

Title: THE ECOLOGY OF LITERACY IN HONG KONG

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Introduction: Hong Kong as a Cultural and Linguistic Crossroads

The majority of people in Hong Kong are ethnically Chinese, and are either immigrants from southern China, especially from Guangdong and Fujian provinces, or descendants of immigrants from those regions of China. Hong Kong presents an interesting case for literacy research as one of the major meeting places of diverse peoples, cultures and language varieties given its over 150 years' history as a trading port ceded in 1842 from Dynastic China to Britain until 1997, when it was handed over to the People's Republic of China as a Special Administrative Region keeping many of its existing legal and civil institutions intact. As an international financial city in the 21st century, it seems even more globalized than other cities in China and Asia with its advanced, globalized telecommunications systems, western free trade and legal institutions, and frequent flows of tourists and business executives from Mainland China, Taiwan, different parts of Asia and all over the world.

The everyday literacy practices of the predominantly Cantonese-speaking people in Hong Kong are thus highly hybridized with linguistic and cultural influences from diverse sources, including frequent linguistic mixing and switching in both speech and writing. Such hybridized practices are, however, seldom seen as 'good' literacy practices by mainstream literacy education and government official norms. However, Hong Kong people's everyday literacy practices have not been subjected to any serious linguistic planning or standardizing efforts of the government, either. **While Cantonese can be written by newly made characters or by drawing on characters in written Chinese (see studies on newspaper literacy below), the Hong Kong government and official, educational institutions do not recognize Cantonese as a written language in its own right, but only as a spoken vernacular.** School literacies and everyday literacies outside of school, thus, seem to be treated as two systems largely encapsulated from each other. Research studies in these two areas also seem to be encapsulated from each other due to traditionally little interaction between sociolinguists and literacy educators in Hong Kong. In this chapter I shall outline the development of literacy research in Hong Kong and propose some directions for future research that seek to both respond to the emerging new media literacy practices among young people and to build bridges between school literacies and everyday literacies, drawing on the ecological framework of continua of biliteracy from Hornberger (2003).

Early Developments

Luke and Richards (1982)'s article on the status and functions of English in Hong Kong represents one of the early efforts in charting out the general ecology of language use in Hong Kong. While the paper focused on English it also touched on the functions and status of other language varieties used in Hong Kong. Hong Kong was characterized by Luke and Richards (ibid) as a situation of 'diglossia without bilingualism'. As a British colony (from 1842 to 1997) English occupied the high position of formal language in most official and education domains while the vernacular, Cantonese, occupied the low domains in people's social and everyday life. Luke and Richards (1982) argued that there existed a small group of Chinese-English conversant bilingual elite who function as the middle-people between the British ruling class the Cantonese-speaking masses. The ruling English speakers and the massive Cantonese speakers were characterized in this study as largely socially and linguistically encapsulated from each other.

Luke and Richards' study (1982) provided a general background to understand the language ecology in Hong Kong in the 1960s to the 1980s (Li's study [1999, see next Section] will provide an update of the situation from the 1990s onwards). It can be said that the majority of people in Hong Kong largely function in a Cantonese linguistic environment. Snow's studies (e.g., his doctoral thesis in 1993 and his book based on his thesis in 2004) offered the most comprehensive documentation of the historical development of a written Cantonese literature since the Ming dynasty (e.g., Cantonese opera scripts, Buddhist chants and verses written in Cantonese) in Southern China. Snow's detailed study of the historical origins and development of the Dialect Literature Movement (DLM) in Southeast China in the first half of the 20th century (particularly related to the literacy work of communist workers in the rural areas) provided us with a rare window on how written Cantonese literature has had a long history associated with community development work and empowerment of the rural and working classes in the Cantonese speaking areas of Southeast China, including Hong Kong. Snow also provided a historical outline of the social and economic factors leading to the flourishing of Cantonese-style writing in popular newspapers, magazines, advertising and private communications after the Second World War, especially during the 1970s-1990s when Hong Kong became increasingly urbanized, commercialized and witnessed an economic boom that brought about the rise of local Cantonese popular culture and Cantonese mass media entertainment.

Other early studies by local sociolinguists have centred on newspaper literacy in Hong Kong. The methodology used is mainly linguistic analysis of texts. For instance,

Luke and Nancarrow (1991) described the unique linguistic features of Hong Kong newspaper writing and identify the sources of linguistic influences as multiple: spoken Chinese (*Putonghua*), modern written Chinese (*baihua wen*), Classical Chinese (*wenyan*) and spoken Cantonese. This unique form of literacy also feeds back into spoken Cantonese as a high variety of spoken Cantonese (e.g., in formal news broadcast speech, documentary commentaries and dialogues and narration in historical TV dramas). Luke and Nancarrow (*ibid*) thus argued that the ability to speak formally must also be regarded as part of literacy, and spoken Cantonese in its more formal styles would equally require learning and practice. Luke and Nancarrow also argued that the unique way of teaching Chinese texts in Hong Kong schools also provided the general reading public with the skills and conversion rules to read Hong Kong style newspaper literacy. Children in Hong Kong schools are taught to read aloud modern written Chinese in spoken Cantonese. In this way Hong Kong people have been socialized into ways of converting formal Chinese writings into spoken Cantonese and vice versa. However, as sociolinguists researching language use largely outside of school settings, Luke and Nancarrow (*ibid*) did not provide any detailed description of the processes in which children are socialized into the above literacy and oral practices between spoken Cantonese and Standard Written Chinese and there has been little research in this specific area to date.

Apart from analyzing the linguistic sources of influences on newspaper writing style, early studies also focus on analyzing the systematic ways in which spoken Cantonese is represented in popular writing. Luke (1995) analysed the writing system in Cantonese paperbacks in Hong Kong. The 1980s witnessed the rise of popular pocket-size books in Hong Kong. These books cover a variety of genres (e.g., 'how-to' manuals, short essays, stories, romance fiction, jokes, etc.) and a diverse range of topics (e.g., how to invest, how to keep fit, how to make friends, how to dress up, etc., or short witty essays on everyday observations of city life and people from different walks of lives in Hong Kong). Since these topics are closely related to the everyday life of most Hong Kong people the language style of these popular books is very close to the colloquial spoken language used in Hong Kong people's daily life; i.e., spoken Cantonese with occasion mixing in of English words related to everyday topics and events of Hong Kong (e.g., marketing, creative, presentation). Luke (1995) focused on the informal but systematic ways in which the everyday spoken language of Hong Kong people is represented in these books. He concludes that when a spoken Cantonese word does not have a corresponding Chinese character, the most frequently used ways to overcome this orthographic gap are: (1) to use a Chinese character that has the same or a similar sound to that of the Cantonese word,

and (2) if there does not exist a Chinese character with the same or a similar sound, new characters will be made from parts of existing Chinese characters to represent the Cantonese word. Sometimes, English letters or words with similar sounds are used but this is not a frequent practice compared with the above-mentioned two practices.

Major Contributions

Due to the expansion of secondary education in the late 1970s and 1980s and the expansion of higher education in the 1990s, the bilingual middle class has expanded and in a recent article by Luke (2003), Hong Kong society in the post-1997 era is described as one experiencing ‘decreasing diglossia with increasing bilingualism’. Luke (2003) argued that after 1997 many important political speeches are made in both Cantonese and English (or more in Cantonese than in English, e.g., in the Legislative Council) and there is the rise of Cantonese as a main working language in more and more high domains which used to be the exclusive territory of English. Putonghua (the national standard spoken language of China), on the other hand, in the post-1997 era has risen in importance in two radically different domains: the ‘super-high’ domain where its use is symbolic of national sovereignty, and the low domain of tourism and services where its use is functional and practical in dealing with tourists from Mainland.

Li (1999) also provided an update of the general language education in Hong Kong since Luke and Richards (1982). Li described the sociolinguistic matrix by outlining the distribution of the main functions of the two written languages: standard written Chinese (SWC, also variously known as MSC—modern standard Chinese, modern written Chinese, or ‘baihua wen’) and English, and the three spoken languages: Cantonese, English and Putonghua (the standard spoken language of China), in four key domains: government, media, employment and education. Cantonese and English remain the most important spoken languages in Hong Kong society. Li argued that the macro-sociolinguistic analysis, ‘diglossia without bilingualism’ (Luke and Richards, 1982), should be replaced by ‘polyglossia with increasing bilingualism’. Li pointed out that there are two written High varieties, SWC and English, and the former is penetrating into some domains formerly dominated by the latter in post-1997 Hong Kong. Cantonese, typically interspersed with some English words or phrases, is assigned Low functions in both spoken and written mediums. Li argued that there is some indication that Putonghua is getting increasingly important in post-colonial Hong Kong, but there are as yet no significant social functions assigned to it. Compared with the early 1980s, significant changes have taken place at all levels. These changes centre on the increasing hybridization of different language resources

(e.g., English, Cantonese, SWC) in everyday informal spoken and written language: code-mixing and switching practices are increasingly common nowadays in Hong Kong (see Li, 2002 for a comprehensive survey of code-mixing and switching research in Hong Kong).

The language-in-education policy issues have also been intensively researched on. Pennycook (1998, 2002) analysed the language-in-education policy issues in 19th and early 20th century Hong Kong, and argued that the British colonial government's Orientalist mother-tongue (vernacular) education policy might itself be infused with social control and cultural governance desires (e.g., via Confucianist ideologies of respect for the authorities). Key studies have revolved around the research questions of how the government's recent medium-of-instruction policy for secondary schools has been received or resisted in the schools (Poon, 1999; 2000a, 2000b). Lin (2005) summarized the research literature and discussed how the government and official educational institutions' English dominant policy (reinforced by recent globalization forces and discourses) has further stratified the society into the English-conversant bi/multilingual cosmopolitan elite and the largely (Cantonese) monolingual working masses, and how language policy functions to produce subaltern (marginalized) identities and subjectivities. Tsui's study (2006) also expressed similar views.

Recent studies on mass media literacy have largely carried on with the linguistic tradition of analysis from early studies laid down by Luke and his colleagues. For instance, Li (2000) offered a comprehensive review and extension of the linguistic analysis of Cantonese literacy styles in newspaper and other mass media in Hong Kong in the 1990s. He focused on the major research question that Luke and others have started off with: how do the Cantonese mass media workers in Hong Kong cope with the task of representing colloquial Cantonese speech in writing. He concluded that many young people in Hong Kong, when they write and speak in informal situations, readily draw on whatever resources available to them for effective communication:

A more realistic analysis of the trilingual situation in Hong Kong is that, given the need to lend expression to the vernacular they know best, speakers of Cantonese turn to Modern Standard Chinese (MSC) and English for contingent, sometimes idiosyncratic solutions to fill the orthographic gap in the non-standard variety (Li, 2000)

The 'non-standard variety' in the above quote refers to the newspaper style of writing that Luke and others have studied since the early 1990s. Recent studies by Wu

(2000, 2006a, 2006b) on the features of orality in Hong Kong print media, especially in commercial and political advertising and local news and entertainment news texts, showed the increasing use of oral involvement strategies:

Three different forms of orality that are mingled in the different types of written media discourse are identified: 1) question-answer pairs; 2) general emphatics, first person pronouns and second person pronouns; 3) colloquial Cantonese. Besides their interpersonal function of involvement and the social functions of solidarity and in-group identity, these orality features and strategies are found to 1) help the success of an advertisement by enhancing its attention value, readability, memorability, and consequently selling power, 2) enhance the immediacy, credibility, and objectivity of the news reporting by foregrounding the individual's voice, style or comments. (Wu, 2000, p. 87)

Wu (2000, 2006a, 2006b) argued that a dynamic rather than a purist approach towards language use and cultural expressions in society should be taken and the use of colloquial Cantonese speech features and the mixing of SWC, English and Cantonese in print media should be seen as the creative use of diverse linguistic resources for persuasive writing and effective communication rather than as signs of a decline in the society's language standards.

While the above-cited sociolinguists have largely researched on the majority language—Chinese or Cantonese (albeit with the mixing in of some English words/letters)—mass media texts, a number of local sociolinguists have also researched on the linguistic features of English as well as the ecology of English use in Hong Kong. Bolton's edited volume (2002) offered one of the first comprehensive efforts in documenting works in this area. Of particular interest in this collection are articles by Bolton (2002), Chan (2002) and Lam (2002).

Bolton (2002, p. 34) argued that Hong Kong has moved from 'elitist bilingualism' to 'mass bilingualism', citing the census statistics that indicate a rise in the proportion of the population claiming a knowledge of English over the decades, as illustrated in the table below:

1931	1961	1966	1971	1991	1996	2001
6.3%	9.7%	20.0%	25.5%	31.6%	38.1%	43.0%

Table 1: Census results for self-reported knowledge of English in Hong Kong 1931-2001 (from Bolton, 2002, p. 34)

While self-reports cannot be taken as accurate measures of the population's English proficiency, they do reflect a rising trend of confidence in one's knowledge in English among Hong Kong people. Drawing on a number of criteria for the development of world Englishes, Bolton (2002) argued that the Hong Kong society has the potential to develop its own variety of English--Hong Kong English.

However, Bolton's view might be seen as a bit optimistic for the actual proportion of Hong Kong people actively using English in their everyday life seems to remain small. Chan (2002) offered an instructive window with telling figures and statistics on the diminishing readership of *South China Morning Post*, the major English language newspaper in Hong Kong. Similar trends are happening in English language broadcasting: the audiences of the English TV and radio channels have been limited and have further diminished after 1997. English 'mass' media in Hong Kong seems to draw their readers and audiences mainly from the expatriate communities as well as the well-educated professional bilingual communities, and have not reached the 'masses' yet.

Are there any English creative works and literacy circles in Hong Kong? Lam (2002)'s article provided observations on the small but vibrant amount of English literacy activity in Hong Kong, mainly among English writers or well-educated Chinese writers. While Lam (2002) proposed that there should be more English literary creative programmes in university, it seems that to attract more young people to engage in English literary activities, language arts education needs to be strengthened in the primary and secondary school sectors too and more links and cross-fertilization should be fostered between young people's Chinese/Cantonese pop cultural activities and English language arts activities (see Lin's work-in-progress in the next two sections).

Work in Progress

There is much work in progress which cannot all be covered in the limited space of this paper. I shall, therefore, summarize studies deemed to be most relevant to literacy educators. One interesting area of research is that of 'Hong Kong English': e.g., whether it is a fully or partially developed indigenous variety of English, and whether pedagogically Hong Kong English can be adopted as a viable target model (see views expressed by Andy Kirpatrick, 2006, cited in *Ming Pao Daily*, 4 Sept 2006, p. 16). Li concludes in his recent study (forthcoming) as follows:

In sum, what is proposed here is a radically re-structured curriculum that

incorporates the strengths and insights of WE and ELF research and the empowering potential of Standard English. ... [we have] HKE [Hong Kong English], where a common core is similarly supplemented by an indigenized vocabulary that is incomprehensible to those who are unfamiliar with Hong Kong culture... (Li, under review, p. 17)

Another piece of work-in-progress (Cheng and Warren, forthcoming) examines the structure and linguistic realisations of disagreements in a corpus of Hong Kong spoken business discourses. The findings are compared with the forms of disagreement, and their associated realisations, represented in Hong Kong school English language textbooks. Important differences were found: Students in Hong Kong are taught to be more direct in English than real-life norms would permit. Cheng & Warren (forthcoming) find this problematic, especially when Hong Kong Chinese tend to have a cultural preference to be indirect and to be other-oriented.

While Hong Kong English has been a hot topic for research, few studies have researched on the Cantonese spoken language development of children in Hong Kong. A seminar by Benjamin Tsou and his colleagues (2006) reported on their ongoing pioneering work to develop a Hong Kong Cantonese Oral Language Assessment Scheme (HKCOLAS) for use by speech therapists working with Cantonese children in Hong Kong. Their study involves analysis of large corpuses of Chinese newspaper language and textbook language collected over the past ten years, which provide useful data for future research on the features of media literacy in Hong Kong. With further research and development the scheme might be adapted for use by teachers in school settings too.

Even fewer sociolinguistic studies in Hong Kong have looked at youth subcultural literacies and explored the educational potential of these youth informal literacies. Lin (forthcoming)'s study of hip hop youth subculture and rap lyrics in Hong Kong is the first study of this kind in Hong Kong. Making local hip hop music and lyrics in Hong Kong has always been a marginal practice engaged in mostly by grass-root youths who find in this trans-local music genre and sub-culture the powerful symbolisms to express their defiant voices to mainstream society. These Hong Kong youths express in their local language—Cantonese—rap lyrics their sharp critique of society, of the education system, and of what they see as mainstream hypocritical practices and overly commercialized mass media practices. Through using Cantonese raps in artful ways they construct alternative discursive spaces where their defiant voices and sharp social critique can be heard in a fun yet powerful genre. In

Lin's study (ibid), she drew on interviews of a first-generation Hong Kong hip hop MC—MC Yan of the former popular Hong Kong band, LMF (*LazyMuthaFuckaz*), and analysis of his Cantonese hip hop lyrics to discuss how some youths in Hong Kong construct their powerful voices and identities in pockets of alternative spaces in a society that privileges the middle classes with their cultural capital, and in an education system where the local language of Cantonese is *officially* placed at the bottom of the linguistic hierarchy, albeit it is the indispensable (but often backgrounded) working language of everyday life. To MC Yan, both rapping and street graffiti are part of his larger public educational project to make his message known/seen/heard by more people in Hong Kong and China. In his words, '*My message is to ask people to reflect, to use their brains to think and their hearts to feel.*' The artwork he did for a local magazine (see Fig. 1) shows his experimental efforts to combine street graffiti art with Cantonese rap lyrics to convey a political message, using metaphors to satirically refer to China's political moves to set up legislation that will reduce the freedom of speech in Hong Kong. Blurred in the background picture were some policemen rounding up a pedestrian in a street in Sam Shui Po, one of the poorest ghetto areas in Hong Kong. Overlaid on the picture in the left bottom corner is a photo of MCYan's street graffiti tag (his signature: SYan). The white graphic design above the Cantonese lyrics is composed of two Chinese characters (meaning 'seventeen', the name of the local youth magazine) written in graffiti style and turned anti-clockwise by 90 degrees. Analysis of this piece of artwork, drawing on Hornberger (2003)'s continua of biliteracy, would involve blurring the boundaries of oral and written language, of English and Chinese, of Chinese and Cantonese (The English words, 'The Rap is:', precede the Cantonese rap lyrics written in Chinese characters), of reception and production (e.g., rap lyrics written to be both *read* and *rapped*), and of micro and macro analysis (e.g., the micro analysis of the Cantonese rhyming structure and colloquial lexical pattern in the rap lyrics should be situated in the analysis of the macro sociopolitical context to which this piece of rap lyrics respond with a protest message).

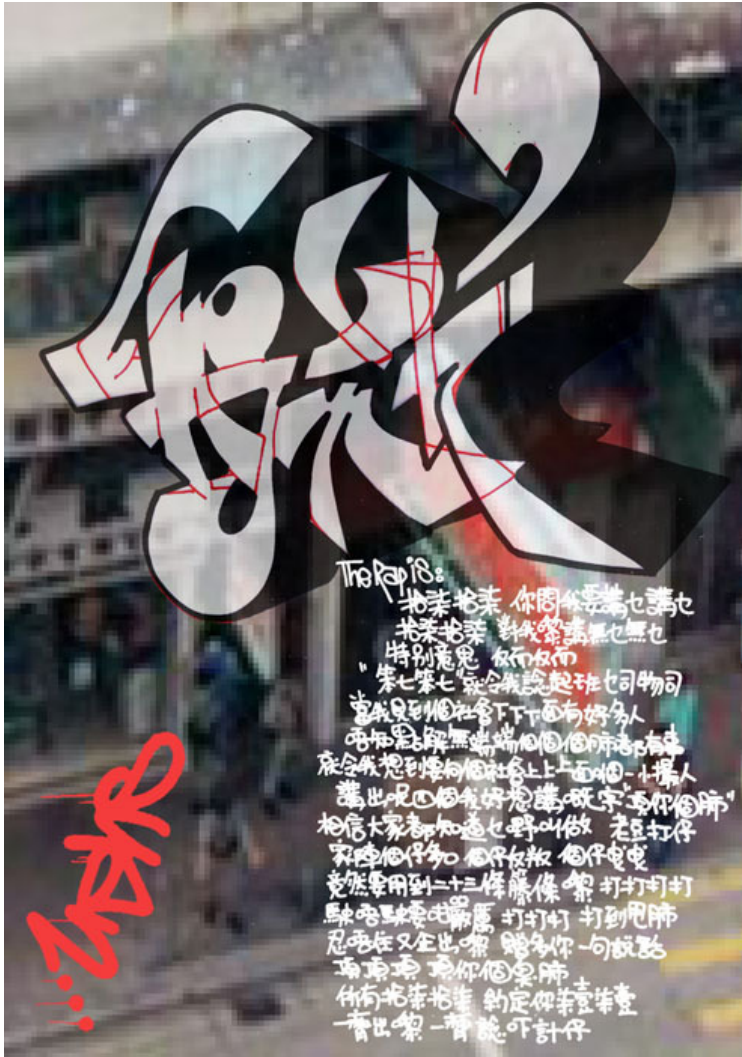


Fig. 1: MC Yan’s artwork for a local magazine: combining street graffiti artwork with Cantonese rap lyrics in print media

It seems that there is a possibility to draw on youth subcultural hip hop culture and its artistic and linguistic creative practices as resources for a critical public pedagogy (Carrington and Luke, 1997) that reaches out to youths and peoples beyond the classroom. There remains a lot of work to be done in this area to chart out what exactly such a pedagogy would look like and what effects that might have.

Problems, Difficulties and Future Directions for Research

It seems that the body of research on the ecology of literacy in Hong Kong has traditionally focused mainly on linguistic analysis of mass media texts. The research methodology can be broadened from linguistic text analysis to include ethnographic studies of youth literacy practices; i.e., to analyse not only the texts but also the

literacy practices situated in different communities and youth subcultures. In fact the everyday, informal literacies are as important as school literacies in light of Hornberger (2003)'s ecological framework of continua of biliteracy. Traditionally, researchers and educators in Hong Kong have tended to treat everyday literacies as separate from school literacies instead of seeing them as lying on continua—the oral and the literate traditions, the standard Chinese language and the vernacular Cantonese language, Chinese and English linguistic and literary resources. All of these should be conceived as constituting overlapping continua rather than different, encapsulated language systems. **Researchers whose works were reviewed above tend to work in largely encapsulated arenas; e.g., on Hong Kong English, or on Chinese media literacy. However, if we are informed by Hornberger's continua of bi/multi-literacy, there should be more cross-over and collaboration among researchers working on English and Chinese literacies, formal and informal literacies, oral and written language practices, standard and vernacular language practices, etc.**

Literacy researchers should also expand their analysis to cover the newly emerging literacies mediated by new digital media. Every day many Hong Kong young people are spending a lot of their time using literacies in the new communication media: MSN/ICQ ('I seek you'), email, SMS, weblogs, etc. A lot of literacy practices are going on without receiving much sociolinguistics researchers and literacy educators' attention (but see the on-going research projects of Angel Lin on youth SMS practices and on-going projects of Rodney Jones (2006) on ICQ and electronic discourse practices in Hong Kong). Without understanding young people's outside-of-school informal literacy practices, school literacy educators cannot think of innovative ways to link everyday literacies with school literacies to help students access school literacies without finding the latter alien or irrelevant to their everyday lives. Treating different literacies as encapsulated systems only makes us neglect the rich potential of innovative bi-/multi-literacy and language arts programmes that can be developed to draw on different linguistic, subcultural and literate traditions and resources to support the development of multiple literacies; e.g., using rap lyrics genres to bridge youth popular cultural literacy and school literacy (see Lin, A. and Chan K. Y., forthcoming). Future research directions should therefore take a much more holistic, ecological perspective on multiple literacies and draw on the framework of continua of biliteracy developed by Hornberger (2003) to conceptualize, research, and develop education programmes on different literacies as mutually affecting and supporting one another.

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