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Code-Mixing and Code Choice
A Hong Kong Case Study

John Gibbons

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Preface: Sociolinguistics and Hong Kong

Sociolinguistics as an area of study has experienced explosive growth over the past twenty years, with the appearance of many journals and books. Of interest in its own right, Sociolinguistics can also supply valuable information and ideas to linguists, sociologists, anthropologists and educationalists. After a period of varied approaches and disparate findings, discernible attempts are being made to evaluate, rationalize and integrate work in the field (see for example, Hudson, 1980; Dittmar, 1976; and Saville-Troike, 1982). In line with this trend, a major aim of this book is to use a range of different sociolinguistic approaches on a single speech community, in order both to test their analytical and descriptive value and to work towards a more unified descriptive framework. The focus is on language use rather than language proficiency (although the two are obviously related).

A colony in an era when such forms of government have been widely rejected and replaced, the position of Hong Kong as a Western outpost in the heart of Asia has resulted in a cultural cross-roads, a melting pot of Eastern and Western influences. A bustling economic success, Hong Kong was forced by massive immigration from China to use to the full the remarkable ingenuity, adaptability and grit of its people to provide the necessities of life. Partly as a consequence of the above, Hong Kong is of considerable linguistic interest. There are language communities from various regions of China, the sub-continent, and the West, as well as creole speakers from Macao (Thompson, 1960). Official language policy is one of Chinese–English bilingualism, in which the two languages co-exist uneasily. In spite of Hong Kong's potential interest, there has been relatively little research into the linguistic and sociolinguistic situation. Another aim of this study is to make a small contribution towards the stock of information available on language, particularly on code-mixing and code choice in Hong Kong. To keep the study within manageable bounds, the accessible, fairly homogeneous, bilingual community of students at the University of Hong Kong was used, since this is one of the few groups in

Hong Kong where one can rely (in most cases) on a reasonable bilingual proficiency, a pre-requisite for study of code choice.

The principal objectives of this work can therefore be summarized as follows:

1. to use and evaluate a number of sociolinguistic models and methods
2. to arrive at a more coherent model of code choice
3. to provide a substantial amount of information concerning the sociolinguistic behaviour of a specific Hong Kong group.

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1 The Language Situation in Hong Kong

Introduction

A broad understanding of the language situation in Hong Kong provides an essential context for the study of the speech behaviour of students at the University of Hong Kong, which acts in turn as a sounding board for the theoretical approaches discussed through this book. A good starting point for a general impression of Hong Kong's languages can be found in the government censuses of 1971 and 1981. Certain facts about the Hong Kong situation emerge in a striking fashion. First, despite Hong Kong's cosmopolitan multiracial appearance, in 1981 98% of the population was *Chinese* which means that Hong Kong is a far more racially homogeneous city than most in Britain and other western countries. This overwhelming numerical dominance of the Chinese population must affect the roles of languages in Hong Kong. A second salient fact is that Hong Kong is largely a first or second generation *migrant* community. For instance, in the period 1951–1981 there were more than a million immigrants into a population of around 5½ million. Third, the Hong Kong population is a *young* one. In 1981 the census figures were:

Under 15	:	24.8%
15–34	:	40.7%
35–64	:	27.9%
65 and over	:	6.6%
		100%

The information about language from the 1981 census had not been released when this was written. In the 1971 census we find that Cantonese is the "usual language" of 88% of the population. Speakers of other Chinese dialects form 10.29% of the population while English is the "usual

language" of only 1.04%. On this measure English falls below some comparatively obscure Chinese dialects.

A different picture emerges when we turn to the "ability to speak English" of non-native speakers. Some 25% of the population claim to speak English — 30% of men compared to 20% of women. This ability may, of course, be only marginal.

Unfortunately the census statistics provide little more information on language in Hong Kong. Consequently, some of the information in the rest of this chapter cannot be related to data and is therefore impressionistic, although reference to published information is made wherever possible.

Languages in Hong Kong

Cantonese

Cantonese is normally classified as a Chinese "dialect". According to Fraenkel (1967: 76) it has some 55 million speakers — a significant number. Mandarin and Cantonese are not mutually intelligible (although it is possible for their speakers to develop an understanding of the other's speech — see below).

The Cantonese of Hong Kong is fairly close to the Guangzhou (Canton) norm, reflecting mutual influence and the fact that many of Hong Kong's people have their origins in the region around Guangzhou. Some phonological changes appear to be in progress, however (Pan, 1982). There is no standard reference work for Cantonese but useful information can be found in Cheung (1972) and Hashimoto (1972).

Mandarin

Hereafter the chief spoken form of Chinese, also known as *Putonghua* and *Kow yü*, will be referred to by its best known English name — Mandarin. Useful linguistic descriptions can be found in Kratochvíl (1970) and Chao (1968). Mandarin is the national standard language (in slightly different forms) of Hong Kong's giant neighbour the People's Republic of China, and of Taiwan, and is an official language in Singapore. It is said to have in excess of 600 million speakers, the largest number of speakers of any language in the world, although the degree and type of proficiency of these speakers remain unverified. It is being adopted as a *lingua franca* among overseas Chinese communities.

In these circumstances one might expect Mandarin to play an important role as a second spoken language in Hong Kong. In fact this is not the case. It is taught to children in only a very small number of schools. For most Chinese people in Hong Kong, their major contact with Mandarin is through entertainment. The most common form is cinema, but it can also include popular songs and television programmes. In consequence many Hong Kong Chinese have some degree of listening comprehension ability in Mandarin, but are able to speak the language poorly, if at all. The listening ability is fostered by sub-titles and by regular phonological correspondences between Cantonese and Mandarin. The forthcoming changes in Hong Kong's political status will presumably lead to much more widespread attempts to learn Mandarin in Hong Kong.

Other Chinese Dialects

We have already noted that most of Hong Kong's population consists of immigrants or the descendants of immigrants: at the time of the British takeover the population could be numbered in thousands. Although most Hong Kong people trace their origins to Cantonese speaking areas, a sizeable minority originate from areas where other Chinese dialects are spoken. This minority brought their mother tongue with them, but now appear to be following a classic integrative pattern, by adopting the dominant local language — Cantonese (Fishman & Hofman, 1966, give an account of this same process in the U.S.A.). The 1971 census statistics show this clearly (see Table 1).

TABLE 1

	Usual Language		
Age Group	*Cantonese*	*Other Chinese Dialects*	*Others*
14 and below	92.1%	6.7%	1.2%
15 – 24	91.8%	6.9%	1.3%
25 – 39	87.2%	9.9%	2.9%
40 – 54	83.4%	15.3%	1.3%
55 and over	78.8%	20.5%	0.7%

One consequence is that schooling in dialects other than Cantonese has now virtually disappeared in Hong Kong. If these dialects are maintained, their use is limited largely to the home, and to certain small enclaves.

Written Chinese

A major unifying force among China's linguistically disparate peoples is their written system which, because it is fundamentally ideographic rather than phonetic (i.e. characters tend to represent meanings more than sounds), is capable of transcribing a large number of related languages/dialects (and, with modifications, unrelated or distantly related languages such as Japanese and Vietnamese) — see Newnham (1971) for details. The Chinese written language is of great antiquity, and over time written Chinese and the various spoken languages of China have diverged, although an attempt is now being made in mainland China to bring the written language nearer to the spoken. Since the government of China has resided in the north for a long period, the written language has been in a dynamic relationship of mutual influence with Mandarin — the spoken language of government and the capital. The result of the historical divergence, in conjunction with the influence of spoken Mandarin, is that written Chinese is different in many respects from Cantonese: differences include vocabulary, grammar and forms of expression. Consequently for Cantonese children learning written Chinese has some of the properties of learning a second language.

The accepted standard for written Chinese in Hong Kong is essentially traditional and literary (see Hsü, 1979: 130ff). The simplified characters and more colloquial style of mainland written Chinese are less usual in Hong Kong, and are found largely in publications with some specific allegiance to the People's Republic of China. There is also considerable variation in Hong Kong written Chinese, running from full literary Chinese to the equivalent of Cantonese written in characters. Educated Chinese immediately recognize the latter as deviant, and tend to be highly critical of the popular press in which it occurs.

English

As noted previously English is the usual language of only one per cent of people in Hong Kong, although approximately a quarter of the population claim some proficiency. As one would expect, given Hong Kong's colonial status the official norm is British English. Nevertheless, American English is not uncommon, partly because more Hong Kong people receive University education in North America than in Britain or Hong Kong. The English spoken by Chinese in Hong Kong runs along a continuum. from heavily Cantonese influenced variants to standard British English. Hunter (1974) points out that there is no local norm, unlike the

second language situation in India, Singapore or Kenya. However, Luke & Richards (1982) document "certain recognizable and distinctive features" of the middle proficiency Hong Kong English speaker.

Pidgin English

Whinnom (1971: 104) writes, concerning the "modern situation" in Hong Kong:

> "Pidgin is the language of Chinese. . . . It is the language in which the amah from Canton communicates with the cook-boy from Shanghai, and in which the shopkeeper will address a fellow trader from Fuchow."

In the article Whinnom makes a case for pidgin English being a *lingua franca* (everyday language of communication among speakers of different mother tongues) in certain Chinese social groups. In personal communication Whinnom has remarked that this situation existed during his period of residence in Hong Kong in the 1950's. However, one can say with some confidence that, apart from the occasional relic speaker, pidgin English has virtually disappeared in Hong Kong. The best available description of China coast pidgin English is Hall (1944).

Roles of Languages in Hong Kong

From what has been said so far it is apparent that the languages mainly used in Hong Kong are (spoken) Cantonese, Written Chinese and English. What follows is a brief summary of the roles played by these languages in various domains of Hong Kong life – more detailed descriptions can be found in Gibbons (1983) and Luke & Richards (1982). In keeping with normal Hong Kong practice when the term "Chinese" is used in this book it should be taken to mean spoken Cantonese and Written Chinese.

The Media

In newspapers, radio and television there is more Chinese than English, although English appears over-represented given the number of speakers.

Law and Government

There is official parity of English and Chinese, although in practice English appears to have precedence in authority, and Chinese in frequency of use. The internal written language of law and the Civil Service is English.

Business and Employment

Cantonese (occasionally with additive material from English) is the normal spoken language of the Chinese business community. Because of its prestige connotations and suitability to the appurtenances of the modern office (typewriters, computers etc.) English is comparatively common in writing, especially in the higher echelons. Hong Kong people place great importance on the learning of English for employment purposes, in part because they are well aware that a knowledge of English correlates with income, prestige of employment and educational level (Westcott, 1977).

Education

There is a 2% minority (Education Department figures) of expatriate children who attend schools with German, French, Japanese, American, British and other curricula. The remaining (mostly Chinese) 98% of children attend schools where the curriculum relates to Hong Kong and the language of instruction ("medium") is officially either English or Chinese. The situation regarding the medium of instruction in such schools, expressed in terms of percentages of students enrolled in March 1980, was the following:

Primary schools: Chinese medium: 91.4%; English medium: 8.6%
Secondary schools: Chinese medium: 12.3%; English medium: 87.7%

(Education Department figures). The change of medium between primary and secondary schools is startling and has been the cause of much public controversy, although it has been brought about mainly by parental demand. In reality the situation is not so clear cut, since both languages are used in most schools whatever the ostensible medium. For a more detailed discussion of this issue see Gibbons (1982).

At the tertiary level the University of Hong Kong is primarily English medium although Cantonese is used in tutorials on occasions. The Chinese University is predominantly Chinese medium (i.e. Written Chinese and spoken Cantonese); however, English (particularly reading matter) and

Mandarin speech are also used. In the two Polytechnics most writing is in English but Cantonese is not uncommon in spoken instruction. Of the three teacher training colleges, two are officially entirely English medium and the third offers courses taught in both English and Chinese. The other three "recognized" tertiary colleges have a mixture of language media. Overall at the tertiary level there is a strong tendency for reading material to be in English while speech is in Cantonese whatever the official language policy of the institution concerned.

Status of English and Chinese

The *lingua francas* of Hong Kong mirror a social division between Westerners and Chinese. Despite the significant numbers of French and German speakers, the *lingua franca* of Westerners in Hong Kong is English. For instance, a small scale survey of children from German speaking homes showed that nearly all of those who had been in Hong Kong for more than a year had a high level of proficiency in English. Among Chinese, however, the *lingua franca* is Cantonese (and written Chinese). The language shift to Cantonese among speakers of other Chinese languages has already been documented. Luke & Richards (1982) believe that this is a result of a high degree of "enclosure", that is that Chinese and expatriates essentially live in isolated communities: they refer (p. 52) to "separate life styles and value systems and . . . little interaction between the two groups". In this respect Hong Kong may not be markedly different from other societies with substantial transient expatriate communities. Luke & Richards (1982: 58) also point out that frequent Cantonese–English code-switching "is not a common feature of the speech repertoire of Hong Kong Cantonese".

The status of English in Hong Kong is somewhat unusual. In countries such as India, Ivory Coast or Mozambique the former colonial language is a *lingua franca* of the educated local élite, comprising one common form of local *internal* communication — these might be seen as true *second language* situations. As far as the local Hong Kong population is concerned, English does not play such a role: its uses in internal communication are predominantly limited to official writing — Chinese rarely speak English to one another. By contrast in Chile or Poland, Spanish and Polish respectively serve for all purposes of internal communication — other languages are learnt essentially for *external* communication. These comprise true *foreign language* situations. Since English in Hong Kong is used in both education and the law, it cannot be said to be a foreign language in this sense. In consequence Luke & Richards (1982) refer to the status of English in Hong Kong as an "auxiliary language".

Language Attitudes

Language attitudes frequently reflect the history and current position of different linguistic groups within a society (see, for example, Edwards, 1979). Fu (1979) gives a lucid historical survey of language in education in Hong Kong. She shows how colonial governments frequently accorded an inferior role to the Chinese language. It is only in the post-war era that Chinese has come to be treated as a partner with English. Chinese attitudes to the West were similar. The Chinese view of themselves as superior and of outsiders as barbarians is well documented (see for example Wright, 1953). These historical legacies are likely to influence attitudes to English and Chinese.

In the current situation there are a number of factors which may influence attitudes. The first is that English native speakers in Hong Kong mostly comprise an élite group. They tend to be skilled professionals with good incomes. Relations between Chinese and Westerners generally appear to lack antagonism, but are not particularly warm. Turning to the Chinese population, one should remember that proficiency in English correlates with educational level, prestigious employment, and (not least) with income.

Another possible influence on language attitudes is the spread of the international (but English language) 'pop' culture, especially among younger people in Hong Kong. For instance, some Cantonese radio stations play a significant proportion of English language records. Local fashion and film magazines refer often to the West, and incorporate fragments of English. Chinese traditional dress, hair styles and entertainment tend to be replaced by Western imports, or local hybrids of East and West. Indeed, to some extent, the same could be said of architecture, arts, government and education, and even (to a lesser degree) of eating habits. Nevertheless most Chinese people in Hong Kong appear to have a strong sense of Chineseness and to be proud of their national identity.

The study of language attitudes in this setting is of evident interest. In fact this may be the best studied area in language research in Hong Kong. There have been a number of attitude studies, nearly all using Chinese students in secondary schools or universities, examining attitudes towards English and Chinese. This is useful for the purposes of this book, although the results of these studies obviously cannot be taken as necessarily representing the attitudes of the wider community.

The first published study to examine attitudes in depth was Cheng, Shek, Tse & Wong (1973). Their work is unashamedly polemical, and the first