

EDUCATION

SCHOOLS MAY BE KILLING DIALECT

Linguists warn that using Putonghua to teach Chinese language is shifting the balance against Cantonese, which could die within generations

Simon Parry

Education officials have been urged to review their policy of using Putonghua to teach Chinese language and literacy in Hong Kong, amid fears that Cantonese is becoming marginalised and is at risk of dying out within generations.

More than 160 of the city's 1,025 government primary and secondary schools are using Putonghua in Chinese language lessons after a government policy encouraging a switch was introduced in 2003. Before that Cantonese had been used.

However, linguists say studies indicate the policy is accelerating the decline in the use of Cantonese in Hong Kong and could contribute to the ultimate disappearance of the language as Putonghua becomes more widely used.

Stephen Matthews, associate professor in linguistics at the University of Hong Kong, said a study conducted by one of his Masters students indicated that children taught Chinese language in Putonghua were beginning to use it in the playground as well. "She [the student] also did a survey of languages at home and found there was more Putonghua used in the children's home," he said. "Again, that is shifting the balance. There is less Cantonese in the children's life and more Putonghua."

Matthews argues that Cantonese is at threat from current policies and trends. "[Cantonese] might survive for 50 years or so, but after it may well be on its way out," he said. "It is difficult to calculate the timing but in the medium to long term, Cantonese is an endangered language."

The effect of the language dying would be that children could not talk to their grandparents and traditions such as Cantonese opera would disappear as fewer young people spoke the language, he said. "We have seen that happen in other language-shift situations," said Matthews, who has studied the decline of the Hakka and Chiu Chow dialects. "It generally happens over three generations. It is sad when that happens."

Matthews has co-authored several books on Cantonese language and grammar with his wife and colleague Virginia Yip Choy-yin, professor of linguistics and modern languages at Chinese University.

He called on schools to pursue a



Thomas Lee and Stephen Matthews



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policy of two written languages and three spoken languages.

"Personally I would like to see Cantonese saved," he said. "It [the government] should let not Cantonese fade away from the school."

Thomas Lee Hun-tak, a linguistics professor at Chinese University, said he would prefer to see a mix of Putonghua and Cantonese used for Chinese language learning, with Putonghua used at higher levels only.

"The core foundation training in Chinese should be taught in Cantonese. That doesn't conflict with developing a high proficiency in Mandarin," he said.

Lee said he was worried the Hong Kong government would follow the "underlying assumption of central government policy" that Putonghua should be promoted over minority dialects, in the mistaken belief it is socially and economically beneficial.

An Education Bureau spokeswoman said: "Under the existing policy, schools may choose to teach the Chinese language subject in either Cantonese or Putonghua. We encourage those schools that believe they have the preconditions for success in place to try teaching Chinese language in Putonghua."

"In the last decade, many studies on teaching Chinese language in Putonghua have been conducted. In light of the inconclusive findings of the local studies conducted so far, we recommend that schools should consider their own circumstances, including the students' ability to learn in Putonghua, and the availability of support measures to facilitate a smooth transition, in deciding whether to use Putonghua as the medium of instruction for the Chinese language subject."

1909

Year the Qing government designated Beijing dialect the national language; Putonghua is based on it

Why save Cantonese?

Students at the University of Hong Kong have spelled out the reasons they believe Cantonese should be saved amid predictions that the language is in danger of dying out. Here are some of their views in an essay assignment on the effects of the disappearance of the language set by Associate Professor of Linguistics Stephen Matthews:

"If Cantonese becomes extinct, some of our cultural heritage would follow suit. Cantonese opera would not be sustainable and beautiful lyrics such as 'falling flowers at night hiding the moon from sight' from the opera *The Flower Princess* would be lost forever. It would be a cultural disaster."

Tsui Wa-han

"Unique Cantonese expressions such as 'a gloomy face', 'to connive' and 'free' would be lost. It is difficult to translate Cantonese into other languages without change in its intrinsic meaning. These variations among languages give colour to the world and avoid homogeneity. The language garden analogy by [Professor Ofelia] Garcia [of The City University of New York] suggests that it would be boring to see all flowers of the same colour in all gardens when travelling around the

world; varieties of shapes, sizes and colours of flowers enrich our visual and aesthetic experience. Like ecological diversity, linguistic diversity contributes to an interesting and colourful world."

Wu Kin-fai

"The death of Cantonese may cause the decline of the cultural identity of Hong Kong people. A region's language is used in ceremonies and myths and folklore. Once the language is lost, ceremonies, myths and other elements of our culture will also be lost. For example, pop songs in Cantonese like *Under the Lion Rock*, television programmes and even colloquial expressions like 'playing unfairly to one's own advantage' will be lost – as well as our sing-song intonation."

Leung Chin-hung

Simon Parry