Organized solutions to language problems: managing professional language in Hong Kong

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A model of language management

This paper will present some aspects of organized professional language management in Hong Kong. Therefore, I must tell what I mean by language management, and describe some salient aspects of language management as practiced in Hong Kong. Language management is behavior towards language, in opposition to language behavior. Organizational arrangements for managing languages have considerable practical interest. To understand them, we need a model of language management that models behavior towards language in discourse. The model must link actual use of language to organizational arrangements (*see* Neustupný 1973).

Discourse is necessarily managed during production and in interaction. In discourse, individuals interactively produce discourse in which they

May *note* any feature of that discourse (constructing a *deviation*)
May *evaluate* a noted feature (constructing an *inadequacy*)
May *adjust* an evaluated feature (constructing an *adjustment*)
May *implement* the adjustment

This is the essential model of *discourse management*. (The thought in this model is not unique to language management theory. It is present, *e.g.*, in modelling of cognitive processes, in ethnomethodology, etc.) The discourse management process can be linked to organized behavior towards language. For example, a person may contact Terminologicentrum TNC (http://www.tnc.se/) because s/he may have noted the use of some particular word in Swedish discourse, and may have evaluated such usage as inadequate because s/he felt it was 'English' and 'foreign'. S/he fails to come up with a Swedish replacement as an adjustment to this inadequacy

and calls an expert in the agency to discuss possible adjustments to remove the troubling foreignness. Discourse had not failed in the sense of breakdown of communication in this instance, so we can say that the person acted out of *non-linguistic interest*. It could also be that the person did not understand the word. In an ongoing conversation that would probably have been adjusted by an explanatory utterance in a subsequent turn by the person who produced what had become a deviation for the interlocutor. Once an expert in an agency takes on the query, the deviation has become a *language problem* which is subject to *organized language management* (http://arts.hkbu.edu.hk/~bhjernudd/).

What languages are managed in Hong Kong?

The language varieties that are managed on behalf of the majority of the population in Hong Kong are English, Chinese, Cantonese, Putonghua, and 'mix'. The nomenclature is interesting and is a feature of a language management system. 'English' names many different behaviors. 'Chinese' is a catch-all label, too, but should also be understood in opposition to 'Cantonese' in which case Chinese is the written language and Cantonese the spoken. 'Putonghua' then takes its place as the spoken official language of the PRC and as one variety of Chinese commonly spoken by people from the PRC. 'Mix' is the label for the language behavior that attracts both praise and scorn, mostly the latter. It weakly signifies a young and educated identity. If 'mix' were not also seen as deeply problematic, it would not have attracted its own label. It is a variety of Cantonese (and Chinese) with a good number of recognizable borrowings from English at the one end of a scale, and with very frequent code-switching to English at the other end of that scale.

For spoken discourse, Hong Kong Chinese select Cantonese. English is spoken with foreigners who are presumed not to know Cantonese. Spoken English may also be prompted by the use of documents written in English or by the presence of foreigners in an office. Minor rules govern when English speech should be used in particular settings, *e.g.,* in ceremonies, as first choice by switchboard operators in firms, and so on. There is a well-established practice to use written English for business documents. Doing international business motivates its use.

I will exclude from further discussion expatriate groups' language preferences and the minorities. I will also exclude foreign countries' interests in promoting their national languages in Hong Kong.

Language management in the private sector

A successful individual in Hong Kong knows English. To know English means a chance to be professionally and socially mobile. This is partly a practical matter: university entry requires English, and job interviews gate applicants by using English.

The perception that English is vitally important to Hong Kong's business performance is well illustrated by the **Workplace English Campaign** which the Education and Manpower Bureau operates outside the school system. Its goal is to raise English competence anywhere in the workforce (www.english.gov.hk). This campaign is vigorously supported by business.

"Big business" in Hong Kong has pursued a relentless campaign to combat what its representatives *claim are falling standards of English* among youth. But the facts show that more people in Hong Kong know English better than ever before (Bacon-Shone and Bolton, 1998). The surveys do not note what kind of English. I speculate that "correct English" is much less in evidence with the changeover from British colonial social realities to Chinese self-rule. For one thing, many English speakers from all ethnicities left. A multitude of little discourse deviations from their British-oriented norm, leading perhaps also to minor discourse problems that did not trouble communication before, have came to be noted and evaluated as inadequate by important actors on Hong Kong's socio-political scene, its English-speaking elite. Encounters at work places, especially at the time of recruitment, are troubled by conflicting norms in discourse.

But if there is an English crisis, why do the wheels of the economy continue to turn in ways that economists explain without resorting to costs of communications failure? Communication works well in offices because *language management routines are built into the organization of the office*. Work is itself organized so as to minimize rewrites and other costly adjustments. Pre-adjustment by routine use of prepared forms, templates,

vocabulary and phrases is one important design. Some employees' English proficiency may fall short of expectations but in-house and on-the-job training, much informal and interpersonal, screens out potential language inadequacies and benefits production. Supervision notes slip-ups and offers feedback for self-improvement. Interpersonal discourse management actively accommodates individuals whose spoken language falls short of the norm which may lead to successful self-improvement.

There are some empirical studies of language management as an integral part of organizational management and processes in Hong Kong. One study of a textiles trans-shipment agency in Macau (Cremer and Willes 1991, 1994) reported rapid acquisition by new personnel of discourse routines specific to this agency. The study also reported how the Macau office rejected negative evaluation of this highly particular LSP-variety by a foreign client who subsequently learnt and used it. At this conference, Bilbow reported on the hotel industry in Hong Kong.

Lawyers, technical writers, copywriters, web designers and other professionals perform many of the language production tasks that require precise expression. And translation firms produce much text for businesses. These service companies in turn need appropriately qualified personnel. This workforce may be available. Many study abroad and return with professional qualifications and excellent English.

Still, recently expanded legal training in Hong Kong led to severe dissatisfaction with graduates' English skills. This is perhaps not surprising. The legal profession has a tradition of managing legal language, indeed, legal realities and discourse are inseparable. I need not say more about its pragmatics at this conference because of the many fine papers on the topic in general and on Hong Kong in particular by colleagues from the City University (Candlin *et al.*).

Adjustments to communication problems in business can be designed from within existing systems. But it is also understandable that when business interests perceive a radically lowered entrance proficiency of English among youth who are looking for their first jobs, they would like the government treasury to pick up the cost of adjustment by reforming the educational system.

The educational system and English

"The educational system" is the major site for language management in HK and it deals with all languages. English was the exclusive medium in secondary schools until recently. Chinese was declared the medium of instruction for secondary schools at the time of the 1997 transition. When the government relented and, instead of requiring all schools to be Chinese-medium, designated about a quarter of the secondary schools as English-medium, interests clashed. Some secondary schools were deemed good enough to be designated as English-medium schools. For them, school-leavers' English proficiencies were projected to remain acceptable, and learning other subjects unaffected by the medium. Obviously these are the best schools. However, parents who have to send their children to schools designated as Chinese-medium schools feel they are offered a second-rate choice. The government's medium-of-instruction reform was meant to find a solution to the problems of enhancing learning in schools including enhancing English-language learning. The reform created at least a temporary problem of equal educational opportunity. Even if government representatives promise (www.ed.gov.hk/ednewhp/school_all10.htm) better results all round in Chinese-medium schools (and researchers demonstrate these better results), better English included, parents protest. They would rather not suffer the additional stratification of opportunity for their children that division of medium of instruction also brings about. Incidentally, Chinese usage is not seen as a problem. Pupils' acquisition of knowledge in general is also not an issue. A major educational-pedagogical revamp of the entire school system is simultaneously underway (www.e-c.edu.hk/eng/aims/report.html).

A complex array of committes in the government is now tinkering with the system by allowing exceptions and supporting tutoring arrangements (www.ed.gov.hk/ednewhp/resource/research_report/English/tmi.htm) and may in this manner buy time for the governing pro-Chinese-medium policy to demonstrate its worth. It is worth keeping in mind that the issue of English versus Chinese medium schools is almost as old as Hong Kong (*see* Bickley 1997).

Decisions in the school system are taken quickly and authoritatively charging the relevant offices with concurrently developing designs for

adjustment and implementation. Value and interest conflicts then erupt when the decisions become known to other participating groups. In typical Hong Kong spirit, decision-makers then move ahead at an energetic pace to overcome obstacles.

Rigorous theories that offer designs for adjustments and their implementation are as yet to be found only in university researchers' work and in special-function offices within the educational establishment (such as testing, for example). Individuals with linguistic expertise do participate but appear to be able to be of service mainly by contributing *ad hoc* suggestions within already quite constrained bureaucratic procedures and organizational structures.

A **Standing Committee on Language Education and Research (SCOLAR)** (www.language-education.com/) was *inter alia* set up "to advise the overall policy on language education, including the medium of instruction". The committee functions mainly "to identify and set priorities for language education research in Hong Kong in accordance with its terms of reference to offer advice to the Government on language education issues and policies" and by maintaining an excellent database on language learning and teaching in Hong Kong and elsewhere. The committee continues the work of the **Language Fund** which was originally set up to channel private sector business funds in support of English. The terms of reference for obtaining research grants are quite specific and concern improvements of means of teaching English and Chinese, and of evaluation of different medium-of-instruction arrangements.

The complex interaction of public and private interests from the highest level of government to individual parents could best be modelled as a muddling-through process which favors emerging realities as the ultimate arbiter for solving this bundle of interlocking problems. Lack of information on actual use of English, in actual discourse, and the complexity of interaction of a multitude of interests and organizations with other primary goals make language management for English difficult. A campaign (such as the Workplace English Campaign) which links a "language provider" directly with a self-selected client may succeed; but almost any action in the educational system challenges conflicting interests. This is clearly a serious matter which ultimately can only be

overcome if attention is given precisely to ways in which conflicting community interests can be reconciled and decisions in community matters democratically reached and broadly endorsed.

Language management in the civil service

There are two departments within the government that are constituted specifically to manage language internally to the civil service. They are the **Civil Service Training and Development Institute (CSTDI)** and the **Official Languages Agency (OLA)**.

The Civil Service Training and Development Institute organizes English usage, Chinese writing, and Cantonese and Putonghua proficiency courses. The former two are genre and task based (for details, go to (www.info.gov.hk/cstdi/Ehtml/engindex.htm). Civil servants sign up for classes according to internal rules of access. The Institute is a highly professional organization which relies on applied linguistic theory and which develops short courses that meet current proficiency and usage needs. Personnel keep informed of applied linguistic practices through staff training and contacts with the academe. For example, courses on *Writing Minutes of Meetings in Chinese* and *Official Writing in the Mainland and Hong Kong SAR : A General Comparison* meet current needs following the return to Chinese sovereignty of Hong Kong; as do Putonghua proficiency courses for the Cantonese-speaking civil servant and Cantonese proficiency courses for civil servants who in order to remain in the system after the transition are required to take a Cantonese exam.

The Official Languages Agency implements government language policy within the civil service (www.info.gov.hk/ola/english/index.htm). Although its mission statement gives equal weight to the use of English and Chinese, OLA's implementation program clearly favors Chinese. The reason is straightforward. After the transition to Chinese sovereignty, government policy encourages a shift from the use of English to the use of Chinese in government offices (although not at the expense of competence to serve the public in English which is being maintained).

The agency was already in place having served as a translation and interpretation service in the British administration to bridge the

communication gap between English in the administration and Chinese among the public. These functions remain and are applied also in support of expanding the use of Chinese within departments.

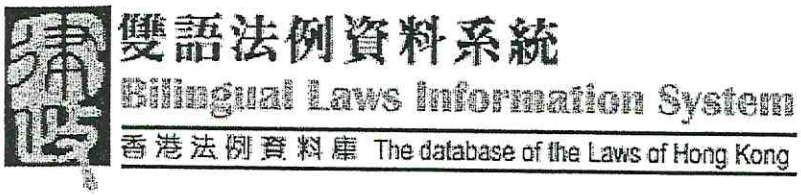
Chinese language officers of the agency are assigned to offices throughout the civil service. They may spend much of their working time on translation of documents, yet at the same time are charged with the tasks of developing and applying norms for use of Chinese in the various relevant genres and areas of content and also of promoting the use of Chinese. The agency has produced manuals to codify norms and to promote and support usage (www.info.gov.hk/ola/english/mission/index.htm).
The major source for evaluation of Chinese norms is the authority commanded by valued learned individuals (who could be a university professor of Chinese) who are steeped in the traditions of Chinese language study and language appreciation. The norms and normative principles are communicated in training workshops and staff seminars. For English, norms are exo-normative and based in reference to "native speakers" and to authoritative reference works (which could be *the OED*).

Notings are typically initiated by the language officers themselves, not by the originators of the texts, and adjustments are found in manuals and by their own judgement, often consultatively across desks in the same office.

Recruitment to career positions is done in the normal fashion of the civil service (www.info.gov.hk/ola/english/mission/index.htm). Individual officers have by their own initiatives successfully completed higher degrees in languages or specialized fields of language study. My enquiries have not established the existence of contacts with similar agencies abroad nor an interest in language management or language cultivation theory.

As in private business firms, government departments produce in-house manuals and vocabulary lists.

A singulary important other agency in the civil service that manages language is the Department of Justice. Its internet home page (www.info.gov.hk/justice/) saliently signals the language interest:



This database is the result of nearly twenty years of translation work of laws and regulations from English into Chinese to prepare for the departure of the British administration. The working team was led by Mr Tony Yen (www.gtj.macau.gov.mo/htmlcn/perdir/02/pd02f004.asp) who is now Law Draftsman. The work continues in several ways. First, all laws and regulations are now produced bilingually. Second, the department keeps track of legal terminology. A record of the codification of terms has been and is being kept from translation work and is separately published (www.info.gov.hk/justice/new/depart/pub_13.htm). Third, the legal translation work has been extended to include selected cases since the common law system is retained. A **Committee on Bilingual Legal System**, chaired by the Secretary for Justice, advises "the government on measures to further develop Hong Kong's bilingual legal system..." just as the former translation work was also supervised by an advisory committee, then chaired from outside the civil service.

Both the present and the past work is conducted "to facilitate the wider use of Chinese in court proceedings" and in legal work in general in Hong Kong. English will be kept because of Hong Kong's declared role as an international city (for which precisely legal and financial services that can rely on a system based in the rule of law provide crucial income). In other words, the Department of Justice both promotes the use of Chinese and, in support of promotion, develops Chinese legal genres and terms. Socio-political developments in Hong Kong certainly support such an objective, although there is professional resistance because of the English-language-dominated training of legal personnel for Hong Kong.

These endeavours are carried out without formulation or search for explicit theories of language development and management, or meta-theoretical contacts. A rich archive awaits the researcher to study the last twenty years of managed development of Chinese legal language in Hong Kong.

Recently, the Law Draftsman added a *plain language* objective to his agenda. This objective arose from his concern with enhancing access to law in a community that prides itself on the rule of law. He feels that particular attention need to be given to developing principles for a plain(er) language of laws and regulations. The translator was constrained by reproducing the English text of a different time and purpose. Now, with original drafting of laws and regulations in Chinese, the draftsperson has freedom of formulation. In Tony Yen's working model, adjustment to plain language is not limited to certain kinds of texts but applies in an environment of other communications and action to achieve the greater goal of justice. Texts have to be approved and therefore implementation as well is accompanied by communications that contribute to the text's meaning. A goal of plain language in the present law drafting context is not merely a matter of phrasing within a text but a matter of the purport of sets of texts, at least an adjustment of genre, towards loftier socio-legal goals.

In the civil service, I have also identified a committee that advises the **Survey and Mapping Office** of the Lands Department on *place names* for maps. Cases are forwarded from the district offices of the department to the committee. Place names "find their way" into survey documents and on to maps through the district offices of the Lands Department which refer problems to the committee.

Place names are local. Therefore, writing them in Chinese may require local characters (no pun intended!). Much Cantonese is "local" relative to conventions of the written Chinese standard. Cantonese words need their own characters and some are already in common use. Consequently, they form subsets of vocabulary that receive attention by the **Chinese Language Interface Advisory Committee (CLIAC)** (www.info.gov.hk/digital21/eng/hkscs/), administered as part of the government's IT strategy development by the Information Technology Services Department. Committee members come from academic institutions, language and linguistics institutions and the IT and publishing industries. Characters uniquely used or useful to Hong Kong are noted and evaluated to establish a common Chinese language interface for the HK SAR in computing, the Hong Kong Supplementary Character Set. The effort contributes to the development of ISO 10646. This pragmatic effort

arises directly out of inadequacies of representation of contemporary Chinese spoken discourse.

The Linguistic Society of Hong Kong (www.hku.hk/linguist/lshk/) has been developing a new transcription system for Cantonese, jyut6 ping3, and regularly contributes to the discussion of language problems in Hong Kong. I should also mention that there are interest groups that seek to influence public Chinese usage, such as the **Chinese Language Society**.

The HK SAR has not formed any committee relating to *terminological standardisation*; however, ISO documents are received and made available in the Product Standards Library of the Innovation and Technology Commission. A newly formed association of interested academics, the **Terminological Association of Hong Kong (TAHK)** (http://personal.cityu.edu.hk/~ctivan/tahk/) may stimulate more interest.

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