Language and Society
in Early Hong Kong
(1841—1884)
by Zhang Zhenjiang

早期香港的社会和语言

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Abstract

This dissertation studies language and society in early Hong Kong (1841—1884). Focusing on the Chinese community, the aim of this thesis is to trace and describe the historical, social, anthropological and linguistic processes through which certain languages and dialects were 'selected' by the new Chinese community to serve as a means of intra-group as well as inter-group communication.

The British Crown Colony of Hong Kong, once established, soon attracted waves of immigrants from China. Gradually a new Chinese community was formed. This community, made up largely of transient workers, was led by the Chinese elite group and lived in relative seclusion from the European community. Within the period under study, linguistically the Chinese community was chiefly dominated by three Chinese dialects. Social life among the sub-groups was characterized by communication barriers. Along with the development of the community, the need was felt for these barriers to be eliminated since without a common language Chinese people could not coordinate their joint actions to protect as well as to benefit themselves. A process of language choice was thus started, which was fundamentally driven by social and cultural factors. As a result, Cantonese was selected as the common language. Roughly from 1860 on, the community became one which linguistically centred on Cantonese, a dialect then was in fact far from homogenous.

Outside the new Chinese community, a completely different common language had to be used for communicating with the European inhabitants. Churches and the Government had successively established schools to teach English to the Chinese. In doing so they hoped to facilitate their rule as well as to anglicize and Christianize the Chinese. But within the period under study, these schools attracted only a tiny number of Chinese pupils of poorest families who were looking for economic and social rewards only. On the whole, the Chinese community was strongly opposed to the study of English due to cultural differences. This made English language teaching a complete failure for about forty years, although this situation was to change gradually, especially after the mid-1880s.

The only lingua franca that connected the Chinese and the Europeans then was Chinese Pidgin English (CPE). This dissertation traces its origins, changing roles, and developments in the early years. Originating from Canton and Macao, this language was used mainly as a commercial jargon in the past in South China. After 1841, it was brought into Hong Kong by the Chinese and Europeans who moved into the Colony. In the beginning years of the Colony, surprisingly CPE functioned in a set of domains and had a considerable number of speakers of both the Chinese community and the European community because it was the only language that could act as a bridge between the two races. However, from about the 1870s onwards, it became apparent that CPE was not very well-suited to the increasing demands of a much complicated society. Lacking power and being labeled as low in prestige, CPE was gradually sidelined and abandoned.

Romanization

Within the period under study, there was no such thing as Hanyu Pinyin ('汉语拼音'), which is universally accepted and used almost all over the world. Therefore, different authors of Chinese and non-Chinese adopted different spelling systems to transcribe the traditional Chinese characters according to their own custom and usage, thus, confusion is inevitable. For example, today one often finds that different spellings represent the same Chinese character, and different Chinese characters are represented by the same spelling, although the latter case is relatively rare.

Obviously, it is impossible to standardize all the Romanized spellings of Chinese characters used in all the historical documents. So in this dissertation, in citations and in some special cases, proper nouns (including Chinese names of places, persons, institutions and organizations) are spelled in the ways that they most frequently appear in historical and contemporary English documents. In other cases, Hanyu Pinyin is used. For example, both 'Canton' and 'Guangzhou', or 'Hong Kong' and 'Hongkong', are used in this dissertation. The corresponding Chinese characters have been given when the romanization or Hanyu Pinyin appears for the first time.

Abbreviations

BB	Hong Kong Blue Books
BP	Hong Kong Government, Blue Paper
CM	China Mail
CR	The Chinese Repository
CW	China Review
DP	Daily Press
DWF	District Watch Force
EAC	Educational Association of China
FC	Friend of China
GBSC	Report from the Select committee on commercial relations with China
GCPMC	General Conference of the Protestant Missionaries of China
HSA	Historical and Statistical Abstracts of the Colony of Hong Kong, 1841—1930
HKS	Hong Kong Statistics
HKAAR	Hong Kong Annual Administration Reports (v. 1, compiled by R. L. Jarman, 1996)
JHKBRAS	Journal of the Hong Kong Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society
HKGG	Hong Kong Government Gazette

HSHK	Historical and Statistical Abstracts of the Colony of Hong Kong
KSC	Kam Shan Chung
NPH	Nam Pak Hong
PLK	Po Leung Kuk
SP	Hong Kong Sessional Papers
TWH	Tung Wah Hospital
TWHC	Tung Wah Hospital Committee

Contents

Chapter 1
Introduction

Research Questions

Synthesizing enthnolinguistic/anthropolinguistic, sociolinguistic, anthropological, sociological and historical approaches, this dissertation attempts to give a tentative but detailed account of some major parts of the relationship between language and society in early Hong Kong (1841—1884).

Focusing mainly on the early new Chinese community ('华人社会'), the aim of this dissertation is to trace and describe the related historical, social, anthropological and linguistic processes through which relevant languages/dialects were 'selected' by the new Chinese community and the whole society to serve as the proper means of intra-group and inter-group communication. In these processes, as we shall see later, the factors of historical events, cultural identification, power-related social elements and ethnolinguistic vitality had been proved to be crucial. Therefore, in order to come to a better understanding of the processes, we shall look in some detail at the forming, development and roles of the new Chinese community and the whole society on the one hand, and the Chinese ethnic dialects (mainly '粤方言' Cantonese, '客家话' Hakka and '福佬话' Hoklo) and the English-based

languages (including English and Chinese Pidgin English, CPE) on the other hand. By examining these historical, social, cultural, anthropological and linguistic conditions in the early years of Hong Kong's history, it is hoped to understand and trace the language choice, language spread and language shift that have resulted from them. With this intention, this dissertation is not designed to be a pure linguistic study; rather, it is intended to be an interdisciplinary study of the sociology of language.

Today, it is widely believed that there are close relationships between language and society, and therefore, 'an understanding of power relations is important in tracing the history of a language' (Knowles, 1997: 4). Many eminent linguists and scholars of related fields all over the world have emphasized the importance of the relationships repeatedly. They believe that language is primarily a cultural or social product. For example, according to one of the greatest American linguists and anthropologists, E. Sapir (1921: 4), 'speech [language] is a human activity that varies without assignable limit as we pass from social group to social group, because it is a purely historical heritage of the group, the product of long-continued social usage'. Another most outstanding American linguist, L. Bloomfield (1935: 42), also points out that 'all the so-called higher activities of man—our specifically human activities — spring from the close adjustment among individuals which we call society, and this adjustment, in turn, is based upon language'. In fact, linguists, anthropologists, sociologists and scholars in many other relevant disciplines all over the world all agree that language enjoys so close a relationship with society that it has already become a natural part of people's everyday life. As pointed out

by E. Sapir (1949: 146),   ' it is difficult to see adequately the functions of language, because it is so deeply rooted in the whole of human behavior that it may be suspected that there is little in the functional side of our conscious behavior in which language does not play its part'.

From the perspectives of linguistics, we could say with complete safety that without language, there is no society. It is quite obvious that any kind of normal society will be ' impossible without control, which is communicated through language'   (Giles & Robinson, 1990: 271). For example, without the effective control which is easily made possible by language, the ' rights and responsibilities involved in such systems as law, medicine, and religion cannot be fulfilled'   (Saville-Troike, 1989: 39). On the other side, seen from the perspective of society, it is equally right to say that without the conditions of a given society, there can be no such thing as a particular language or dialect since ' the use of any given language in a specific population is associated with social conventions. Social norms account for the birth and continuation of languages' (Ben-Rafael, 1994: 7). Language therefore can be regarded as a system that is determined to a very large extent by its related social factors of the community or the society in which it is spoken.

Armed with these general insights, we can begin to consider the specific case of early Hong Kong (1841—1884). As a direct result of the Opium War, the small Island of Hong Kong was ceded to the English in the early 1840s. The creation of the Crown Colony of Hong Kong immediately attracted tens of thousands of immigrants from Mainland China. Therefore, within a very short time, a unique and brand-new

Chinese community was formed. Economically and commercially motivated and oriented, this Chinese community had at least two most salient characteristics: it was a community consisting essentially of transient workers from South China, mainly Guangdong ('广东省') and Fujian ('福建省'), who generally only stayed there for a few years. It was a community which lived its life in seclusion fundamentally from the colonial Government and the European community. In fact, as far as everyday life and routine work were concerned, it lived independently of the colonizers and any other Western inhabitants. Within the period under study, the massive Chinese immigrants lived together and established gradually their own social structures. For example, very soon they were organized and led by some of their own new local headmen who were mostly Cantonese-speaking, wealthy and influential compradors and Hong merchants. Therefore, this new Chinese community was an autonomous entity with respect to civil affairs, though, in a certain sense, this state was not of their own choice, but was imposed on them by the English colonizers and other Westerners, who separated the community from theirs purposefully. At that time, except within some special fields, mainly commerce and service (however, in these two fields the contacts between the Chinese and the Europeans were intensive), the new Chinese community was severely isolated from the Government and the Europeans. In this regard, as already pointed out by Sinn (1989: 7), it could be said with considerable confidence that early Hong Kong was of segregation in essence, which means segregation between the colonial Government and the Chinese people, and between the European community and the Chinese community. This kind of segregation 'was, for the most part,

a tacitly agreed principle in their [the Chinese and the Europeans] co-existence'. All these inevitably influenced greatly the developments of language and communication in early Hong Kong in subsequent years.

Linguistically, within these years, this newly emerged Chinese community quickly became aware of a serious linguistic communication difficulty. There were too many ethnic dialects in use, however, not any single one could serve as an effective medium for either internal or external communication. This community was formed as a result of random immigration and contained no evidence of careful planning. Since these immigrants belonged to various Chinese ethnic groups, they brought along with them their various mother-tongues — mostly, varieties of Cantonese ('粤方言'、'广州话'、'本地话'), Hakka ('客方言') and Hoklo ('闽方言'、'福佬话'), which were unintelligible to each other in nature. In fact, due to lack of an effective, pre-existing communication system, in extreme situations these Chinese ethnic dialect speakers had to resort to Chinese Pidgin English (CPE hereafter) for external communication. Very soon this difficulty forced these dialect-speaking Chinese newcomers to accommodate their dialects in each other's direction actively and decisively while in the meantime in equal effort maintaining some kind of ethnolinguistic distance amongst themselves. They knew that without a common and effective channel of communication to harmonize their actions, it would not be possible for them to protect or benefit themselves. As we will see, particularly in times of hardship, a common linguistic code would serve as a most powerful symbol and tool for the Chinese community. We hope to find out in some detail the processes through which Cantonese dialect rose to become such a common language for the Chinese in their intra-group