSC). Cantonese is phonologically very different from Putonghua, but similar in terms of lexical items and syntactic structure. It is one of the oldest dialects in China and still preserves the phonological system of Middle Chinese dated from 5<sup>th</sup> Century. A Hong Kong Cantonese speaker may not be able to communicate verbally with a Putonghua speaker from Mainland China, but they can communicate successfully by writing in MSC. In most schools in Hong Kong, the Chinese language class is conducted in Cantonese, so those born in Hong Kong in the period from 1949 until the 1980s are unlikely to have had the opportunity to learn Putonghua formally<sup>2</sup>. The frequency with which Cantonese is used has resulted in the appearance of dialect influences in writing. When reading local Chinese newspapers, Mainland Chinese often complain about the use of non-standard lexical items and syntactic structures that are not found in MSC.

The language-in-education policy of "biliteracy and trilingualism" (i.e. in written Chinese and English, and in spoken Cantonese, Putonghua and English) was formally endorsed by the government in 1997. Putonghua became a formal subject in the school curriculum. Some schools even indicated that they were ready to replace Cantonese as the medium of instruction with Putonghua. In the following year, Hong Kong reinforced the compulsory mother-tongue education policy, in which all schools (apart from 114 secondary schools which were granted exemption) had to conduct teaching and learning in Chinese. In reality, such measures usually mean that the top students are admitted to schools with English as the medium of instruction, while students of lower academic achievement are allocated to Chinese medium schools. In addition, the government has not formally defined "Chinese" in the Hong Kong context. As a result of this, some schools, as mentioned above, are ready to use Putonghua in lieu of Cantonese as the medium of instruction.

### **"Biliteracy and Trilingualism" and the economic restructuring**

Hong Kong is basically populated by Chinese people, but her history has left her with both the local dialect of Cantonese and the colonial language English. In light of her history and the needs of dealing with the present world, it would

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1 Cantonese is put under one of the major dialect groups of China, known as Yue, marked "6" on the map. It is spoken widely in the southern part of China: Guangdong province, part of Guangxi province, Hong Kong and Macau.

2 Putonghua became an elective subject in primary and secondary schools in Hong Kong in the eighties. It became a core subject of the school curriculum in 1998.

be both extremely difficult and undesirable to recreate Hong Kong as a monolingual region where only Putonghua was spoken.

In the Plan, SCOLAR carefully avoids mentioning the impact of political change in Hong Kong on language policy, in order not to get caught up in the debate about language policy simply being made to appease China (Poon 1999). The dominant discourse in the rationales for biliteracy and trilingualism is globalization and economic restructuring, as illustrated by words, such as "development, achievement, career prospects, competition, challenges, market, international, global business community" (SCOLAR 2003, p.3).

For globalization to take place, natural assets and created assets have to react to turn into multinational investment (Narula 1996). Hong Kong has scant natural resources, but in the fifties and sixties, she had a large pool of cheap unskilled immigrant labour from China, which enabled Hong Kong to develop into a light industrial centre before China opened her market in the eighties. Hong Kong had also taken advantage of her strategic position with a deep sheltered harbour to develop into a transportation centre. With an increase in labour costs in the late seventies, this first advantage was lost and most factories have since relocated to China. However, for the last 40 years, Hong Kong has been quite successful in training an elite pool of valuable human capital or skilled manpower, and this forms part of her created assets. Language is a skill required in many different kinds of professions. In the past, English in Hong Kong was regarded as a colonial language, but as Hong Kong evolved into an international city, English has become accepted by the local residents as an international language that permits universal communication (Poon 2004). In the eighties, especially after the Joint-declaration concerning the future of Hong Kong was signed in 1984 by Britain and China, Putonghua entered the linguistic platform of Hong Kong. The government has poured huge sums of money into language education, as evidenced by the establishment of SCOLAR, language funds, language programmes on radios, language activities and competitions, immersion programmes for teachers and the English Native-speaking Teachers Scheme. All these language plans or programmes launched by the Hong Kong government are propelled by the rapid changes in Hong Kong's economy over the last few decades.

Hong Kong has a very vibrant economy, but she is heavily dependent on external economic activity. In the eighties, Hong Kong's manufacturing sector, which used to account for 23.7% of the GDP, had been extensively "hollowed out" to neighbouring provinces in China. As a result, the Hong Kong economy had come to depend excessively on the export of services to China and the World (Wang & Wong 1999). According to Liu (1999), Hong Kong is now moving towards two areas of high value-added activity. The first area involves developing into a truly first rate international financial centre, in the same league as London and New York; the second involves exploiting the industries

in innovation and technology. This economic restructuring is characterized and driven by a large-scale inflow of human capital in the form of highly skilled professionals, scientists and engineers from all over the world, making Hong Kong a truly global city.

The restructuring of Hong Kong's economy is evidenced firstly by the transformation of the basis of the economy from labour-intensive processing industries to the service sector. Secondly, China has replaced the United States and Japan as Hong Kong's most important business partner. Thirdly, there has been an increase in the number of professionals, associate professionals, service workers and shop sales workers, and a decrease in craft and related workers, plant and machine operators and assemblers, skilled agricultural and fishery workers. Finally, there is vast movement of people between Hong Kong and Mainland China. All of these changes demonstrate a very close link between Hong Kong and China, and the increasing dependence of Hong Kong's economy on China. The linguistic market, inevitably, has to readjust itself to meet the new economic restructuring in Hong Kong.

### **Actions in the Plan**

The language environment in Hong Kong was identified by the former Education Department (1997) as follows:

- 1) The Hong Kong Community is essentially populated by Chinese. People speak, read and write in Chinese in their daily life<sup>3</sup>;
- 2) Hong Kong is an international business, financial and trading centre. To maintain a high standard of English is crucial to economic competitiveness.

Based on these two observations, SCOLAR focuses their review on four domains:

#### *Language education in schools*

- 1) Framework and descriptors for language competencies are set to spell out the language competencies expected of school leavers and the workforce to reflect the needs of society.
- 2) A Basic Competency Assessment (BCA) is to be held for primary and junior high students. As for university graduates, it is recommended that they sit for various international English language tests. Working adults

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3 We have to bear in mind that spoken Chinese in Hong Kong is the local dialect, Cantonese, but the written form is close to Modern Standard Chinese used in Mainland China. However, the Hong Kong government has not officially defined "Chinese language".

are advised to take international business English tests accepted by the Workplace English Campaign Committee.

- 3) Regarding the assessment of Putonghua competency, working adults can attempt the Putonghua Proficiency Test administered by China's State Language Work Committee.

These three suggestions denote a movement from the process of language learning to the output of language, certified by tests or examinations.

- 4) The Committee suggests the teaching of "standard" Cantonese pronunciation and recommends that Chinese teachers assist students to distinguish the differences between Modern Standard Chinese writing and colloquial Cantonese-influenced Chinese writing. The national standard in modern Chinese writing should be adhered to. The teaching of simplified Chinese characters is also supported.

SCOLAR also explicitly endorses the possibility of using Putonghua to teach Chinese language even though the findings of research on the use of Putonghua as the medium of instruction in Chinese language class are still inconclusive<sup>4</sup>.

- 5) There are numerous suggestions in the Plan to create an English language-rich environment, such as the continuation of the Native-speaking English Teachers Scheme, and the use of resources from the Language Fund to sponsor co-curricular activities.

### *Professional development of language teachers*

Teachers are blamed for the falling language standards of the students. Members of SCOLAR believe that language teachers are the language models for students and that they have a direct influence on students' interest in learning a language. New requirements have been drawn up regarding qualification of professional language teachers, such as:

- 1) A new framework for the professional development of language teachers is to be drafted that includes knowledge of the language, proficiency and pedagogy.
- 2) Language teacher qualification is to be re-considered. SCOLAR recommends that all new Chinese and English teachers must have a first degree in the relevant subject as well as training in education.
- 3) Support for the language proficiency requirement (LPR) of English language and Putonghua teachers implemented by Education and Manpower Bureau.

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4 A number of studies on using Putonghua in Chinese language class were supported by Language Fund and Quality Education Fund in 2002.

Some of these suggestions affect the curriculum design of the teacher training providers, but requirements 2 and 3 above directly affect the job security of serving or new language teachers. Many have to be retrained and some may have to leave the teaching profession or be deployed to the teaching of other subjects if they cannot meet the LPR.

### *Language training for working adults*

The Plan does not only cover the education sector. As noted above, the language competencies of the working population are also taken into consideration. Employer demand for language skills is a driving force behind the improvement in language standards. (SCOLAR 2003 p.26 section 2.8.1). The government should continue funding for the language learning of adults, such as the Workplace English Training Fund, Continuing Education Fund. Working adults are urged to upgrade their English through continuing education to attain at least the expected competencies for their education level. They would also be required to undertake language tests in order to provide certification of their skills.

### *Community-wide promotion*

In order to enhance the biliterate and trilingual environment in Hong Kong, the Committee also appeals to the community for support.

- 1) All written materials for the public should be required by law to be written in both Chinese and English.
- 2) Employers should ensure that all frontline employees are trilingual.
- 3) Proper language use guidelines should be issued by broadcasting operators. Presenters and performers should be provided with pronunciation training in Cantonese, Putonghua and English.
- 4) More programmes in English and Putonghua are needed.
- 5) Language support should be provided to new arrivals from the Mainland, and to non-Chinese residents to facilitate their integration into the local community.

## **Discussion of the actions**

In order to respond to the language needs of economic restructuring in Hong Kong and to prevent the eroding language skills of the workforce, SCOLAR proposes that language issues be dealt with on different fronts. These include the introduction of formal assessment of the language performance of both students and working adults; promotion of Chinese language and the use of Putonghua in education; the professional development of language teachers; boosting the standard of English and a community-wide promotion of the language policy.



As we can see, Hong Kong needs to adjust herself in the new economy by providing new teams of personnel who are competent to offer services to customers from any part of the world. The biggest group of these customers is from China, followed by Taiwan and South-east Asia. The offering of services to this group creates pressure on the local Hong Kong people to use Putonghua or Mandarin, perhaps supplemented by English. Other groups of visitors from North America, Australia, New Zealand and the South Pacific demand a high proficiency in English.

The main regional competitor with Hong Kong in the export of services is Singapore. While Hong Kong enjoys the advantages of a freer economy over Singapore, she suffers from a lack of true bilingual or multilingual staff. According to the 2000 Census of Singapore, over 50% of the Singaporeans are bilingual or trilingual. This is a linguistic condition Hong Kong people need to bear in mind if they wish to develop into a global city.

There is relatively "free" movement between Mainland Chinese and Hong Kong people. In all kinds of exchanges, either in person or through electronic devices, language is involved. Cantonese is usually employed in the nearby province of Guangdong, but Putonghua is the dominant language used for communication in China. With the gradual opening up of China, the number of Mainland Chinese from other non-Cantonese speaking provinces and cities may increase tremendously. In such circumstances, the linguistic market of Putonghua increases in both size and value.

The Plan's recommendations primarily deal with the economic restructuring of Hong Kong, especially in enhancing the linguistic resources of her human capital. However, the area of using new technologies to cross boundaries in a globalized economy is neglected. In the information age that results from globalization, the growing popularity of computers demands a new form of literacy (Mo 2003). The implications of the shift of reading and writing practices from page to screen have been neglected by all government parties.

As Hong Kong moves from manufacturing to service industries, and shifts quickly towards the high-value technological sector, there is a need for employees with information-processing and analytic skills (Castells 1996). Reich (1991) calls these service workers "symbolic analysts" who will spend much of their time analyzing symbol-based (numerical and textual) information. The requisite skills listed by Reich are: critical analysis, evaluation, experimentation, collaboration, communication, abstraction, system thinking and persuasion. Are these skills incorporated into the contexts of language teaching to prepare our students for the future economy? Or are we again just proposing some language measures to deal with the present demand from the business and service sectors? Apart from introducing more examinations to push students and the working population to meet the benchmark of their respective academic levels or job types, there is no comprehensive plan to

enhance the language skills of Hong Kong people in a way that will meet the new communication and literacy skills required in a knowledge-based society.

The second problem involves the symbolic value of language. As Pennycook (1995) points out, English carries a set of ideologies, values and norms based on the history of its development and use. This statement applies to the study of French, Spanish, Chinese or any language. In Hong Kong, when people talk about globalization, it means westernization: adopting the western way of life, mode of thinking, values, customs and language. In the Plan, little attention is paid to these ideological aspects of language learning while the instrumental value (Wee 2003) is emphasized. However, are functional language programmes good enough to enhance the language standards of students and working adults? Are we ready to accept the whole package of ideology and value that come together with the language? Apparently, when the government says "bilingualism", they do not mean "multiculturalism". Diversity and critical language awareness are brushed aside as long as the students can perform according to the descriptors of the tests.

As for Chinese language, there are issues other than its value as an economic commodity at stake. Problems of nationalism and identity dominate the discourse when it comes to the promotion of Putonghua. A significant portion of Hong Kong people identify themselves as Chinese or Hong Kong Chinese, and recognize value other than the instrumental in learning Chinese language, such as: understanding the people, history and culture, and for purposes of enjoyment and creativity. However, the word "identification" needs clarification with respect to Hong Kong Chinese. To most Hong Kong people, "China" is a cultural concept, rather than a political one (Chan 1999). In a recent survey on civic education teachers' understanding of nationalistic education in Hong Kong, Leung (2003) argues that the national identity constructed through school education focuses on the cultural aspects but neglects the political aspects of China. This results in the creation of a cultural identity rather than a national identity because there cannot be a complete national identity without the political dimension. He suggests that the exploration of both cultural and political (democratic) identity is necessary for the cultivation of a complete Chinese national identity.

Throughout the Plan, there are recommendations on promoting Modern Standard Chinese and Putonghua. Cantonese is mentioned once with reference to standard pronunciation. Teachers are expected to help students to become aware of Cantonese influences in writing. There is a basic assumption that Cantonese is unacceptable as a written form of Chinese. In a way, Cantonese is devalued as a local vernacular. However, local identity remains strong after the handover. In a survey conducted in 1998 by the University of Hong Kong, 40% of the respondents referred to themselves "Hong Kong people", while 20.6% called themselves "Chinese", and the other

15.5% "Chinese in Hong Kong". Without a "complete" national identity, we can understand why young people in Hong Kong prefer to converse and "write" in Cantonese.

Language is commonly used to reveal one's attitudes and identity. The use of Cantonese has a symbolic value in Hong Kong that wards off full integration into China. On the other hand, the learning of Putonghua represents a valuable commodity during the process of the economic restructuring of Hong Kong. With the influx of Mainland Chinese to Hong Kong since the handover, and the business opportunities in China or other Chinese-speaking regions, there is a growing passion for the learning of Putonghua. Some educators argue that the learning of Putonghua is a sign of affiliation to the broader Chinese Community. I would treat such claims with reservation. Emotional attachment to China is comparatively weak, especially for the younger generations born in Hong Kong who do not have close family ties in China. They approach China simply as an economic frontier. In order to explore this new frontier, they need the appropriate language skills. Wong (1999) calls such an approach a combination of cultural affinity with economic rationality. In this respect, the learning of Chinese, especially Putonghua, is on a par with English. Since Putonghua is not accepted as the mother tongue of most Hong Kong people, it is simply considered a utilitarian tool.

## **Conclusion**

The Action Plan to Raise Language Standards in Hong Kong is a very ambitious programme to boost Hong Kong's language standards. There are proposals regarding the specification of the language skills of learners, language campaigns, requirements for teacher qualification, language curriculum and the involvement of the whole community.

The dominant discourse of the Plan focuses on how languages can be used to serve Hong Kong's new economy, although SCOLAR does not openly admit that languages can also be regarded as resources in ensuring the economic survival of Hong Kong. We need to accept that Hong Kong's lack of natural resources renders her extremely vulnerable to external economic turbulence. Human capital is a valuable asset and education becomes extremely important in fostering the human resources for a knowledge-based economy. Without the requisite skills to communicate with the huge neighbouring economic entity of China and the rest of the world, Hong Kong will be marginalized, even if the population is willing to participate in the global economy.

It is generally the case that in formulating language policy during globalization, there is tension between global and local interests. In Hong Kong, the tension between national and local issues adds another factor to the equation. At

present, the local dialect, Cantonese, is left alone without any government support. Little is done to protect an old dialect that preserves much of the phonological system of an ancient language. In a decade's time, Putonghua may be used as the medium of instruction. The government may put a seal on the use of Cantonese in schools at a time when the local residents no longer see the economic value of their own dialect.

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# Appendix I

## Chinese Linguistic Groups



