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# Cantonese as an additional language in Hong Kong: Problems and prospects

GERTRUDE TINKER SACHS and DAVID C. S. LI

## *Abstract*

*Based on data obtained from a questionnaire survey and in-depth interviews with four Caucasians and four dark-skinned Asians, this study shows that while some 'foreigners' do make an effort to learn Cantonese, many find the teaching methods not so useful and the language difficult to master, especially its tone system. The data are analyzed following the interactive multicultural model of acculturation. The findings point toward a huge chasm between non-local groups and the Cantonese-speaking community. The receptivity of Hong Kong Chinese towards attempts by members of non-local groups to speak Cantonese varies, depending on their racial identity and socioeconomic status.*

## **Introduction**

The term diaspora has been used to describe the peoples of the world who have left their original homeland and settled elsewhere. Not all of these scattered people are economic migrants (Kennedy 2001), but regardless of the reasons for leaving their ancestral homeland, these people need to sustain themselves and this often means, following the time-honoured aphorism of 'when in Rome, do as the Romans do', to integrate at least in some aspects, into the society of their adopted home. One of the clearest indicators of integration or a lack thereof is the extent to which the minority groups make an attempt to learn the local language(s) of the majority. The language situation in Hong Kong presents an interesting case in this regard because, although Hong Kong has been home to many non-Chinese residents for more than a century, very small numbers have made an active attempt to learn the Cantonese language of the majority (Li and Richards 1995; Tibbetts 1996; cf. Smith 1995, 1997a,b).

For over 150 years Hong Kong was a British colony until July 1997, when it was returned to China and became a Special Administrative

Region of the People's Republic (HKSAR). As part of the colonial legacy, English continues to enjoy the status of an official language alongside Chinese, that is, standard written Chinese and spoken Cantonese. Over 95 percent of the Hong Kong residents estimated at 6.8 million are ethnic Chinese; an overwhelming majority of whom have Cantonese as their 'usual language'. Cantonese is regarded as a regional standard in Guangdong, Guangxi and Hong Kong. There is also general consensus among linguists that typologically speaking it has the status of a language on a par with the national language, Mandarin or Putonghua. Apart from being the lingua franca among Hong Kong Chinese, Cantonese also figures prominently in formal events such as the Chief Executive's annual policy address, debates in the Legislative Council, and in the public media such as popular songs (better known as 'Canto-pop') and sundry TV and radio programs. In the education domain, Cantonese is the medium of instruction in Chinese-medium secondary schools (including the subjects, Chinese Language and Chinese History, in English-medium schools), as well as in postsecondary institutions, especially when for various reasons the bilingual lecturer finds it difficult to teach exclusively in English (Flowerdew *et al.* 1998, 2000). In addition, since the late 1970s written Cantonese is commonly used in informal sections and 'soft' genres of the Chinese newspapers and magazines, notably infotainment, chatty columns and advertisements. In sum, as part of the socio-political arrangement of 'one country, two systems', Cantonese continues to serve significant language functions in Hong Kong. Hence, even though Cantonese is popularly perceived as a Chinese dialect and tends to have low social prestige vis-à-vis standard Chinese and English, there is no question that this vibrant vernacular is keeping up its vitality in HKSAR after the hand-over (Bauer 1988, 2000; Li 2000). Given the widespread use of Cantonese in Hong Kong, therefore, one wonders why it is that relatively few non-Chinese residents in Hong Kong learn it. The issues involved are complex, and the complexity cannot be elucidated without understanding the functions and status of English in the local language matrix (Li 1999), to which we now turn.

Despite the relative numerical insignificance of non-Chinese residents, there is an implicit yet prevailing assumption which is widely shared by Hongkongers – Chinese and non-Chinese alike – that the non-Chinese communities do not need to speak Cantonese or understand Chinese, and that local Chinese are expected to use standard English (more British than American) when interacting with non-Chinese residents. Evidence in support of this observation abounds in public discourse. Perhaps the most obvious example is incessant public concern amplified in the media, both Chinese and English, about Hong

Kong students' declining English standards. In accordance with the HKSAR government's aspiration to sustain Hong Kong's image as an international city and financial center, a high level of English proficiency is an important part of the official language goal of 'bilingualism and trilingualism', that is, the ability to read and write Chinese and English, and to converse in Cantonese, English and Putonghua. In terms of actual language use, until recently all the bills of public utilities such as water, gas, telephone and electricity, and all written communication from local banks, insurance and credit card companies, were bilingual in Chinese and English.<sup>1</sup> In addition, there is a general expectation that telephone inquiries made by English-speaking clients should be handled in English – a default assumption which surprisingly has never been challenged or questioned, and which will certainly lend ammunition to those who are critical of the global hegemony of English. This point is epitomized in a TV advert promoting the government-sponsored 'Workplace English Campaign' (WEC), in which a frontline staff member of Hong Kong Towngas Company tells the audience how delightful she feels upon seeing significant improvement in her English communication skills when dealing with English-speaking clients – a modest achievement she is very proud of, thanks to an English course subsidized by Workplace English Campaign (cf. Turner 2004).<sup>2</sup>

A still more revealing example may be found in a letter entitled 'Language barrier' written by a Westerner complaining about the low English standards of police officers stationed on an outlying island called Lamma. This complaint, which appeared in the letter-to-the-editor column of the most prestigious English daily – the *South China Morning Post* – was taken very seriously, as shown in the following excerpt of the response written by a spokesman for the Commissioner of Police appearing in the same column 10 days later:

We are aware of the large expatriate make-up of the community on Lamma [Island] and every effort is made to select officers with suitable language skills for the posting. Currently, all duty and supervisory officers on the island can communicate in English.

Officers attached to the island have also been briefed to seek assistance if they encounter any language barrier, whether English or others, when necessary.

Meanwhile, in order to streamline the reporting procedures of minor cases, bilingual report forms are available.... Members of the public can make use of these printed forms to make it easier to report simple theft cases. (Wong, 2002)

Interestingly, the same complaint letter prompted an angry response by a German reader, whose words are worth quoting at length here:

Since moving to Hong Kong seven months ago, I have noticed that many native English speakers seem to assume everyone must speak English. ...

Instead of expecting most Hong Kong Chinese to learn English, the expectation should be for foreigners to learn Cantonese.

New migrants in the US, Canada and all European countries including the UK, are expected to learn the language of their new home and adjust to their cultural environment.

Why is it then, that many 'gweilos' ['foreign devils'] expect the Hong Kong Chinese population to adjust to the way of life adopted by English-speaking countries? I accept that Hong Kong has been shaped by the British and it is unique. However, the cultural arrogance displayed by some Westerners makes me very angry. (Klobe 2002)

The angry German reader cited here has made a keen observation which happens to coincide with the focus of our investigation: while some westerners' 'cultural arrogance' does have a role to play contributing to the perceived default assumption that English is the 'natural' language choice in communication between Chinese and non-Chinese residents in Hong Kong, the picture is considerably more complex. This study presents evidence showing that the limited non-use of the majority's vernacular, Cantonese, between members of the Chinese and non-Chinese communities may be explained in part by a combination of linguistic and sociolinguistic factors at work in their social interactions – factors which are ultimately rooted in such deeper notions as language status, language distance (Odlin 1989), socioeconomic status, and social and ethnic identities.

### **Cantonese as an additional language in Hong Kong**

From the time of British settlement in 1842 to the postcolonial era after June, 1997, Hong Kong has been home to a relatively small number of non-Chinese residents. The 2001 census indicates that 5.1 percent of the total population (or 343,950 persons) are ethnic minorities (Hong Kong Government 2001). As a correlate of Hong Kong's status as a British colony, the acquisition of English has been extensively researched and documented. In contrast to this is a dearth of information regarding the language needs of the non-Chinese communities, especially the extent to which they need Cantonese when interacting with Hong Kong Chinese. Little is known about the research question, 'what attempts, if any, were made by non-Chinese communities in Hong Kong to learn Cantonese?'

For decades, formal courses in Cantonese have been on offer at various institutions such as the civil service, the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK), the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology (HKUST), YMCA, YWCA and the British Council. The quality of teaching and teaching materials varies (see below and also Smith, 1997a for more detailed discussion). Until the 1990s, course books in Cantonese designed for self-learning were few and far between. A comprehensive functional grammar of (Hong Kong-based) Cantonese in English did not appear until 1994 (Matthews and Yip 1994). By far, the teaching and learning of Cantonese as a second language is best organized and documented by the government's central training agency: Civil Service Training and Development Institute (CSTDI; see also their web site: [www.info.gov.hk/cstdi](http://www.info.gov.hk/cstdi)). Until 1996, Cantonese was taught to expatriate civil servants using the course book *Elementary Cantonese* by Sidney Lau (1979), which aimed at developing basic knowledge in colloquial Cantonese. Starting from 1996, however, 6-week intensive Cantonese courses were organized for expatriate civil servants who had studied Cantonese up to an intermediate level and who intended to serve the HKSAR government. After the handover, about 1,000 expatriate civil servants are expected to learn and master Cantonese and Chinese writing in order to meet various language needs on the job. Those who want to transfer to permanent terms of employment are required to pass a Chinese language test, a policy which was described as 'racism' by some of those affected. The Yale-in-China Center at the Chinese University of Hong Kong is another course provider which has attracted a large number of learners of Cantonese. According to anecdotal evidence available to us, Cantonese is learned at various other teaching centers, but there has been little systematic research regarding the numbers and nationalities of learners, the quality of the delivery of lessons, or the overall levels of attainment (see 'Interview Results' below).

For learners of Cantonese whose mother tongue is other than a Chinese variety, the learning of Cantonese is hampered by various difficulties. In a feature article entitled 'Beating the language barrier' (Chiu 1996), for example, four expatriate civil servants were interviewed and three major learning difficulties highlighted. First, distinctive tones of Cantonese morpho-syllables were reportedly difficult to master, for failure to articulate morpho-syllables in the right tone would result in grave communication problems. Second, the learning of Cantonese was hindered by a lack of literacy skills in reading and writing Chinese. A police superintendent was quoted as saying: 'For me to remember and study Chinese I have to have everything written down in a very strange format. I can't read books, newspapers or subtitles on TV programmes.'

My only way of learning is to listen and repeat what I've heard' (Chiu 1996). Third, it was pointed out that Chinese colleagues often did not cooperate. As another participant put it, 'I have to insist on speaking Cantonese. I have had ridiculous conversations in which I'll speak in Chinese and the Chinese guy will reply in English, although he may later switch to Chinese. This is quite an interesting phenomenon' (Chiu 1996). The situation was further compounded by mixed reactions on the part of Hong Kong Chinese when expatriates speak to them in Cantonese. As one interviewee pointed out, 'Some people like shopkeepers and taxi drivers are very happy if they see a gweilo who can speak Cantonese. They say, "Wow, you're incredible. You're very smart", but others, like waiters in better restaurants, will think you're looking down on them if you speak Chinese to them' (Chiu 1996).

Practically all of these learning difficulties are borne out in the scanty literature on the learning of Cantonese as an additional language in Hong Kong. Li and Richards (1995), for example, conducted a small-scale questionnaire survey of non-Chinese learners of Cantonese. A total of 183 responses were collected. Respondents rated transactional needs as highest for the use of Cantonese such as buying things in the market or asking for directions. In contrast, their need for Cantonese for interactional purposes was much smaller. Respondents were also asked to self-rate their Cantonese proficiency following clear descriptors (Li and Richards 1995: 5). Close to 90 percent of the respondents rated their Cantonese as 'basic' (67 percent 'basic lower', 21 percent 'basic upper'). Those respondents who indicated that they had made an attempt to learn Cantonese reported having varying degrees of success. Three main reasons behind low achievement were (a) tremendous difficulties coping with subtle prosodic features of the Cantonese tonal system; (b) lack of a standardized romanization system, which helped explain why Cantonese-English dictionaries were of little help; and (c) lack of meaningful reinforcement outside the classroom, for shop and street signs, food items in menus and the like tended to be written in logographic Chinese characters. As Li and Richards (1995: 7) put it: no accessible written word forms were available to facilitate vocabulary learning, which in turn made it very difficult for incidental, independent learning to take place. The quality of classroom input, too, left much to be desired. The majority of respondents complained about boring, non-communicative teaching methods characterized by structure-based repetition or drilling ('stone age methodology' as one respondent put it). As for the course books, some respondents felt put off by a lack of recycling of, and control for, basic vocabulary.

In two separate studies, Smith (1995, 1997b) identified similar difficulties confronted by learners of Cantonese: the tonal system with its

six distinctive tones, each carrying one of three contours (level, rising and falling); lack of standard written representation of Cantonese morpho-syllables; and a low level of motivation due to the large number of Chinese–English bilinguals. Smith further noted that many expatriates had little social contact with non-English-speaking Cantonese speakers, but pointed out that in the areas of linguistics and language teaching, an understanding of Cantonese could provide insights into the difficulties experienced by Chinese learners of English.

Very similar findings were obtained in Tibbetts's (1996) investigation of factors affecting the acquisition of Cantonese. Data were collected by semi-structured interviews with 27 interviewees and a questionnaire survey involving 133 non-Chinese respondents. Most of the respondents (82 percent) rated the level of their Cantonese as 'minimal'. Among the main learning difficulties identified were: a complex tonal system, lack of a consistent written representation, lack of time and interest, and low teaching quality. Finally, learning success appeared to correlate positively with four main factors: degree of integration into the Cantonese community, prior knowledge of Putonghua, high motivation, and opportunities to learn and use Cantonese. On the other hand, length of residence, age and language aptitude appeared to have little or no influence on the effective acquisition of Cantonese.

The brief review above shows that the learning of Cantonese as a second language in Hong Kong is not a simple matter at all. Apart from technical difficulties related to the target language itself – a rather complex tonal system, the romanization system not being used in public settings (logographic Chinese characters are used instead), and a lack of user-friendly course books and learner dictionaries – opportunities for practice appear to be rather limited because Cantonese speakers often prefer to respond in English when spoken to in Cantonese, especially if the purpose of communication is transactional rather than interactional (Brown and Yule 1983). However, many expatriates are not making a strong effort to learn the language because they perceive the language to be difficult, they lack the time, they are not good at learning languages or because they believe they do not need to learn Cantonese given the prevalence of local English language speakers in Hong Kong (Klobe 2002; Li and Richards 1995; Tibbetts 1996; Smith 1995, 1997).

### **Language learning and use in context**

The decision to learn or not to learn a language is intricately related to how much economic, social and personal value one attributes to learning that language and how connected one wants to be with the people



who speak it. Additionally, in the Hong Kong context, a decision not to learn Cantonese may be associated with perceptions of the global hegemony of English (Crystal 1997; Tollefson 2000) and/or feelings of ethnocentrism. Regardless of the vantage point used to investigate the learning of another language, however, the place of the learner's sense of self or identity and the interlocutor's perceptions of the speaker cannot be underestimated. Norton and Toohey (2002: 115) phrase it this way, 'language learning... is not only a linguistic system of signs and symbols' but 'it is also a complex social practice in which the value and meaning ascribed to it in utterance are determined in part by the value and meaning ascribed to the person who speaks'. Dörnyei's (2003) discussion of learner motivation and willingness to engage in the act of learning or communicating in another language also reinforces Norton and Toohey's viewpoint. Dörnyei states that 'while an L2 is "learnable"... in that discrete elements of the communication code (e.g. grammatical and lexical items) can be taught explicitly, it is also socially and culturally bound which makes language learning a deeply social event' (p. 4). Various social factors coupled with the language learner's multiple identities (political, socioeconomic, gender, ethnic, to name just a few) and lifeworld experiences all impact upon learning (Wenger 1998). Norton and Toohey (2002: 119) suggest that a viable alternative to studying merely the 'uptake' of linguistic knowledge and skills is to examine the social structures of particular communities and the differentiated positionings available for learners to access. Success in learning to speak the language of one's adopted homeland is therefore not only dependent upon learner variables and linguistic features of the language or how one is taught the language, but also upon the interlocutors and the extent to which one is allowed to access the cultural practices of the host community through using the language.

Research informs us that learning Cantonese as an additional language, whatever the language background of the learner, is fraught with difficulties. What is lacking in the literature to date is qualitative data showing, with concrete examples, what actually happens in situated contexts when members of more or less distinct non-Chinese communities go about the task of learning and practising Cantonese. Anecdotal evidence abounds suggesting that the learning experiences of learners of Cantonese in Hong Kong are far from being homogeneous, which is understandable by virtue of differences in their socioeconomic and ethnic background. It seems intuitively clear, for example, that the Cantonese-learning experiences of a high-income Caucasian company executive and interactional patterns with native speakers of Chinese are likely to differ significantly from those of a low-income Asian domestic helper.

One way to better understand the language learning or a lack thereof by Hong Kong's non-Chinese residents is to examine pertinent aspects of acculturation. Acculturation theorists and researchers have presented us with several models for describing intercultural contact phenomena. These models fall into two broad categories: the linear bipolar or the two-dimensional, multicultural, interactive model. Linear-bipolar models are limited as they describe only one aspect of the acculturation process, namely how the immigrant adopts the host culture. Interactive multicultural models, by contrast, describe immigrants' or ethnic minority members' acculturation strategies in addition to the majority members' attitudes toward the immigrants' acculturation (Castro 2002). This paper attempts to shed light on some of the complexities surrounding Cantonese language learning and its use from the perspectives of several non-Chinese cultural groups. We adopt an interactive multicultural model of acculturation as we also explore the attitudes of the host members to the immigrants' learning and use of Cantonese (Castro 2002; Rudin 2003, cited in Marsella, Christopher and Ring 2003).

### **This study**

#### *Data and methodology*

The data in this study were obtained using a combination of quantitative and qualitative methodologies: a small-scale questionnaire survey, supplemented by in-depth interviews conducted individually or in small groups about six months later. The survey was conducted by student helpers in the street or in the mall of shopping centers in Hong Kong. In the survey we addressed two main research questions: 'What is the general attitude of non-Chinese residents towards the learning of Cantonese as a second language?' and 'How receptive are local Chinese to non-Chinese residents when they make an attempt to speak Cantonese?'. Separate but thematically overlapping survey questionnaires were used, one for non-Chinese and the other for local Chinese (see Appendixes I and II). Following the analyses of the general attitudes of Chinese and non-Chinese respondents, a semi-structured questionnaire based on the findings of the survey was used for conducting individual/group interviews with a view to understanding more fully the main social factors which have a significant influence on the learning and use of Cantonese. In so doing, we adhere to the principles of Goetz and Lecompte (1984, as cited in Leki and Carson 1997: 57) that the interview medium is uniquely suited to eliciting data that 'represent the world view of the participants being investigated' (cf. Flowerdew *et al.* 1998, 2000).

*Survey results*

This section gives a brief summary of the main findings of the survey. Forty people were successfully interviewed in each of these two categories, for a total of 80 Chinese and non-Chinese interviewees.

**NON-CHINESE RESPONDENTS (N = 40).** The majority of the non-Chinese respondents interviewed were British and American (55 percent), others came from Australia (10 percent), India, the Philippines, and Canada (7.5 percent respectively), and 2.5 percent from each of the following countries: France, Ireland, Japan, New Zealand and Spain. Eighty percent of them stated that English was their mother tongue. The majority of the respondents had university (47.5 percent) and post-graduate (32.5 percent) education, and about two-thirds were under 40 years of age.

*Attitudes toward learning Cantonese.* The vast majority of the foreign respondents (82.5 percent) said they had made a conscious attempt to learn Cantonese, either formally or informally. Some 45 percent were still studying Cantonese. About a quarter of them indicated that they had spent a lot of time learning Cantonese; 37.5 percent claimed that they had not learned Cantonese. Only about one-third (32.5 percent) said they found learning Cantonese enjoyable; 12.5 percent not enjoyable at all; 38 percent had mixed feelings.

*Opportunities to use Cantonese.* About 35 percent reported having the opportunity to use Cantonese. Around 52 percent reported getting help from Cantonese speakers about their Cantonese, while 47.5 percent claimed that neighbors provided little help. Over one-third (35 percent) claimed that their colleagues were not eager to help them in speaking Cantonese, while about an equal number claimed that the opposite was true.

*Approaches or methods used in learning Cantonese.* Many approaches or methods were reportedly used – more likely to be a combination of these than exclusively one or another method. About 57.5 percent reported picking up Cantonese in their daily life. Listening to others speak Cantonese around them was by far the most common (70 percent). Other approaches/methods included: learning from friends (75 percent), through independent study (47.5 percent), and through short-term courses (27.5 percent). About half of the respondents indicated that they had a lot of contact with Cantonese speakers.

*Actual use of Cantonese.* Nearly three-quarters of the non-Chinese respondents indicated that Cantonese was not necessary or not used (74

percent) in their daily lives/life. In other words, less than one-fifth of them (19.4 percent) indicated that Cantonese was used 'sometimes', 'often' or 'always'. The most popular occasions for using Cantonese, in decreasing order of significance, are (1) ordering food in a restaurant, (2) shopping in a fresh food market, (3) traveling by bus or other public transport, and (4) asking for directions.

*Local Chinese Hongkongers' responses when spoken to in Cantonese.* Non-Chinese respondents were asked to indicate how the local Chinese people would respond when spoken to in Cantonese in eight different situations. The overall results showed that local Chinese tended to respond favorably.

*Difficulties learning Cantonese.* Seventy percent of the non-Chinese respondents described Cantonese as difficult to learn and 10 percent as 'very difficult'. Of all the difficulties mentioned, problems related to pronunciation, tones and intonation topped the list (30 percent).

*Need for Cantonese.* The majority of the respondents (55 percent) said they needed to learn Cantonese. Nine respondents (22.5 percent) felt that they did not need to, while another 9 respondents (22.5 percent) said that it depended on the situation. Most of them wanted to learn Cantonese for integrative and practical reasons.

LOCAL CHINESE RESPONDENTS (N = 40). Over half of the local Chinese respondents were below the age of 39, and had received post-secondary or university education. Over 77 percent had resided in Hong Kong for 21 years or more. The majority of them (65 percent) said they did not know any 'foreigners',<sup>3</sup> but reported having had the experience of being spoken to by non-Chinese people, whose level of Cantonese was mostly characterized as basic or elementary. Over 40 percent said they had opportunities communicating with foreigners at work. As for the question 'Do foreigners want to speak Cantonese?', 25 percent said they believed that foreigners wanted to speak Cantonese, another 25 percent said they did not. In terms of language choice preference, nearly half of them (47.5 percent) preferred foreigners to speak English to them, about one-third preferred being spoken to in Cantonese, while 20 percent did not have any preference.

#### *Individual and focus group interview results*

To complement the data gathered in the first round, additional surveys were conducted with 35 foreign domestic helpers (FDHs) on a Sunday

in Central, Hong Kong and a focused group interview with 5 FDHs in the home of the first author. Other individual, pair or group interviews with East Indians, Americans and Europeans were conducted at the university (7) or in the homes of the interviewees (4). In all, a total of 16 in-depth interviews were conducted. These interviews, conducted by the first author, lasted for about 60 to 90 minutes depending on the number of persons. All the interviews were transcribed by student helpers under the authors' supervision. Then, with the help of the software WinMax, the transcriptions were coded inductively according to dominant and recurrent themes emerging (following Pike 1964; Watson-Gegeo 1988; cf. Flowerdew *et al.* 1998, 2000). Owing to space constraints, we will limit ourselves to describing the profile of eight representative interviewees. To foreground the particularities of each of the interviewees, thematically salient features will be presented contrastively in four pairs. In order to protect the interviewees' personal identities, their personal names will be replaced with fictive first names. Table 1 gives an overview of the general profile of the interviewees reported in this study.

Table 1. *The personal profile of interviewees reported in this study.*

Inter- viewee (pseudo name)	Gender	Age	Ethnicity and Nationality	No. of years in Hong Kong	Profes- sion	First Lan- guage	No. of Years learning Cantonese
Mona	Female	50	White American	20	Head of American cultural founda- tion	English	Full-time for one year
Paul	Male	55	White American	24	Teacher	English	Self-taught
Betty	Female	52	White Polish	11	Lab technician	Polish	Nil
Joan	Female	58	White Welsh	11	Home Maker	English	Part-time one semester
Chandra	Female	46	Indian HKSAR	41	Univer- sity teacher	Hindi	At school, environment
Rami	Female	27	Filipino	4	Domestic helper	Tagalog	At home
Pripam	Male	39	Indian, HKSAR	39	Banker	Hindi	At school
Joey	Female	31	Filipino	1	Domestic Helper	Ilokano	At home

*Mona and Paul.* Mona and Paul are both white Americans and have lived in Hong Kong for over 20 years. Both are married to local Hong-kongers and can speak Cantonese fluently. For both of them integration into the local community is important, but unlike Paul, who believes that he is fully accepted, Mona, despite her fluency, still feels like she is a foreigner. She believes that Hong Kong Chinese do not expect foreigners to be able to speak Cantonese or even want them to speak it. At the heart of this mindset, according to Mona, is that Hong Kong Chinese do not expect foreigners to integrate into the local Cantonese community and ‘they don’t want you to penetrate their culture ...’. She continues:

I’m too much aware of being a foreigner ... People who don’t know me see that I am a foreigner and that is a fact. But what I am saying about the mindset is that, even people who know me and like me very much, it’s not even judgmental, I think, but there’s just still a kind of attitude that foreigners are different ... foreigners are foreigners, I think in most societies, it’s true.

Paul, on the other hand, believes that few foreigners are genuinely interested in integrating into the local community and so do not learn Cantonese. He further observes that from the point of view of local Chinese, since few foreigners stay here for long, they are not expected to learn and speak Cantonese. At the same time, there is no compelling reason why they need to, for most Chinese businesspeople, civil servants, educators speak at least some English.

Paul attended Cantonese courses but did not find them particularly helpful. Tones were not a big problem to him; instead, a lack of etymological semblance with any of the European languages that he is familiar with (French, German, Spanish) made learning Cantonese a great challenge, for ‘nothing you bring to the table has any connection; everything’s new .... So you must start as a total child beginner, a baby, an infant’. One such example he gives is *din*<sup>22</sup> *daan*<sup>55</sup> *ce*<sup>55</sup> (電單車, ‘motor-cycle’), ‘which is an electric paddle vehicle with round wheels, so etymology is a killer’. He is still learning Cantonese, for he keeps writing down words and phrases that he hears, for example, from taxi drivers, waiters and market stall holders. As a language learner, he is very motivated and methodical. When asked ‘How do you learn?’, he said:

Brutal ... yeah, drill, repetition, memorise, pull out the index card for the word *toujour* and go at it ... Anytime I wait for a bus, I pull out the cards. Anytime I’m riding on the bus, I pull out the cards, use all this standing time, yeah.

Before coming to Hong Kong, Mona had studied Mandarin for 10 years in Taiwan. She loves languages. In addition to English, her mother tongue, she reads Chinese (intermediate) and speaks fluent Mandarin on everyday, non-academic topics, and considers herself fairly fluent in Cantonese. Mona studied Cantonese full time for two semesters when she first arrived and then later employed a tutor. Since then, she has been eager to practice using Cantonese for all sorts of communication purposes, to the extent of patronizing shop owners and keepers who would speak to her in Chinese. Despite her knowledge of Mandarin, she found Cantonese ‘a very, very difficult language’, because Cantonese has more tones (6 in Cantonese, 4 in Mandarin), and is not written in the same way as standard written Chinese. One area of grammar which she found very difficult is final particles, which are much richer compared with Mandarin. In her view, hard work and patience are indispensable qualities if one wants to be successful in learning Cantonese, for there is no shortcut:

In a way that I think it is necessary when you learn a language, you must be very disciplined, you have to memorise, you have to study really hard. ... you don’t sit back and, you have to copy your characters, you have to memorize texts. You have to do that ... All the people who succeed are people who are really obsessed like me. So, that’s the only way ....

Both Mona and Paul use Cantonese for transactional as well as work-related purposes. Mona has to use Cantonese often with her Cantonese-speaking employees and when interviewing clients. Paul finds Cantonese useful for supporting his teaching. For example, conveying his anger to his students when admonishing them not to use foul language:

... they clearly understand when I [say] ngo<sup>23</sup> zan<sup>55</sup> hai<sup>22</sup> ngo<sup>23</sup> m<sup>21</sup> zung<sup>55</sup> ji<sup>33</sup> nei<sup>23</sup> gong<sup>35</sup> cou<sup>55</sup> hau<sup>35</sup> [我真係我唔鍾意你講粗口, ‘I really don’t like that you use foul language’], like that. They understand I can even be angry when I speak Cantonese.

*Betty and Joan.* Both Betty and Joan are Europeans and have lived in Hong Kong for 11 years. Betty is Polish and Joan is Welsh. Betty works as a science lab technician in a local school and Joan is a home maker. They are both married to university professors and live on the university campus with other locals and foreigners. Betty’s knowledge of Cantonese is rudimentary, mainly colloquial expressions that she picked up at the marketplace. She has not made any formal attempt to learn Cantonese, for she does not believe that she could cope with the tones,

which she found too difficult to distinguish: 'I know it's too difficult for me. It puts me off'. To make her point, she cites the frequent frustration when instructing taxi drivers to go to the Chinese University of Hong Kong where she lives: 'I said *zung*<sup>55</sup> *man*<sup>21</sup> *daai*<sup>22</sup> *hok*<sup>22</sup> (中文大學, 'Chinese University'), and they say 'what'? ... I can never say *zung*<sup>55</sup> *man*<sup>21</sup> *daai*<sup>22</sup> *hok*<sup>22</sup>, I say it with an accent and they cannot understand.' The only formulaic expression that she can manage and will use always is *jau*<sup>23</sup> *lok*<sup>22</sup> *m*<sup>21</sup> *goi*<sup>55</sup> (有落唔該, 'stop here, please') when telling the driver to stop the bus or mini bus.

On her job as a science lab technician, Betty is surrounded by Chinese colleagues who are mostly younger, male, and bilingual in Cantonese and English. She tried to communicate with them in Cantonese, but since they all prefer to speak English with her, their conversations would invariably 'just come back in English'. Mixing with Chinese colleagues proved to be difficult, partly because they prefer to use Cantonese among themselves, but also because of marked differences in gender, age and preferred topics:

... they used to invite me to the restaurant ..., and after a few years ... I think I was going with you and you speak Cantonese and ... sometimes I ask them to translate so they do translate, but I feel you know, I think they are quite happy on their own, and they have to translate to me and ... they talk about cars, and they talk about the girls ... I used to go for a few first years and then, but you know I said oh it's just too much for them ... and too much for me to ask them and I feel they are much better without me, they do invite me occasionally, I said 'No, thank you very much' ....

Joan knows very little Cantonese – barely a few words – although she does make an effort to use it whenever she has the opportunity. For example, she would greet a saleslady at Fortress, an electronic appliances store in her neighborhood, but she can't go beyond saying 'Did you have a nice lunch?' in Cantonese. Unlike Betty, Joan made a conscious attempt to learn Cantonese by attending classes first at YWCA, then at YMCA, but that did not last long and was not very helpful. She found the class enjoyable, but not the learning process, mainly because the tones are too difficult for her. She also attended 'The Cantonese table', an informal weekly meeting where some local Chinese [mainly university students] are supposed to help them practice Cantonese, but it does not work very well, for they keep lapsing into English. While Joan wished she had devoted more time to studying Cantonese, the fact that she was likely to be on the move again was a major damper: 'the fundamental thing is I wasn't living in Hong Kong all my life .... I



wasn't prepared to give uh.. two years of my life to daily lessons...' But a more important reason why she has little motivation to learn Cantonese is a lack of support from local Chinese:

When I was learning, and I would try to put sentences together, I just used to get a very negative response... from mostly friends... You know they weren't encouraging... because I wasn't saying it properly I wouldn't get 'Oh that's a good effort!' ... They would just say 'No, we don't know what you're saying' ... I got very negative feedback....

Joan believes that foreigners in Hong Kong can get by without knowing any Cantonese, although she does acknowledge a need to learn some Cantonese because 'you're living in somebody else's country'. Having said that, however, she realized that for transactional communication, such as talking to ladies in the marketplace, 'I'm not going to be on a friendly basis with them, and I can manage it perfectly well with my limited Cantonese, and with smiling ...'. Betty's response to the question of whether foreigners in Hong Kong should learn Cantonese, was similar to Joan's. She said 'you don't have to [learn Cantonese]; you can go without', because they can get by with English. Joan, however, based on her Cantonese learning experiences concluded that (a) Hong Kong Chinese all want to use English with foreigners; and (b) by refusing to speak to foreigners in Cantonese, they can maintain a distance with them.

*Chandra and Pripam.* Chandra and Pripam have been living in Hong Kong nearly all their lives and went to local schools. Their experiences of interaction with local Chinese in English or Cantonese are qualitatively very different from those described by the American/European interviewees above. As fluent Indian speakers of Cantonese, they find their cultural identities and sense of belonging constantly challenged in Hong Kong. They both have strong feelings regarding the use of Cantonese and feel that in general, when interacting with local Chinese there is an unmistakably unfavorable perception of them as dark-skinned outsiders. While they both learned Cantonese at local schools, Chandra also attributes her native-like fluency to her passion for viewing local television, which she still does when she can find the time:

The box was a fascination. When I came from India, I hadn't seen that in India, so I was just fascinated by it. And most of my friends do speak it, and my other friends who, who maybe have got married and then moved to Hong Kong. Some speak it, but others don't

speaking it that fluently. Some have consciously gone and taken classes, to learn how to speak Cantonese, because they feel they need it.

Even though Pripam had a very positive experience learning Cantonese in an English-medium high school with local, Southeast Asian and foreign students, he said that since Form 7 he has become more aware of being made unwelcome by local Chinese. The strong sense of being different and unwelcome permeated the interviews with Chandra and Pripam. Despite being fluent Cantonese speakers, Chandra has had difficulty mixing with Hong Kong Chinese and developing intimate or close relationships with them, while Pripam criticises local Hongkongers for being 'parochial'. Chandra has Chinese colleagues with whom she maintains good collegial relationships, but she would not characterize the friendship as deep or intimate. She suspects that it may have to do with the fact that ethnic groups of non-Chinese origin are generally treated as foreigners. She contends that, at the heart of the matter is the local Chinese attitude towards the in-group and the out-groups – a boundary defined essentially along the lines of ethnicity:

If you ask me, are you a foreigner? I will tell you I've been here since I was a little girl. I feel I belong too, I was ... 5 years old, 4 and a half when I came to Hong Kong. And I've been here all my life, all my friends are here. It is home. But if you ask me, are you a foreigner in Hong Kong, yes, I am a foreigner in Hong Kong ... because I am of Indian origin ... [and] would the Chinese consider me as a local? No, no, they won't .... I would even say I am a Hongkongese [Hongkonger] to some extent. But if you ask me to the extent that we are accepted as Hongkongese [Hongkonger], it's a totally different issue.

Pripam's sentiments are similar to Chandra's as he too feels like an outsider:

They actually, they don't feel the need to .. integrate. They don't feel the need to uh .. to sort of understand you. That's the whole thing because they feel this is their little world. And they live here. Even if they travel to any other part of the world, they travel in groups. When you go out and see how other uh .. how people in other countries interact with foreigners, you'll, you'll notice the difference like.. take Singapore, for example, everyone whether Chinese, or Malays, or Indians, they all .. they all have this sense of identity of being a Singaporean and they all speak the same way ... They have accents and yeah *when they're in school* there's *no sense of like* you know

what colour you are, what not. I mean, *when* you hear them, they're all Singaporeans. (italics added to show the speaker's emphasis)

Despite being a 'Hong Kong Indian', Chandra still finds that some people are surprised when she speaks Cantonese, but for the most part prestige is associated with the use of English in certain settings as she notes: 'They're shocked, pleasantly surprised', those who have never encountered them [Cantonese-speaking Indians] before. But, not so in places like the Holiday Inn, where waiters and service staff are accustomed to seeing Indians speak fluent Cantonese:

Well, it depends. If people know you, they are not shocked, if they don't know you, they meet you for the first time, they're kind of surprised. Sometimes when you speak to them in .. in English, they might be more willing to help you. You'll get better service. So, I mean, it depends. Like even when I am in a posh restaurant, I know that the waiter can't speak in English, in fact I will speak to him in English.

Pripam finds a more welcoming reaction from those on the Mainland in Guangzhou, who he feels want to extend the conversation beyond what is requested:

They make the effort to show you around or ... and, you know, carry the conversation beyond the questions you're asking them. But in Hong Kong you're just not ... I guess they expect it, as far as ... you don't get anything uh positive out of it but you don't necessarily get anything negative; it's just uh the locals here expect you to speak Cantonese. And when you speak, it's just not a surprise.

When asked about the need for foreigners to learn Cantonese, Chandra and Pripam had diverging viewpoints. Pripam believes that because trade is so important, it is English which makes Singapore stand out in Southeast Asia, and Hong Kong should follow that example. He adopts a pragmatic view and feels that Hong Kong Chinese should make an effort to brush up their English, 'because that's what's really bridged the gap between China and the rest of the world'. Chandra holds a more integrationist conviction and believes that it is an advantage to learn Cantonese because it helps to communicate and learn the culture. Though she contends that 'the majority of people in Hong Kong cannot communicate that well in English' and 'are kind of scared to communicate with foreigners, because they have to speak English'.

*Rami and Joey.* Rami and Joey are college-educated Filipino women who majored in computer science and midwifery, respectively. Like the two Indian interviewees above, they have experienced a lot of hardship and discrimination; their feelings, however, are much more intense largely owing to their work status. They have been working in Hong Kong as foreign domestic helpers for less than five years, and they attend the same church. Joey is still feeling homesick after 10 months on the job, which she describes as 'hard' and Rami after more than 3 years feels fortunate to have very good employers even if it is tough to look after three small children. Joey also feels fortunate that she has a good employer but admits to feeling like an outcast with which Rami concurs, because 'some of them only see us as domestic helpers and do not see what is in the heart'. Joey states her feelings this way:

You can feel that you are an outsider because not all Chinese will accept you, especially we Filipinos. They look down on us. I still feel very ... very strange.

Both women agree that there is very little socializing with the local Hong Kong population and the only place where they feel accepted is in their church or when they congregate with fellow Filipinas in Central to celebrate special events like Independence Day. Rami continues:

It's hard to work in a foreign country and it's also hard for me that I've been far away from the family especially when I was sick.

The two women are required to use English on their jobs but Joey had to learn some basic Cantonese to communicate with the grandmother for whom she cares. Rami, due to her longer stay in Hong Kong, spoke only Cantonese with her previous employer and now uses Cantonese for basic transactions in the market or when taking a taxi. Both have picked up Cantonese by listening to their employers and have not had any formal instruction. They find the tones difficult. Joey thinks that there is no real need for her to learn Cantonese although she thinks if she did, she would know what her employers were saying about her. Rami feels it is important for Filipinas to learn Cantonese to communicate with their employers for practical reasons because, as she says, 'most of the time the newcomers' contracts are terminated because of their language barrier' and because 'some employers do not speak English'. Rami finds that people are generally positive when she speaks Cantonese.

## Discussion

When we first started the ‘Cantonese as an additional language’ project, we were consumed by a basic goal to find out more about foreigners’ attitudes towards learning Cantonese and the degree to which they are accepted by local Chinese. Half way through the project, our data have led us to a deeper appreciation of many of the intervening and mediating variables which influence and govern language use. The data from our survey are consistent with earlier findings regarding difficulties of learning Cantonese (Li and Richards 1995; Tibbetts 1996). However, for the majority of our non-Chinese respondents, we found that they harbour in general a favourable attitude towards learning Cantonese. This positive attitude notwithstanding, only less than half of the respondents in our mini-survey actually made an effort to learn Cantonese by attending courses (27.5 percent) and/or doing self-study (47.5 percent). What seems puzzling is that, despite such efforts, the vast majority of our non-local respondents felt that Cantonese was not much used in their daily lives.

An area that has not been addressed in previous research has been the Chinese Hongkongers’ receptivity to the non-locals’ attempts to learn and speak Cantonese. Regarding the question whether local Chinese have positive and negative attitudes towards foreigners who *wanted* to communicate with them in Cantonese, the results are ambivalent. However, while slightly more locals preferred being spoken to in English as opposed to Cantonese, the majority of those interviewed did not know any foreigners. What is apparent from our survey is that a chasm exists between the two groups: many local Hongkongers do not know any foreigners and the majority of foreigners do not need to use Cantonese on a daily basis. This suggests that the level of interaction or contact between the two groups in general is restricted, except for that small group of Hongkongers who have opportunities to communicate in English with foreigners at work or, for an even smaller group, at home. This being the case, what, then, is the degree of acculturation on the part of non-local residents? We believe learning the language of the majority can act as some kind of a cultural broker facilitating acculturation and access to some of the cultural practices of the majority (Tinker Sachs 2002), but the findings from our survey suggest that acculturation through Cantonese language learning appears to be very limited and restricted to a minority. We now turn to the findings from our interviews with the various ethnolinguistic groups to explore these issues further.

We use three important questions raised by Norton and Toohey (2002: 120) to frame our discussion on the degree to which non-local

Cantonese language learning and its reception by Chinese Hongkongers facilitates or restricts foreign acculturation in the Hong Kong community. These questions are:

1. How do community practices facilitate or block access to experienced ethnic Chinese Cantonese speakers?
2. How do community practices structure possibilities for selfhood?
3. What kinds of utterances are newcomers able to appropriate when interacting with local Hong Kong speakers?

We will take up each of these questions in turn.

*How do community practices facilitate or block access to experienced speakers?* There is no denying that foreigners in Hong Kong are surrounded by native speakers of Cantonese. However, the extent to which those fluent speakers engage in speaking Cantonese with non-locals is complicated. We have observed that there is a general lack of cooperation and support on the part of native speakers of Cantonese when some learners make an effort to practise using the target language, regardless of the intended language function, transactional or interactional (Brown and Yule 1983). This is also attested in our survey data as well as in earlier research (see, e.g., Chiu 1996; Li and Richards 1995). Three of the interviewees Mona, Joan, and Chandra have noted the reluctance of locals to interact with them in Cantonese. Mona believes this attitude is partially related to the locals' desire to preserve and protect their culture from infiltration as they do not want anyone 'penetrating their culture'. Chandra concurs as she feels she is still perceived as a 'foreigner' despite having lived in Hong Kong from childhood. Joan found the local women at 'the Cantonese table' repeatedly lapsing into English, thereby preventing her from practicing Cantonese.

To explain Chinese Hongkongers' apparent unwillingness to interact in Cantonese with foreigners, we believe it is useful to make a broad distinction between two main groups of Cantonese native speakers: those who have a (fairly) high level of English communication skills, and those who do not. When spoken to in Cantonese, Chinese Hongkongers who have little or no knowledge of English will have little choice but to answer back in Cantonese. At the same time, whatever the intended language function of the learners of Cantonese – transactional or interactional – their Cantonese proficiency is usually not high enough to carry the conversation forward, and so social interaction with non-English-speaking Chinese Hongkongers, like the attempts

made by Joan and Betty, tend to be of little help beyond the reinforcement of basic, high-frequency vocabulary. However, when these local speakers encounter highly proficient non-local speakers of Cantonese, there is usually a positive response as echoed in the sentiments of Paul and Chandra.

When speaking Cantonese to local Chinese with good knowledge of English, on the other hand, the picture gets considerably more complex. If the intended language function is perceived as transactional, which means that the primary concern is speedy communication of information, as is typical of language needs in the workplace, English clearly works better. If the non-Chinese speaker's intention is perceived as interactional, switching to Cantonese would tend to slow down the pace of the conversation, ironically making it more difficult for rapport to develop. The gist of the matter is, compared with the average non-Chinese speaker's level of Cantonese, the Chinese speaker's English is perceived as relatively more efficient and effective in getting one's meanings across and/or cultivating rapport or friendship. However, when the non-Chinese speaker is fluent in Cantonese, as in the case of our interviewees, Mona, Paul, Chandra and Pripam, and the local Hongkonger is also fluent in English, which language is used goes beyond issues of both speakers' relative proficiency levels and gets complicated by factors such as purpose of interaction and cultural identity. Bilingual local Chinese tend not to encourage, or even ignore, the non-Chinese speaker's use of Cantonese as a symbolic act of acculturation and accommodation and, when interacting with non-Chinese speakers, bilingual Chinese Hongkongers tend to prefer the language of their (former) 'colonial' masters, English, to their mother tongue, Cantonese. These two tendencies give us important information about the ethnolinguistic identity of bilingual Chinese Hongkongers.

With reference to Le Page and Tabouret-Keller's (1985) notion of 'acts of identity', we believe the educated Hong Kong Chinese bilinguals' preference for English, and their corresponding tendency to disprefer using their mother tongue Cantonese in interethnic encounters, especially with colleagues and friends, suggests that being bilingual and bicultural, they do not feel that English is the language of 'the other', and so speaking English with 'foreigners' does *not* amount to renouncing or betraying their Chinese identity. This is corroborated by another general observation, namely, the absence of evidence of bilingual local Chinese using Cantonese to assert their ethnolinguistic identity. At the same time, the non-Chinese speaker's effort to learn and converse in Cantonese does not make them appear less 'foreign', as echoed in the comments made by several of our interviewees, even though such a symbolic act of accommodation and acculturation is welcomed by local

Chinese in general. There is also some indication that 'foreigners' speaking in Cantonese (e.g., when ordering food) is sometimes perceived as an insult, for it may be interpreted as implying that the English proficiency level of the Chinese interlocutor is not up to standard. A very similar point is made by Anthea Fraser Gupta (2004) in her explanation of why the use of Malay by foreigners in Malaysia and Indonesia, as portrayed in some Malay course books for self-study, does not sound authentic at all. Given the fact that English tends to correlate with socioeconomic status and higher education, a foreigner who addresses a Malay speaker in Malaysia and Indonesia (less so in Singapore) may be perceived as being insulting, for it suggests that the addressee is unable to speak English, with the additional implication of being uneducated (p. 154).

What is also important in this discussion is to examine not only Chinese Hongkongers' attitudes but also those of some foreigners regarding the question of whether there is a perceived need for them to learn Cantonese. Many attitudes prevail and amongst them is what one interviewee, Paul, described as 'cultural superiority'. A similar sentiment has been echoed in the extract from the letter to the editor of a newspaper cited earlier. Some foreigners also hold themselves aloof from the community; they may be there for a short period of time and simply do not want to invest too much time in learning Cantonese or interacting with local Chinese.

*How do community practices structure possibilities for selfhood?* If we interpret 'selfhood' as meaning opportunities for 'self-actualisation' (following Abraham Maslov's (1968) theory of personal development), our data show that many of our interviewees feel that their full selfhood is never realized because they feel marginalized by the dominant community practices and the perceptions of Chinese Hongkongers. This is generally true of all foreigners who have made an attempt to learn Cantonese but especially more acute for dark-skinned foreigners. In other words, learning Cantonese does not automatically provide one with the means to access the insider practices of the community. One vestige of colonialism is the special place and preferential treatment often given to Caucasians. While preferential treatment is often given to Caucasians, the dark-skinned foreigner is relegated to the lowest status of all. Torda Lowe's (2000) investigation into the discourse and identity of Filipino domestic workers documents the treatment of this particular group by local Hongkongers. As is well-known, the Hong Kong government has been reluctant to enact legislation against racism, on the grounds that racist and discriminatory practices against dark-skinned residents were uncommon, despite clear evidence to the contrary, including the findings in this study.<sup>4</sup> While feelings of being out-



siders are prevalent in the interviews with most of our respondents, the feelings of being ill-treated or ostracized because of race is dominant in the conversations with the Filipinos and the Indians that we interviewed. Rami and Joey find that there is little socializing with local Hong Kongers and feel 'looked down upon', while Chandra and Pripam find it difficult to develop intimate friendships as they are not treated as 'belongers' or locals despite their cultural group's presence in Hong Kong for well over a century (Vaid 1972; White 1994, cited in Detaramani and Lock 2003).

What is characteristic of access to community practices for the Filipinas is 'legitimate peripheral participation' (Lave and Wenger 1991) because they are present in the home and engaging in community practices albeit at a superficial and peripheral level not only because of their limited Cantonese, but also because they are not seen as 'equal' in the first place, as stated by Rami, because of their skin colour and social class and socioeconomic status. However, while class and status are primary determining factors for more than 250,000 domestic helpers in Hong Kong, even those upper-class, dark-skinned non-locals feel unwelcomed by Hongkongers as indicated by two of our Indian interviewees, Chandra and Pripam, despite the fact that they speak Cantonese fluently. Perea (2000: 344) discusses how American discourse is dominated by the black/white binary paradigm of race to the exclusion of other races. In Hong Kong, the dominant discourses on 'foreigners' usually refer to upwardly-mobile white foreigners, to the exclusion of other races and classes, including the dark-skinned Indians who have been playing a pivotal role in 'helping the development of Hong Kong as a world city for at least 160 years' (Tsang, 2000) and who, according to the former HKSAR Chief Executive Tung Chee Hwa (2002), have 'some 400 firms operating in Hong Kong'. Notwithstanding the significant contributions of dark-skinned Indians, they remain conspicuously absent in Hong Kong government and media reports (Hello from Hong Kong Government Postcard).<sup>5</sup>

*What kinds of utterances are available for newcomers to appropriate when interacting with local Hong Kong speakers?* Our data suggest that while there are basic functional utterances available for newcomers to appropriate such as when ordering food in a restaurant, or shopping in a fresh food market or when asking for directions, many linguistic as well as social factors hinder the full and extended appropriation of Cantonese. Thus, consonant with earlier findings (Li and Richards 1995; Tibbetts 1996), a majority of the interviewees pointed out that pronunciation is a major problem because they found the Cantonese tonal system very difficult to master. This point is epitomized by two interviewees' responses in the following excerpt:

- (1) Interviewer: What problems did you have when you were learning Cantonese?  
Betty: The tones, yes.. yes.. I can't remember them.  
Interviewer: Right, you can't remember. And for you Joan?  
Joan: Same, same with the tones, I couldn't hear them basically.

This finding is not surprising given the fact that neither of the interviewees' first languages is a tone language. For learners of Cantonese who are unaccustomed to phonemically distinctive tone contours, the acquisition of the six distinctive tones in Cantonese is not at all easy. No wonder the most often cited learning difficulty as well as a major source of frustration was that the 'same word' has many meanings. That 'same word' designation is of course a misnomer: the syllable may be identical, but uttered with different tones, they are heard as different words by native speakers of Cantonese. What the interviewees meant is that, if one fails to utter a Cantonese morpho-syllable with the appropriate tone contour associated with it, one will fail to get one's meaning across or risk being misunderstood, resulting in communication breakdown in either case. This helps to explain why the communication failure and frustration rates are so high with learners of Cantonese.

## **Conclusion**

Using a combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods, this study confirms that Cantonese is indeed – as stated by one of our interviewees – 'a very, very difficult language' to master. We also found that our non-local subjects tend to have a positive attitude towards learning Cantonese, and that a relatively small percentage among them does make an attempt to learn it. More importantly, our data generated insights into an area heretofore unexplored regarding the way Cantonese as an additional language is learned and used in Hong Kong. After analyzing the views of the learners as well as how their attempts at using Cantonese are received by Hong Kong Chinese, we found that a huge chasm exists between the two groups. In addition, we found that the receptivity of Hong Kong Chinese towards the attempts by members of non-local groups to speak Cantonese tends to vary, depending on their racial identity and socioeconomic status. Consequently, some 'foreigners' who speak Cantonese may find doors opening but this does not imply full acceptance by local Hongkongers because they are still perceived as foreigners (Tinker Sachs 2002). Although some researchers believe that social distance and physical dissimilarity mitigate against acceptance by dominant cultural groups (e. g. Nesdale and Mak

2003), we would contend that legislation which strives to support racial harmony and integration would provide a positive backdrop for future discussion and research on race, class and language use in the Hong Kong context.

It is our belief, therefore, that future research on Cantonese as an additional language ought to deconstruct the cultural concept of 'foreignness' as well as the complex process of acculturation, especially with regard to those dark-skinned ethnic groups who have grown up in Hong Kong. We believe one useful and productive way forward is to investigate the differential perception of 'foreignness' among Hong Kong Chinese by analyzing media discourse and school textbooks critically. In addition to critical discourse analysis, more situated research, preferably using ethnographic and case study methodologies, is needed to shed light on how social interactions involving Cantonese as an additional language are patterned in specific local contexts.

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### **Appendix I: Survey Questionnaire for Non-Chinese Respondents**

1. Name
2. Contact number (In case clarification of answers is needed)
3. Nationality
4. Mother tongue
5. Occupation

6. Higher education level attained (Please tick box)

Primary	
Secondary	
Post-secondary	
University	
Post-graduate	

7. Age group (Please tick box)

< 20	
20–29	
30–39	
40–49	
> 50	

8. How long have you lived in Hong Kong? (Please tick box)

< 1 year	
1–3 years	
3–5 years	
> 5 years	

9. Did you know Cantonese before you came to Hong Kong?
10. Have you picked up any Cantonese since you arrived here?
11. Did you try to mix with Cantonese people? If yes, how successful?
12. How successful are or have been your attempts to integrate? (for example: at work, sports, schools, church, social gatherings, clubs, with neighbor, etc.) Explain.
13. Please list any other languages/dialects you know in the table below, giving level of proficiency in the following areas using the following scale:

1 = elementary 2 = intermediate 3 = higher 4 = advanced

Language/dialect	Reading	Writing	Speaking	Listening

14. Do you find Cantonese easy or difficult to learn? Why?
15. Do you think foreigners need to learn Cantonese? Why?
16. Have you made a conscious attempt to learn Cantonese, either formally or informally? (If not, why? End of questionnaire)
17. How many attempts have you made to learn Cantonese?
18. Are you still studying Cantonese in any way? (If not, please go to no. 20)
19. Please calculate how many hours you spend weekly learning Cantonese, including both formal classes and private efforts. (Please tick the appropriate box)

< 1 hour	1–3 hours	3–6 hours	6–9 hours	> 9 hours

20. Which of the following methods have you used to learn Cantonese? (Note: you can tick more than one box)

Long full time course (1 year or above)	
Short full time course (less than 1 year)	
Long part time course (1 year or above)	
Short part time course (less than 1 year)	
Private study with a tutor	
Independent study, working alone with a course book and /or tapes	
Learning from Cantonese friends and colleagues	
Other, please specify	

21. What problems do you have learning Cantonese?  
 22. What methods do you use to overcome the problem?  
 23. Please read the statement below and tick the box that fits your opinion.

1 = strongly disagree

2 = disagree

3 = neutral

4 = agree

5 = strongly agree

NA = not applicable

<b>Statement</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	N/A
Studying Cantonese is enjoyable						
The Cantonese classes that you have attended is/are excellent						
Cantonese books and study materials that you have used is/are excellent						
My private tutor is excellent						
I have spent a lot of time learning Cantonese						
I learn Cantonese from hearing others speaking all around me						
I have many opportunities to use Cantonese						
Cantonese speakers generally give a lot of help informally						
I pick up Cantonese informally from taxi drivers, waiters, market stall-holders and other strangers I meet in my daily life						
I have a lot of contact with Cantonese speakers						
My colleagues at work are eager to help me speak Cantonese						
My neighbors offer me a lot of help practicing my Cantonese						

24. How often do you speak Cantonese? (Please tick box)

Never	
Seldom	
Sometimes	
Often	
Always	

25. Please write to indicate the extent to which you would use Cantonese in the following situations. (Use “**never**”(1), “**seldom**”(2), “**sometimes**”(3), “**often**”(4), “**always**”(5) to fill in the column of “Extent”). Please also indicate the typical immediate responses of locals when you speak in Cantonese to them. You may choose from the following responses. Please use the related letter to indicate the response you choose. You may choose more than one.

**Responses in Cantonese**

A = Excited      B = Pleased      C = Complimentary  
D = Rude          E = Teasing          F = Acceptable Cantonese

**Responses in English**

G = Translation      H = Ask for English response      I = Say something irrelevant  
J = Normal response

**Non-verbal responses**

K = Laughing      L = Facial expression      M = Find someone to help  
N = Move away      O = Responding with gestures      P = No response

Situations	Extent	Responses
1. Ordering food in a restaurant		
2. Taking a taxi		
3. Shopping in a fresh food market		
4. Traveling by bus or other public transport		
5. Talking to electricians, plumbers etc. at home		

<b>Situations</b>	Extent	<b>Responses</b>
6. Talking to support staff at work		
7. Getting information about goods and services		
8. Asking for direction		
9. Ordering food in a workplace canteen		
10. Shopping in supermarkets and stores		
11. Talking to clients at work		
12. Talking to colleagues at work		
13. Making phone calls at work		
14. Talking to neighbors		
15. Visiting different parts of HK in your free time		
16. Visiting Southern China on business		
17. Talking to superiors at work		
18. Making social phone calls		
19. Talking to friends		
20. Watching films		
21. Other (please specify)		

26. Do you think foreigners who are working in Hong Kong should learn Cantonese?

**Appendix II: Questionnaire for Local Chinese Respondents**

1. Name
2. Contact number (In case clarification of answers is needed)
3. Nationality
4. Mother tongue
5. Occupation



6. Education level (Please tick box)

Primary	
Secondary	
Post-secondary	
University	
Post-graduate	

7. Age group (Please tick box)

< 20	
20-29	
30-39	
40-49	
> 50	

8. Please list any other languages/dialects you know in the table below, giving level of proficiency in the following areas using the following scale:

1 = elementary 2 = intermediate 3 = higher 4 = advanced

<b>Language/ Dialect</b>	<b>Reading</b>	<b>Writing</b>	<b>Speaking</b>	<b>Listening</b>

9. How long have you stayed in Hong Kong consecutively?

10. Have you ever lived outside of Hong Kong? (If no, go to no. 12.)

11. Where and how long?

12. Have you ever traveled outside of Hong Kong?

13. Where and how long?

14. Do you know any foreigners? (If no, go to no. 18)

15. Where are they from?

16. How long have you known them?
17. Can they speak any Cantonese?
18. Do you have chance(s) to communicate with foreigners? (Please specify, e. g. at work, socially )
19. Has any foreigner ever spoken Cantonese to you? (If no, go to no. 23)
20. How would you grade their level of Cantonese? (Please tick box)

Elementary	
Intermediate	
Higher	
Advanced	

21. What is your typical response when the foreigner speaks to you in Cantonese?
22. Do you think most foreigners are eager to speak Cantonese?
23. Would you prefer a foreigner to speak Cantonese or English to you?
24. Do you think foreigners who are working in Hong Kong should learn Cantonese? Why or why not?
25. Which foreigners should learn Cantonese, why?

### **Appendix III: Foreigners Learning Cantonese**

Semi-structured Questionnaire Used in Individual and Focus Group Interviews

1. Name
2. Contact number (In case clarification of answers is needed.)
3. Nationality
4. Mother tongue
5. Occupation
6. Education Level
7. Age Group
8. How long have you lived in Hong Kong continuously?
9. Did you know Cantonese before you came to Hong Kong?
10. Have you picked up any Cantonese since you arrived here?

11. Please list any other languages (including English)/dialects you know and your level of proficiency.
12. Do you think foreigners need to learn Cantonese? Why?
13. Have you made a conscious attempt to learn Cantonese, either formally or informally? Elaborate.
14. Do you find Cantonese easy or difficult to learn? Why? What problems do you have learning Cantonese?
15. How often do you speak Cantonese? In which contexts do you use Cantonese?
16. How do the locals react when you use Cantonese? Explain your response.
17. How successful are you or have you been in your attempts to integrate? Please elaborate, give examples.

### Notes

1. To cut down on printing and mailing costs, some public utility companies took the lead to make Chinese the default language in their written communication to clients. English versions are obtainable on demand.
2. In response to the local business sector's dissatisfaction with students' declining English standards, university graduates included, the Workplace English Campaign was officially launched by the HKSAR government in 2000 'with the aims to heighten public awareness of the importance of workplace English and to raise the standard of English among the Hong Kong workforce' (<http://www.english.gov.hk>).
3. In folk terminology, the word 'foreigner' is a literal rendition of ngoi<sup>22</sup> gwok<sup>33</sup> jan<sup>21</sup>, (外國人, 'foreign country person'), referring loosely to all people with an ethnicity other than Chinese, including Eurasians.
4. As of the time of writing, the HKSAR government is reportedly preparing a consultation document for a draft bill against racial discrimination (Shamdasani 2004).
5. Following the devastating economic impact of SARS (severe acute respiratory syndrome) in 2003, the Hong Kong government issued a 'Hello from Hong Kong' postcard as a measure to lure tourists from around the world to visit Hong Kong. The postcards along with postage were free to all Hong Kong residents. The postcard showed 12 pictures of Hong Kong Chinese, Caucasian and Eurasian youths and adults. No dark-skinned people were included.

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