

S. C. M. P.

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A native matter of tongue

MOST people would forgive a writer for his lack of originality, provided he did his homework before putting down other people's views in black and white for the enlightenment of the general public.

But when opinions are presented as facts, few readers, especially the discerning ones, would forgive such irresponsible writing. I refer to Leonard Rayner's article "English and Mandarin in Hongkong's future" (SCM Post, April 2).

It is stated plainly as a fact by Mr Rayner that "people in key Government and university posts" have been using "the language issue to foster chauvinism as a means of personal advancement." Proof please, Mr Rayner!

One wonders how much the writer knows about the language movement that has been going on for more than 10 years in Hongkong. One also wonders if he really understands the difference between the teaching of a first language and a second language.

Could Mr Rayner please enlighten the hundreds of English teachers on how to teach English as a first language effectively to students who, in Mr Rayner's own words, are "from working class background, Cantonese speaking and with little exposure to non-Chinese culture?"

Incidentally, it also strikes the reader that Mr Rayner's prejudice against one of the universities in Hongkong

stems from his lack of knowledge about that institute.

Is he aware, for example, that Mandarin is used and taught there, sometimes as a medium of instruction too?

Had he been reading the local Chinese newspapers, he might have been pleasantly surprised that recently a new language game in Cantonese, English and Mandarin has been introduced by that university.

I sincerely hope that when dealing with a complex issue, a writer with any sense of responsibility will at least do his homework before embarking on any discussion or spreading any of his prejudices.

WINNIE CHEUNG

● Leonard Rayner replies:

● The statement that "people in key Government and university posts" have been using "the language issue to foster chauvinism as a means of personal advancement" is based, partly upon information supplied by Professor Ong, but mostly on checks made with Government officials and senior people in quasi-Government bodies, including one person of undoubted integrity who is seriously considering giving up a senior appointment in Hongkong because of the problem.

Since writing the piece, I have received information that a senior man in a quasi-Government body reported to the head of the organisation a flagrant piece of "chauvinist" manipulation. No action was

taken. I am satisfied the statement is correct.

● Bilingualism (native language plus English) has been achieved in many countries, some, like Singapore, with a more complex situation than exists in Hongkong.

As a writer of a school language textbook, I know some of the problems but, like Ms Cheung, I know far too little.

That is why articles like the one to which she takes such exception are written — to provoke thought and discussion.

The consensus of a television programme on the subject was that the standards of both English and Cantonese are seriously declining in Hongkong.

● I have no prejudice against any university. Mandarin is not only taught in the Chinese University but in many other teaching establishments in Hongkong. Ms Cheung's report on one language game with no comments upon its success does not help.

The unwelcome fact is that, after extensive research, I concluded that the crucial languages for Hongkong — Chinese and English — are not doing well and this is a view generally expressed by academics visiting the Colony from China.

Unpalatable facts do not lose their relevance by attacking the writer and the need to write such a piece arises because men of standing like Professor Ong speak out.