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# Language policy and planning in Hong Kong: Colonial and post-colonial perspectives

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**ABSTRACT:** Hong Kong ceased to be a colony of Britain on June 30th, 1997, thus entering a new stage of its development and evolution as a uniquely-constituted city state and urban metropolis. The Hong Kong Special Administrative Region of China (HKSAR) inherited a linguistic ecology that owed much to its previous existence as a British colony, where the Chinese language had had no de jure status until 1974. From 1995, the stated policy of government has been to promote a “biliterate” (Chinese and English) and “trilingual” (Cantonese, Putonghua and English) society, and various measures have also been taken to promote the use of Chinese as a medium of instruction in schools. Immediately after the change in sovereignty, Putonghua became a compulsory school subject for the first time. This paper will examine the issue of language planning and policies partly from a historical perspective, but also through a consideration of current policies and practices across a range of domains, including government, law and education. One major conclusion that emerges from this discussion is that, from a language policy perspective, the relationship between Chinese and English in the Hong Kong context is potentially far less contentious than that between Cantonese and Putonghua.

## 1. Introduction

Although questions of language policy and planning have received much attention in Hong Kong over the last two decades or so, these issues continue to engage both academic commentators and the wider population. Perhaps one major reason for this has been the speed of economic, political and social change in modern Hong Kong society, which, between the 1960s and 1990s, saw Hong Kong transform from a colonial backwater to a post-colonial global city. This chapter attempts to review current issues in language planning from a number of perspectives. First, the chapter starts with a brief survey of language planning from the perspective of sociolinguistics, proceeds to a discussion of the history of language planning and policies in colonial Hong Kong, and then focuses on contemporary language policies in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) of China.

## 2. Language planning theories and their relevance to Hong Kong

According to Mesthrie, Swann, Deumert and Leap (2000), the term “language planning” was originally coined by the Norwegian-American sociolinguist Einar Haugen (1959), and might be broadly defined as “all conscious efforts that aim at changing the linguistic behaviour of a speech community” (Mesthrie *et al.* 2000: 384). The same author also explains the term “language policies”, as referring to “the more general linguistic, political and social goals underlying the actual language planning process” (Mesthrie *et al.* 2000: 384). An obvious problem here, however, is the similarity of the two terms, “language planning” and “language policies”, which are frequently used in overlapping fashion. More explanation is offered by Spolsky and Lambert (2006) who attempt to disambiguate these two expressions. For them, language policy may be explained thus:

The language policy of a speech community [. . .] consists of the commonly agreed set of choices of language items – whether sounds or words or grammar – or language varieties – whether codes or dialects or named languages – and the beliefs or ideologies associated with those choices. It can be found in language practices and beliefs or in formal policy decisions such as laws, constitutions, or regulations. (Spolsky & Lambert 2006: 561)

In contrast, “language planning” (or “language management”) may be defined as follows:

Language management, planning, engineering, cultivation and treatment are actions taken by formal authorities such as governments or other agencies or people who believe that they have authority, such as parents, teachers, or academies, to modify the language choices made by those they claim to have under their control [ . . . ] Language management itself has three components: the development of explicit language plans and policies, their implementation (by rules or laws or resource allocation), and the evaluation of results and effects. (Spolsky & Lambert 2006: 561)

There seems to be agreement that the term “language policy” seems to have a broader application in referring to the more general beliefs, considerations and ideologies relating to the orientation of such decision-making bodies as governments and educational authorities. The term “language planning” is thus more specifically applied to the actions of such decision makers.

Spolsky and Lambert further note that most analyses of language policies and planning have been concerned with examining “formal, governmentally backed activities at the national or regional level aimed at controlling language knowledge and use within a country or region” (Spolsky & Lambert 2006: 562–563). Following Kloss (1969), they also highlight the distinction between “status planning” versus “corpus planning”, while also accepting Cooper’s (1989) addition of a third-level of “acquisition planning”. For Kloss, status planning referred to the choice of official and national languages, etc., while corpus planning concerned itself with the establishment and regulation of particular aspects of language, such as dictionaries, grammar and writing systems. Cooper’s (1989) notion of “acquisition planning” was crucially concerned with “the determination of which languages should be taught to those who do not speak them and how” (Spolsky & Lambert 2006: 563).

Perhaps what is most typical of the kind of approach adopted by Spolsky and Lambert, however, is the underlying assumption that functional models can adequately account for, and usefully illuminate, the kinds of choices made by governments in language planning, in terms of principles, procedures and processes. Language policy/planning (LPP) studies, as an area of sociolinguistic research and practice, began to achieve prominence in the 1960s, and were often associated with language surveys in developing nations, particularly those in the early stages of post-colonial independence (Fishman, Ferguson & Gupta 1968). Other sociolinguists, including Cooper (1989), Neustupn’y (1970), and Kaplan and Baldauf (1997), among others, followed Fishman in attempting to build rational models of language planning suitable for implementation in the developing world and other multilingual settings. In broad terms, these were often written as almost apolitical structural-functional explanations of the dynamics of decision-making, in those societies under discussion.

From the 1990s onwards, however, new approaches to language planning were clearly visible, characterised by a strong interest in issues related to language and inequality and influenced by critical and postcolonial theory. Thus, for such scholars:

Linguistic theories adopted by language planners, rather than being neutral, objective, scientific tools, were viewed [ . . . ] as detrimental to the development of equitable language policies in complex multilingual settings. This realization led to a rather broad calling into question of received ideas about the nature of language itself, and of the degree to which scholars of language were perpetuating assumptions that had the effect of rationalizing the support of colonial languages, and concomitant economic interests, at the expense of indigenous languages and local economic development. (Ricento 2006)

In this context, scholars such as Tollefson (1991), Phillipson (1992), and Pennycook (1998) have done much to promote critical perspectives on language, greatly extending earlier sociolinguistic approaches by promoting an explicit awareness of issues relating to inequality, power and the politics of language.

### **3. Language planning in Hong Kong: the historical context**

For much of its recorded history, language planning in Hong Kong was a byproduct of the British colonial system, which governed Hong Kong between 1842 until 1997. During most of that period, English was not directly challenged as the language of government and law in HongKong society until the

era of late colonialism from around 1970 until 1997, when issues of language planning and policies were brought into sharp focus through a number of debates on language issues, as well as through government legislation and interventions. Such debates and interventions have continued to the present, although the reunification of Hong Kong with China has added a number of new complexities to such issues, including, not least, the relationship between Hong Kong language planning and policies and those of mainland China.

During the First Opium War, in January 1841, the island of Hong Kong was ceded by the Chinese government to the British. The following year, this was ratified by the Treaty of Nanking, and the British trading and missionary community that had previously taken residence in the Portuguese enclave of Macao soon transferred to the island. From 1842 to 1845 the population of the island grew remarkably from around 5,000 to more than 20,000, reaching 40,000 by 1853, and topping 120,000 by the early 1860s. The vast majority of such immigration into Hong Kong came from neighbouring Guangdong province, and were typically classified as belonging to four distinct groups: the *Punti*, “locals”, i.e. “Cantonese”; the *Hakka*; the *Tanka*, boat dwellers; and the *Hoklo*, from eastern Guangdong province (Munn 2001: 71). In 1860, the British annexed the Kowloon Peninsula and, in 1898, added an additional swathe of its hinterland known as the “New Territories”, so that, by the early twentieth century, British Hong Kong had come to include all three territories, which together constituted the territorial entity of colonial Hong Kong throughout most of the twentieth century, until the celebrated 1997 “Handover”, which finally returned sovereignty over Hong Kong to the People’s Republic of China.

British colonial language policy has been explained by a range of historical commentaries of varying accuracy and perspectives. In the post-colonial imaginary, British colonial language policy worldwide has been linked to a blatant linguistic imperialism which sought to impose the language of the imperial power on colonised communities in Africa, Asia and elsewhere (Phillipson 1992, 1994). Other, more nuanced, accounts have explained British colonial language policy in terms of strategies of divide and rule, pointing to the British predilection in many colonial territories for reserving English-medium education for an elite, and propagating “vernacular” education for the masses (Pennycook 1998). In its bluntest form, the Phillipson/Pennycook perspective on colonial language policy has seen the spread of English as a tool of colonial control and subjugation, either explicitly and overtly through the imposition of English, or, more subtly, through the establishment of systems of parallel languages in such societies. A related argument is that – in many former colonies – the legacy of such policies has extended to the present, through the “deep and indissoluble links between the practices, theories and contexts of ELT [English Language Teaching] and the history of colonialism” (Pennycook 1998: 19). The critical perspectives of both Phillipson and Pennycook have influenced discussions of the history of language policies put forward by a number of local scholars in recent years, including Tsui (2004) and Hopkins (2006).

A rather different picture has emerged from recent research by others, who have attempted to provide a much more detailed picture of the development of the colonial educational system, including the work of Sweeting and Vickers (2005, 2007) and Evans (2008a, 2008b), following Brutt-Griffler’s (2002) reconceptualisation of British colonial language policy as an historically “contested terrain”, where local elites often campaigned or negotiated for access to English-medium education. For example, what emerges from Evans’ careful (2008a) discussion of language policy in Hong Kong between 1855 and 1900 is the picture of a complex patchwork of government Chinese, government Anglo-Chinese, aided Chinese, aided English, and aided Anglo-Chinese schools. Within this system, moreover, by far the largest enrolments were in the aided Chinese schools. For their part, Sweeting and Vickers (2005) also emphasise the complexity of the nineteenth century school system in the colony, noting that for a number of decades “there was no top-down imposition of a clear, consistent language policy”. Later, after the government’s Central School (which later became “Queen’s College”) was founded, both Chinese and English were used as instructional languages for a number of years, which also mirrored the situation in many missionary schools in the territory. Sweeting and Vickers also report that vernacular education expanded substantially in the first decades of the twentieth century, and that educationalists and government spokesmen repeatedly acknowledged the importance of both languages in the education system.

The work of Evans and Sweeting in retrieving the historical record is crucial in providing some kind of balance, not only to the discussion of the history of language issues in Hong Kong, but also as a key to the present. So far, only part of this project has been completed. For example, whereas their work has now done much to illuminate the complexity of government policies on language education in the nineteenth century, very little detailed work (to my knowledge) has been carried out on the influence of missionary and religious schools in Hong Kong, which have deployed both Chinese and English in various types of schools in the territory.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, a detailed historical narrative of language education in Hong Kong remains to be written, although recent work by local historians such as John M. Carroll has emphasised the collaborative nature of colonialism, and the role played by local Chinese elites in policy-formation in many key areas of society (Carroll 2007).

Despite the lack of a clear historical narrative of high colonial history in Hong Kong, a greater clarity arguably exists for the period from the 1960s until the 1990s, an era that could broadly be described as “late British colonialism”. During the 1970s, after the disturbances of the Cultural Revolution in China and social unrest and riots in Hong Kong in 1966 and 1967, the government began to give greater recognition to the Chinese language. In 1974, Chinese was recognised as a co-official language in the territory, while, around the same time, the colonial authorities also established a system of free, compulsory primary and secondary education, as well as extensive systems of public housing and public health.

Until the 1970s, the English language had been the sole official language of government, the official language of law and, *de facto*, the more prestigious medium of secondary and university education. The *Official Languages Ordinance* of 1974 established that Chinese and English would thenceforth “enjoy equality of use” and, subsequently, measures were taken by the government to promote this policy. A decade or so later, after the negotiations between Beijing and London determined the arrangements for the 1997 “Handover”, the position of Chinese was further strengthened by the publication of *The Basic Law of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region*, Article 9 of which stated that: “In addition to the Chinese language, English may also be used as an official language by the executive authorities, legislative and judicial organs of the Hong Kong Administrative Region” (Chinese Government 1992: 7).

In 1995, the Hong Kong Government announced that its new language policy would be “to develop a civil service which is ‘biliterate’ in English and Chinese and ‘trilingual’ in English, Cantonese and Putonghua” (Lau 1995: 19), an official policy statement which is still in force. In the run-up to 1997, an increasing proportion of Cantonese was used in Legislative Council speeches, and since then the Legislative Council has almost exclusively used Cantonese to conduct its affairs. Since the early 1990s the government has been trying to establish training courses in Putonghua for Hong Kong civil servants but, at present, Cantonese, rather than Putonghua, is still the dominant variety. Similar changes have taken place in the legal system in Hong Kong and, from the late 1980s to the mid-1990s, amendments to the *Official Languages Ordinance* have promoted “legal bilingualism” in the law courts. In December 1995, the first civil High Court case was heard in Putonghua and, in August 1997, the first criminal case was conducted in Cantonese in the High Court (Cheung 1997, 2000).

Immediately before the 1997 change of sovereignty, there was widespread concern that the post-colonial period would see the immediate downgrading of English and the rise of Putonghua in key official domains. As is discussed in the next section, an abrupt change in language policy and management has not occurred in Hong Kong, at least in most domains of society. However, one major change in policy that did occur immediately before July 1997 concerned education, when, shortly before the transition, the colonial Hong Kong government formulated a new policy on the “medium of instruction” for secondary schools. On March 22nd, 1997, it was announced that approximately only 100 secondary schools (some 22 per cent of the total of 460) would be allowed to use English as a teaching medium and that punitive measures (e.g., a maximum fine of \$25,000 and two years in jail), might be used against school principals who did not follow the instructions of the government (Kwok 1997). This policy has been largely maintained since 1997, although, very recently, it has been amended to provide more opportunities for the use of English, not least in order to prepare secondary school students for what is a predominantly English-medium university system. Notwithstanding such recent changes, the adoption of

a new “firm” policy in promoting Chinese was the most visible change in language policy at the end of the colonial period, although it might also be argued that the adoption of Putonghua as a compulsory school subject – which occurred around the same time – is likely to have even more lasting consequences.

#### **4. Current language planning and policies in Hong Kong**

Problems of investigation and interpretation of language policies in Hong Kong are not only confined to the historical past but also extend to the present. In certain settings, including the European Union in recent years, language policies are explicitly articulated, set down and disseminated through public documents, reports and regulations. In Hong Kong, however, this has rarely been the case and, in the contemporary HKSAR, there are few (if any) documents that set out an official language policy for all the major domains of society in a cohesive and principled fashion. Instead, there are a number of diverse laws and policy statements that have been issued by government (and continue to be issued) in the colonial and post-colonial period that have combined to shape language planning practices since 1997. Such practices have evidently been moved by circumstances or by public opinion, at times leading the government to respond, in an immediate pragmatic fashion, to the political pressures of the day.

##### *4.1 Language planning in the Hong Kong government*

In Hong Kong, official language policies now regulate which languages are used in government offices in the HKSAR, although these policies changed significantly during the decades before 1997, in the immediate period before the transition from British to Chinese rule. The definition of what the official languages are, and decisions about official language policies in Hong Kong are determined in part by the Basic Law governing Hong Kong, which provided a “mini-constitution” for the territory before the change of government. *The Basic Law of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region of the People’s Republic of China* has two articles that deal specifically with language policies and planning, Articles 9 and 136:

##### **Article 9**

In addition to the Chinese language, English may also be used as an official language by the executive authorities, legislature and judiciary of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region. (Chinese Government 1992)

##### **Article 136**

On the basis of the previous educational system, the Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region shall, on its own, formulate policies on the development and improvement of education, including policies regarding the educational system and its administration, the language of instruction, the allocation of funds, the examination system, the system of academic awards and the recognition of educational qualifications. (Chinese Government 1992)

The Decision of the Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress on the English Text of the Basic Law of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region of the People’s Republic of China is also relevant (Adopted on 28 June 1990):

The 14th sitting of the Standing Committee of the Seventh National People’s Congress hereby decides that the English translation of the Basic Law of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region of the People’s Republic of China which has been finalized upon examination under the auspices of the Law Committee of the National People’s Congress shall be the official English text and shall be used in parallel with the Chinese text. In case of discrepancy between the two texts in the implication of any word used, the Chinese text shall prevail (cited in Ghai 1999: 570).

In addition to the legal provisions made for the use of Chinese and English in the Basic Law, the government has also, in a number of statements, summarized its policy as that of *trilingualism and biliteracy*, which refers to the promotion of trilingualism in Cantonese, English and Putonghua, and biliteracy in written Chinese and English. Interestingly, this policy began in the 1990s, with particular reference to the use of languages in the civil service in the 1990s, but, by 2002, this had been extended to the general population, so that an official report of the Education Committee in 2002 states that “[t]he language policy of the HKSAR Government is to enable students and the working population to be biliterate (in Chinese and English) and trilingual (in Cantonese, Putonghua and English)” (HKSAR Government 2002). Indeed, throughout the last thirteen years, the formula of “trilingualism and biliteracy” has received support in numerous government and educational pronouncements, although, to my knowledge, no fully detailed report or fully comprehensive rationale of this policy has been officially published.

The promotion of the policy of “trilingualism and biliteracy” involves the government in accepting the use of all three languages at the spoken level, as well as a great deal of translation of documents and official papers. This work is carried out by the Official Languages Division of the Civil Service Bureau of the HKSAR government, whose website states its responsibilities as providing translation, interpretation and editing services to Government bureau and departments as well as:

developing the institutional arrangements for the use of official languages in the Civil Service, including setting guidelines, reviewing Civil Service language practices, and providing language advisory services to bureaux and departments; promoting the effective use of the official languages, in particular Chinese and Putonghua, in the Civil Service [ . . . ]; monitoring the use of the official languages and the implementation of the language policy in bureaux and departments” (HKSAR Government 2010).

Within the Government, one of the most important institutions is the Legislative Council (Legco), the body that is responsible for discussing and approving the laws of Hong Kong. The Legislative Council occupies a place at the heart of the political process, although, in theory, it is independent of government and the civil service. In compliance with the official language policy of the Hong Kong government, all proceedings in Legco are translated into a variety of languages. At present, the vast majority of debates and discussions in committee take place in Cantonese but, at the spoken level, are routinely translated from Cantonese into English by simultaneous interpreters so that members of Legco and members of the public listening to the debates have access to translation.

Today, only very occasionally is English or Putonghua heard in the Legco chamber, and on almost all occasions Cantonese is the sole language of spoken communication (Government translator, personal communication, May 18 2010). The vast majority of linguistic work that takes place in Legco involves not spoken communication, but written communication, as all debates and subsequent reports of debates (the *Hansard* or “proceedings”) are recorded in two versions, a Chinese version and an English version. The body that has the responsibility of carrying out these translations is the Translation and Interpretation Division of the Legislative Council Secretariat, which is responsible for the production of the *Hong Kong Hansard*, and is also responsible for translating questions, motions, papers, minutes and other Council papers (Legislative Council 2010). According to an interview with one of the Chief Translators of the Secretariat, around 80% of the documents written for the Legislative Council are currently drafted in English, and then translated into Chinese, so that English very much remains the default written language of government (Government translator, personal communication, May 18 2010).

#### 4.2 *The languages of the legal system*

The government’s language policy also regulates the languages used in written statutes and in the law courts. Prior to the 1980s, English was the sole and dominant language of the legal system in Hong Kong. Now the government is officially committed to a bilingual legal system, and in 1998, a Committee on Bilingual Legal System was set up to advise the Government on bilingualism in the legal domain and how

the goal of a bilingual legal system could be achieved. On the Department of Justice website, it is stated that, in light of Article 9 of the Basic Law, “both Chinese and English therefore have a part to play in the language of the law” (HKSAR Government 2010b). Specific policies are stipulated for the Common Law, Statute Law and the law courts as follows:

#### **The common law**

The principles of the common law are to be found in the judgments of the courts, both in Hong Kong and in other common law jurisdictions around the world. The language in which those judgments have been delivered over the years is almost exclusively English. There are hundreds of thousands of reported cases which form the basis of the common law, and it would obviously be impractical to attempt to translate these into Chinese. While in future there is likely to be an increasing number of judgments in Hong Kong delivered in Chinese, English will continue to be the only medium in which the majority of judgments from overseas is reported.

#### **Statute law**

In keeping with the Basic Law’s provisions on bilingualism, all legislation in Hong Kong is enacted in both Chinese and English, and both versions are accorded equal status. Thanks to the bilingual legislation programme begun in 1989, authentic Chinese texts have been completed of all pre-existing legislation which had been enacted in the English language only, and Hong Kong’s statute book is now entirely bilingual [ . . . ].

#### **The courts**

In July 1995, the Official Languages Ordinance (Cap 5) was amended to enable any court to use either or both of the official languages in any proceedings before it as it thinks fit; to enable a party or his legal representatives or a witness in proceedings in a court to use either or both the official languages, or such other language as the court may permit; to provide that the decision of a court to use one of the official languages in any proceedings before it, is final; and to empower the Chief Justice to make rules and issue practice directions to regulate the use of Chinese language in the courts. Efforts are being made on various fronts to improve the use of Chinese in the higher courts. A Practice Direction on the use of Chinese in the Court of First Instance has been prepared by the Judiciary. Training for bilingual judges has also been introduced, including the provision of courses on Chinese judgment writing skills. No matter whether English or Chinese is used in the proceedings, everyone has a right to use the language of his choice to give evidence. The court will arrange interpretation facilities. (HKSAR Government 2010b)

From the above, we can see that three main concerns are articulated. The first concerns the role of English in the “common law” system, which is the norm in the UK, and other English common law systems, such as Australia, New Zealand, etc. The second concern is with the written laws (“statute law”) of the KSAR, where it is stated that “all legislation in Hong Kong is enacted in both Chinese and English, and both versions are accorded equal status”. The third concern relates to the language of the courts and the expressed desire to improve the use of Chinese in the higher courts. However, despite the aim of providing legal proceedings in “either or both of the official languages”, at present, Cantonese is the dominant language of the lower courts, while English still remains the major language of the higher courts.

A recent study by Ng (2009) has examined the use of Cantonese and English in Hong Kong courts in great detail. Ng notes that it was only in 1987 that the Official Languages Ordinance was amended to state that “all ordinances shall be enacted and published in both official languages” (cited in Ng 2009: 71), and that it was not until 1989 that the first Bilingual Ordinance was enacted. Since the early 1990s, a massive project to translate the statutes of Hong Kong has taken place, a remarkable process involving the translation of more than 19,000 pages of legislation (Ng 2009: 72). Despite this, even today, the vast majority of court documents and judgements are written in English, as are most legal reference books and case law records. At the spoken level, in theory, Chinese enjoys equal status with English, but in practice, there is a clear hierarchy in Hong Kong courts. This hierarchy goes from the lowest courts (the Magistracies), through the District Courts (Criminal and Civil), to the Courts of First Instance (Criminal



and Civil), to the Courts of Appeal (Criminal and Civil), and finally to the Courts of Final Appeal (Criminal and Civil). Ng's analysis indicates a clear asymmetry in legal bilingualism in the Hong Kong law courts:

Cantonese is used with decreasing frequency as one moves up the court hierarchy, and it is totally absent in the Court of Final Appeal. In a parallel manner, the presence of English exhibits an inverted pyramidal distribution. English is used less frequently in the lower courts but retains its strong presence in the higher courts. Horizontally, there is a growing practice of mixed-language trials in the Court of First Instance and the District Court. Cantonese is used when witnesses are examined, but English remains the language of choice when law is debated (Ng 2009: 253).

#### 4.3 *The languages of education*

As has been the case in many other multilingual societies, issues related to the choice of languages to be used in schools have been controversial and sensitive, as it is here that ordinary citizens are most likely to perceive their lives directly affected by language policy. In Hong Kong, the history of the “medium of instruction issue” in the modern era dates back most immediately to the early 1970s, when the British colonial administration attempted to introduce a policy of using Chinese as the medium of instruction. In 1973, the government published a “Green Paper”, or policy proposal, on language education, which asserted that:

The medium of instruction bears significantly upon the quality of education offered at post-primary level. Pupils coming from primary schools where they have been taught in the medium of Cantonese have a grievous burden put on them when required to absorb new subjects through the medium of English. We recommend that Chinese become the usual language of instruction in the lower forms of secondary schools, and that English should be studied as the second language (cited in Gibbons 1982: 117).

After the publication of the 1973 Green Paper, the government met strong opposition from parents and schools about such plans to introduce Chinese Medium Instruction (CMI). Following these protests, the government backed down from pressing ahead with Chinese-medium instruction, and issued a 1974 White Paper which decided on a *laissez-faire* approach to the medium of instruction issue. The school system that then evolved from the 1970s until the early 1990s was one with around 90 per cent of primary schools teaching through Cantonese, and a similar percentage of secondary schools claiming to be “English medium” (or “Anglo-Chinese”). In reality this meant that school textbooks in most schools were overwhelmingly written in English, while at the spoken level the amount of English used varied greatly according to the type of school and the abilities of staff and students.

This so-called *laissez-faire* approach generally continued until March 1997, when the government introduced a policy of “firm guidance” to schools. As reported above, the new policy then established a system where around 75% of secondary schools were required to teach through Chinese (CMI schools), and some 25% were permitted to teach through English (EMI schools), if they could demonstrate the feasibility of so doing. This policy was consistently promoted by the Education Bureau of the HKSAR government for around ten years after 1997, and was even re-affirmed by a government report of December 2005, despite frequent challenges by parents and schools who felt disadvantaged. In 2008 and 2009, however, a significant shift in government policy began, which resulted in a new report on *Fine-tuning the Medium of Instruction for Secondary Schools* (HKSAR Government 2009). Essentially, the report moves away from the “firm guidance” policy of 1997, to provide for greater flexibility about how language management will take place in individual schools. According to the recommendations of the report, “schools will no longer be classified into CMI [Chinese medium instruction] schools and EMI [English medium instruction] schools” and “[t]heir [. . .] teaching modes will become more diversified, including all CMI, CMI/EMI in different subjects and total EMI immersion”. This, it is claimed, “allows schools more flexibility in using EMI for one or more subjects for different classes”. Thus, it is expected that “the choice and number of subjects taught in EMI would likely vary between classes within

individual schools as well as among schools”, and that “MOI arrangements in schools will become more diversified” (HKSAR Government 2009: 5).

This “fine tuning policy” goes into effect in autumn 2010, and the media have already reported that a number of schools are planning to switch from Chinese- to English-medium instruction (Yau 2009a). This loosening of government policy seems to have been motivated by a number of factors, including the desire of the business community to maintain Hong Kong’s competitiveness as a centre for international commerce and finance, the pragmatic need to prepare students for a university education (in a society where most of Hong Kong’s universities are officially English-medium),<sup>2</sup> as well as a groundswell of public opinion from many local parents. Despite this, given the complicated dynamics of education in the HKSAR, whatever policy is implemented is likely to encounter resistance from some quarter, and this change of direction has already attracted criticism from a number of leading educators (Yau 2009b).

#### 4.4 Cantonese and Putonghua

One key aspect of language planning in Hong Kong has a direct bearing on the educational debates discussed above and is, indeed, at the heart of many sociolinguistic issues in Hong Kong society. That is the relationship between Cantonese and Putonghua.

The status and functions of the Cantonese language are unique to Hong Kong, which has been described as “the greatest Cantonese city that the world has ever seen” (Harrison & So 1997: 12). Many local linguists have been less concerned about the tension between English and Chinese than a potential conflict between Cantonese and Putonghua. The widespread use of Cantonese in Hong Kong society, in high domains as well as low, is obviously at odds with the official policy in China, which promotes Putonghua, together with simplified Chinese characters instead of the “full characters” used in Hong Kong and Taiwan. Cantonese may be a mere “regional dialect” in the PRC, but Hong Kong is the Cantonese-speaking capital of the world. In many senses, Cantonese is the essential community language. Given the wide use of the language in education, religion, the print and broadcast media and government, “the status of Cantonese is much higher than is normally thought and cannot be simply brushed aside as the ‘vernacular’” (Sin & Roebuck 1996: 252).

In stark contrast, the PRC’s official language policy since 1956 has included the “unification of the Chinese language”, the promotion of Putonghua, the removal of illiteracy, the propagation of simplified characters, and the promotion of the official romanization system of *pinyin* (Bolton & Lam, 2006: 350). In October 2000, the national government published a new law, entitled *The Law of the National Commonly Used Language and Script of the People’s Republic of China*, which stipulated that: “Schools and other educational organizations will take Putonghua and standard Chinese characters as the basic language and characters to be used in teaching and study” (Rohsenow 2004: 41; Zhang & Yang 2004: 154). Such laws have taken effect in most other Chinese cities, including Guangzhou, where an estimated 5–6 million people out of a population of 12 million have in-migrated from other parts of China, thus adding to a process of language shift away from Cantonese in the community (Lai 2009).

Ironically, many of the HongKong government’s pronouncements in support of Chinese-medium instruction in the period immediately after 1997 emphasized the benefits of “mother tongue” education along the same lines as the renowned 1953 UNESCO report that valorized mother tongue education in schools. However, one issue regularly occluded in language debates is that “mother tongue education” (in its vernacular European sense), simply does not exist in many regions of China. For many of China’s students, Putonghua is a “second language”, and, in many regions, children learn a “home dialect” before going to school, which is often very different from Putonghua, for example, Cantonese, Fukienese, or Shanghainese. But national language policy is quite clear, and has only a limited acceptance of regional dialects and minority languages in educational and other official domains.

In the context of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR), whose systems of government and administration are expected to “converge” with those of mainland China in another 40 years, the question may be not whether Putonghua will be introduced as an official teaching medium, but *when*. Debates on the desirability of increasing the use of Putonghua have already surfaced among local

educationalists, and such discussions are regularly reported in the press. Even more important is the fact that, in 1998, Putonghua became a compulsory subject in all Hong Kong schools, and today more and more children than ever before are now learning Putonghua as a second (or third) language. Whether that means that eventually Putonghua will displace Cantonese in the more formal domains of language use is a question of a good deal of speculation and, in this context, the domain of education is particularly sensitive. In 2003, the government-backed Standing Committee on Language Education and Research (SCOLAR) published the *Action Plan to Raise Language Standards in Hong Kong*, where it stated that its policy on the teaching of Chinese in schools included endorsing the Curriculum Development Council's long-term goal of teaching Chinese Language in Putonghua, and encouraging schools to try using Putonghua to teach Chinese Language (SCOLAR 2003). However, the action plan stopped short of urging a "firm policy" to promote the language, conceding that "further studies on the conditions required to ensure a successful switch and prevent negative outcomes" (SCOLAR 2003). At present, attempts to extend Putonghua to teach Chinese within the public school system have achieved only limited success, but there is always the possibility that – in an altered political climate – the government may attempt to implement this policy more strenuously. At present, however, in spite of some initiatives to promote Putonghua in schools and discussions concerning the use of the national language in other domains, it is evident that the majority of Hong Kong people have a strong attachment to Cantonese, and Putonghua still has only a limited range of functions in present-day Hong Kong (Zhang & Yang 2004).

The extent to which the status and functions of Cantonese in Hong Kong may become highly contentious in the coming years became clear in the summer of 2010 when language debates surfaced in both Hong Kong and across the border in Guangzhou. In early July, reports began to surface in the *South China Morning Post* of a push by the authorities in Guangzhou to switch the language of a number of prime-time TV programmes in Guangzhou from Cantonese to Putonghua before the Asian Games were hosted there in November 2010. It was at that time that the Guangzhou's People's Political Consultative Conference submitted a proposal to the local government on Monday to order the city's most popular television station, Guangzhou Television (GZTV), to replace the use of Cantonese by Putonghua on its main channels (He 2010). The same report also noted that:

With 110 million people, Guangdong has rapidly become the most populous province. But most of the recent increase has been migrant job-seekers, and now half its residents do not speak Cantonese. [ . . . ] Guangzhou, the provincial capital, once spearheaded the mainland's economic reform. But rivals such as Shanghai and Beijing have caught up and even surpassed it. The dialect seems strange to outsiders. [ . . . ] There is a two-pronged attack on Cantonese – internal migration on the one hand, and the government policy of a 'common language for a unified country and harmonious society' on the other. (He 2010)

On Sunday, July 25, 2010 matters came to a dramatic head in Guangzhou when several hundred Guangzhou residents took part in a (reportedly amiable and low key) street demonstration at the exit of Guangzhou metro's Jiangnanxi station against the proposed language switch. According to reports, most of those who participated were young people under the age of thirty (Zhai and Yu 2010). Such a street demonstration, however amiable and good-natured, was dramatic in the sense that any unauthorized gathering of people in China is typically viewed as a cause for alarm, and the fact that few if any similar demonstrations in support of regional dialects in China have ever taken place previously. Immediately following the Sunday demonstration, a representative of the Guangzhou city government responded by asserting that "it had no plan to marginalise the use of Cantonese or replace it with Putonghua". The spokesman, a Mr Ouyang, then went on to claim that the campaign in support of Cantonese had been orchestrated by "people with ulterior motives" (Zhai, 2010). One week later, a second demonstration took place in support of Cantonese at People's Park in Guangzhou and a nearby shopping area on August 1, involving hundreds of people. This time the authorities deemed the gathering "illegal", and arrested at least 20 people for "legal questioning" and simultaneously took measures against Internet blogs and discussion groups (Lau, 2010). On the same day, a small demonstration involving some two hundred

people took place in Hong Kong in order to express solidarity with pro-Cantonese activists across the border.

Following this, however, the situation was defused and at least temporarily resolved when the Head of the Communist Party in Guangzhou announced an apparent climb-down from the proposed restrictions on Cantonese television on August 4. Referring to a report from the officially-sanctioned China News Service, the *South China Morning Post* announced that: “Communist Party Chief Wang Yang told a meeting on Wednesday to mark the 100-day countdown to the Asian Games that there was no question of Cantonese being banned”, suggesting that there had been a misunderstanding which had been exploited by “people who have ulterior motives” (Yu 2010). Following this apparent climb down, it appears that the Guangzhou authorities backed away from their plans to restrict broadcasting in Cantonese and, in the event, the Asian Games took place without further linguistic controversy throughout November 2010. However, this remains an issue that is likely to re-surface, not only in Guangzhou but also in Hong Kong. Indeed, for many Hong Kong people, official attitudes to linguistic diversity reflect attitudes to a much wider range of social and political issues.

Commenting on these events, the Hong Kong journalist, Stephen Vines, relates the recent controversy about Cantonese to the authoritarianism of the Beijing government and issues of Chinese identity, arguing that “China has demonstrated [the government’s] determination to curb or even destroy the linguistic diversity that exists in the nation”, and that “[i]n Guangdong, home of Cantonese, the language battle is accelerating” (Vines 2010). He goes on to argue that:

Cantonese enhances a sense of identity. It is this that scares the rulers in Beijing; officials across the border are already accusing the defenders of Cantonese of having ‘ulterior motives’. [. . .] Authoritarian governments have great difficulty with diversity; they see it as undermining their authority and sowing the seeds of discontent. Even quite innocent manifestations of local pride and regional identification are frowned upon unless officially instigated and approved. [. . .] Officials, like the born-again patriots who run Hong Kong, strive to demonstrate their proficiency in the national language, wearing it as a badge of loyalty. And there has been a constant battle against the development of local languages in literature and the mass media. [. . .] Anyone challenging this process is quickly labelled a ‘splittist’ in the wonderful language of Maoism. This is a serious charge and is thrown about indiscriminately at both those who genuinely desire to split from Beijing, such as Tibetans, and at others who are happy to be in the Chinese state but seek a stronger sense of local identity [. . .] there is a sullen suspicion of anyone showing the smallest sign of asserting anything other than officially approved forms of identification with the state. This makes the nation infinitely poorer, not more united. (Vines 2010)

## 5. Conclusion

In many other contexts for language policy, the crucial questions have concerned the choice and cultivation of national and official languages in the post-colonial context. As is evident from the preceding discussion, the situation in Hong Kong is rather different. Modern Hong Kong was essentially founded by refugees fleeing from the control of a Communist regime and the horrors of the Cultural Revolution, and the identification of Hong Kong people with the national language of the PRC is tempered by the experience of the last six decades. For orthodox language planning, Hong Kong may appear to be an exceptional case, as Tsui notes:

With China’s resumption of sovereignty over Hong Kong, the Chinese language, being the national language, should enjoy a much higher status. The people of Hong Kong should have a stronger awareness of Chinese identity. The adoption of Chinese as the medium of instruction in the majority of the schools should enhance the status of the Chinese language, as well as strengthen the national identity of Hong Kong people and their patriotic sentiments. Consequently, the community should be less resistant to this policy [. . .] this has not proved to be the case. Whereas most former colonies have been eager to establish their national identity upon decolonization [. . .] this does not seem to have happened in Hong Kong. (Tsui 2004: 108–109)

The essential reason for this, as Tsui concedes, is that language policy in the HKSAR has been decided by the political agenda set for Hong Kong in the transition to its “reunification” with mainland China. In this context, neither traditional language policy theorizations nor the standard critical responses appear to offer easy solutions. Some thirteen years into the post-colonial experience, little on the surface of Hong Kong society seems to have changed. English still enjoys high prestige as a co-official language of government and law, and as the dominant language of higher education and the business community. Cantonese enjoys an unequalled status in many domains of high and not-so-high use, including the Legislative Council, the mass media, popular culture, and much else. Putonghua has yet to be heavily imposed as the language of national and official power on China’s most dynamic and prosperous southern city, which is still enjoying the benefits of the “one country, two systems” policy, devised by Deng Xiaoping. In this context, however, for many Hong Kong people the notion of “mother tongue” education may evoke fear of the imposition of the “big brother tongue”, as there is widespread suspicion that Cantonese-medium education may segue into Putonghua-medium education at some point in the not-too-distant future.

Post-colonialism in the Hong Kong context has its own specific characteristics, and as Carroll has commented, “[a]lthough Hong Kong has returned to China, it has not been de-colonized”. Instead, he argues, “it has been re-colonized with the metropole simply shifting from London to Beijing” (2007: 192). That may be true, but as yet the full weight of metropolitan and national policies, including language policy, has not been felt in Hong Kong. Viewed from this perspective, the vitality of Cantonese as a community language (layered with a measure of English) is a touchstone for continued lifestyle of a city-state whose identity combines a unique blend of colonial modernity, global capitalism and diverse contacts with Asia, Europe, North America and the world. The Draft Agreement on the future of Hong Kong signed by the Chinese government in the 1980s promised the territory “a high degree of autonomy”, according to a policy of “one country, two systems”. It remains to be seen how long this autonomy will survive in many spheres of society, including key societal settings, such as government, law, education, and media, which are so crucially linked to the cultural and linguistic identity of the Cantonese-speaking Hong Kong people.

## Notes

1. The role of religious schools in Hong Kong continues to be important to the present day, and a number of Catholic, Protestant, and other religious organizations still run significant numbers of primary and secondary schools in the society. This is a state of affairs greatly in contrast with neighbouring Guangdong and other parts of China, where missionary schools operated in large numbers throughout the Republican period, but closed their doors or were re-organised after the Communist Party came to power in 1949.
2. Hong Kong has seven government-funded universities: City University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong Baptist University, Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, Lingnan University, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, The University of Hong Kong. In addition, there is a tertiary level educational institute, The Hong Kong Institute of Education. The Chinese University of Hong Kong is officially a bilingual institution, while the language policy of The Hong Kong Institute of Education stipulates the promotion of trilingualism and biliteracy. All other institutions are officially “English-medium”.

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