

A detailed look at language

IN urbanised, developed communities — Hongkong is obviously one of these — language performs a wide range and variety of functions. These functions range from ordinary everyday conversation among friends or family to the most complex interactions of diplomats, trade ministers, bankers, politicians, managers, planners, and so forth.

On the way, there is a constant branching off into the many different "languages" used by different specialists, again ranging from motor repair or dress design to the more abstruse realms of nuclear physics, computer science, or monetary economics.

The ordinary man-in-the-street — the manual worker, taxidriver, waiter, shop-assistant, and so forth — may need to handle only a comparatively narrow range of language and relatively few varieties. On the other hand, a personnel manager, a journalist, a radio or TV producer, the head of an organisation, would normally be expected to cope with a far wider range and a fair sprinkling of different varieties.

Not only that, it would be expected of them that they would be expert at switching from one variety or one "domain" of language use to another. In order to be completely successful in their jobs, they must be able to know the right degree of formality, or informality, to use as the situations in which they operate vary.

For speakers of languages in which there is no sharp division between spoken and written usage — English, for example — the problem of mastering this wide range and variety of language functions is not too great, provided one's schooling has been adequate and one's home environment has been reasonably sophisticated or supportive.

The real trouble lies with languages like Chinese where there can, as in Cantonese, be a very marked difference between spoken and written usage; a difference so great that it is as if two different "languages" are being used. Perhaps I could better explain.

At home, or with friends, or in our day-to-day dealings, we tend to use a fairly colloquial, informal range of language. But, as we move into more formal situations, or situations of greater complexity, we reach out for a different sort of language; and this language is modelled to a very large extent on written usage.

In English, for example, we start to use a much wider selection of words, words that we would normally only use in writing. Our sentences become on the whole more complicated and more shapely; our thoughts more precise. We tend to choose our words rather more carefully.

We can call the more informal usage, without any hint of disparagement, a "low" language, and more formal usage a "high" language. There is usually no need to apply such terms to a language like English because "low" shades into "high" without any noticeable break; but the distinction can come in useful when we are talking about Cantonese, where "high" and "low" are rather different languages.

As I said earlier, when our communication becomes more formal we tend to use a language modelled very closely on writing. Written Chinese is not at all the same as Cantonese. Though written Chinese is not exactly the same as Mandarin either, it is very close to it, modified only to a certain extent by certain elements derived from classical Chinese.

Because written Chinese is so different from Cantonese, it has to be consciously learnt, and actively and specifically taught. At primary school level I don't believe there is a serious problem, as all Chinese primary schools in Hongkong teach written Chinese (some more successfully than others) and thus give their students a grounding in the use of high Cantonese.

The trouble begins in secondary school, where even written Chinese, in some Anglo-Chinese schools, is neglected at the expense of English. Much more serious, radically so, is that the teenager, as he begins to be exposed to more formal, or more complex communicative situations, has not enough written Chinese to fall back on when, for example, he is called on to give a speech, take part in a Chinese-speaking debate, give explanations, or in general cope with a wide range of language functions covered by the concept "use of Chinese."

So, instead of developing a "high" form of Cantonese, he falls back on a system which is even more foreign to him, but which he can control to some rudimentary extent — English. He is actually encouraged to. For the typical Anglo-Chinese school-leaver in Hongkong, English has become

the "high" language, however inadequately he may be able to handle it.

I submit that schools in Hongkong, especially the secondary schools, need to do something urgently to set matters right. In the curriculum there should be much more emphasis on "the use of Chinese;" not only written Chinese, but the use of Chinese in speaking ("high" Cantonese).

This does not necessarily mean sacrificing English. On the contrary. What we need is a properly balance bilingual curriculum, in which Chinese is properly taught, and English is equally properly taught, but as a second language.

The transition in Anglo-Chinese secondary schools from the almost exclusive use of Chinese in form one to the more extensive use of English by the time a student reaches form seven can be achieved more rationally and economically than it is at present, without sacrificing the use of Chinese, which should (as it definitely does not at the present time) play a much more important part in the curriculum right through to the tertiary level, and beyond, into the various careers.

English in Hongkong should be recognised for what it is: not a native language, but a highly useful language of wider communication. It should not be allowed to oust Chinese, as it is doing at the present time.

The use of Mandarin — or, to be more exact, Putonghua — is still another matter to be resolved in the future, by long-term planning. As everyone knows who has visited southern China, Cantonese is merely a vernacular. Indeed Hongkong is the only community in which Cantonese is a viable "national" language.

The problem of conversion to Putonghua is much reduced when a learner already has a good command of "high" Cantonese. Indeed a short, intensive "conversion" course is sufficient to give a Cantonese-speaking learner all the Putonghua he is likely to need. This has been demonstrated many times over.

With proper planning and adequate allocation of resources such programmes can be operated on a regular basis in a few centres, to which all secondary school children and students in higher education can be referred at appropriate times.

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