Hong Kong’s language ecology 
and the racialized linguistic order

Kara Fleming
The University of Hong Kong

This paper will argue that the role and status of the languages promoted as part of Hong Kong’s “trilingualism and biliteracy” policy cannot be understood without reference to each other and to their wider social, political and linguistic context. Particularly, in Hong Kong, race is a key mediating factor that structures social orders in which language is used and evaluated, and therefore its role in the ecology must be emphasized. This article will outline the links between language and social hierarchies of race, focusing particularly on the positioning of Hong Kong South Asians, based on ethnographic research in a Hong Kong secondary school and analysis of media and policy data. This approach is key to understanding the apparent contradictions in the evaluation of various languages spoken in Hong Kong, and demonstrates the necessity of a holistic, contextualized analysis of language and race.

Keywords: language and race, language policy, multilingualism, Hong Kong, Hong Kong South Asians, Chinese as a Second Language

1. Introduction

In order to understand the role of any particular language in Hong Kong or any other context, it is important to examine the relationships between languages and social structures, and between the various languages present in a society, for which a language ecological perspective is particularly appropriate and useful. In particular, this paper aims to demonstrate that the social evaluation and the prestige associated with particular language varieties – in Hong Kong or elsewhere – can only be understood in relation to the other varieties present in the local ecology, and by examining local social hierarchies of class and race.

Accordingly, this paper will provide a critical analysis of Hong Kong’s linguistic ecology by examining the links between languages and local social structures.
Language in Hong Kong cannot be understood without reference to Hong Kong’s socioeconomic and racial hierarchies – which are tied closely together. I will argue that understandings of the actual linguistic repertoires of individuals are mediated through ideologies which locate them within this hierarchy.

This analysis arises from ethnographic research with South Asian students in a Hong Kong secondary school. While attempting to understand how the students and broader Hong Kong society made sense of their linguistic repertoires, a number of apparent contradictions arise which can only be explained with reference to the broader system of linguistic and social value. For example, why does a knowledge of English have vastly different implications for working-class South Asians than it does for upper-class ethnic Chinese? Does promoting “Chinese” mean encouraging or suppressing Cantonese? Who is actually meant to embody “biliteracy and trilingualism”? In attempting to answer these questions, it is necessary to look more closely at the racialized structure of Hong Kong society, for which a language ecological approach is particularly helpful.

2. Language ecologies, ideology and race

Work on language ecology emphasizes that languages are not self-contained entities which can be studied in isolation. Thus a language ecological approach “requires an exploration of the relationship of languages to each other and to the society in which these languages exist” (Creese and Martin 2003: 161). Einar Haugen’s foundational work set out a social-psychological frame for understanding language use: “the ecology of a language is determined primarily by the people who learn it, use it, and transmit it to others” (1972: 57).

Language ideologies (Woolard 1998; Irvine and Gal 2000; Kroskrity 2010) provide a useful lens with which to understand language and societal structures because ideologies encode assumptions and beliefs about other social relations – they “locate, interpret, and rationalize sociolinguistic complexity, identifying linguistic varieties with ‘typical’ persons and activities and accounting for the differentiations among them” (Irvine and Gal 2000: 36). This analytic focus fits well with an ecological perspective, because language ideologies cannot be understood in isolation – they must be understood in terms of socially contextualized repertoires. Thus it is not possible to describe the role or the value of “English” in Hong Kong without examining how “English” is understood in relation to other languages and to various social groups. An ecological approach can also serve as the foundation for a critical perspective to language and social relations, as Creese and Martin write: “An ecological approach does more than describe the relationships between situated speakers of different languages, and is proactive in pulling
apart perceived natural language orders: that is, where a particular language and its structure and use becomes so naturalized that it is no longer seen as construing a particular ideological line” (2003: 164).

In Hong Kong, as in many societies, race is a key factor in structuring these social relations (Rampton 1995; Urciuoli 1996; Fought 2006; Lippi-Green 2012). The racialization of language, or the linking of language to particular racial/ethnic groups, often goes hand in hand with social inequality – “ethnicisation is accompanied by an unequal distribution of social value” (Martín Rojo 2008: 47). This analysis will explore some of the ideologies underpinning those linguistic-racial hierarchies, and some of their consequences.

3. History and policy of Hong Kong

Hong Kong is a Special Autonomous Region within the People’s Republic of China with a population of almost 7.2 million as of 2013 (Hong Kong Yearbook 2013). The majority of the population is ethnically Chinese – 94% as of 2011 (Hong Kong Yearbook 2011) – with significant minorities originating in the Philippines, Indonesia, India, and the USA, amongst others. The majority of the ethnic Chinese population is of Cantonese background and Cantonese-speaking. There are a number of other Chinese communities historically present in Hong Kong, including the Hakka, Hokkien, and Chiuchow, but community members have largely shifted to speaking Cantonese (Lim 2016). The discussion that follows will particularly focus on South Asian minority groups in Hong Kong, of which peoples of Indian (28,920, comprising 0.4% of the overall population in 2013), Nepali (20,470, 0.3%) and Pakistani (19,350, 0.3%) background make up the most significant populations (Hong Kong Yearbook 2013).

South Asians have been present in Hong Kong since its colonial beginnings in the 1840s, coming largely as merchants, as part of the British military or as ship workers (White 1994: 15). The merchants were generally quite wealthy, but the majority of South Asians in the territory in the mid-19th century were less well off. Soldiers and ship workers remained in Hong Kong as troops or took work as guards; this was the foundation for the traditional presence of South Asians in Hong Kong’s police force, as well as other civil service occupations, where they were well represented until the handover from British to Chinese rule in 1997. However, Chinese language requirements that have been instituted since the handover have forced many South Asians out of the police force and the civil service more broadly.

English has historically played an important role as a lingua franca among different South Asian groups (Weiss 1991: 418), and there is some evidence of an
overall language shift towards English, especially within particular South Asian communities such as the Sindhi (Detaramani and Lock 2003). All the South Asian students at the school in this study spoke at least some English, to varying degrees of confidence, as well as a range of languages other than English or varieties of Chinese – responses to a survey I administered indicated that students had abilities in Punjabi, Urdu, Tagalog, Nepali, Pashto, Korean, and Thai.

Government policy is centred around English and Chinese – there is little official planning concerned with other languages. The Basic Law of Hong Kong (Article 9) and the Official Language Ordinance establish both English and Chinese as official languages (Hong Kong Government 1997a, b). “Chinese” in Hong Kong is usually used to mean spoken Cantonese and written standard Chinese (but the ambiguity of this term will be discussed below). The policy of “biliteracy and trilingualism” emphasizes acquisition of spoken English, Cantonese, and Mandarin, and literacy in English and written standard Chinese in traditional characters. To oversimplify the situation, official language policy and dominant language ideologies typically position English (and increasingly Mandarin) as a gatekeeper to elite status, and Cantonese as a symbol of local identity and belonging.

The issue of medium of instruction (MOI) has been one of the most contentious areas of policymaking and debate. This has largely been focused on secondary schools – the fact that Hong Kong universities all teach in English and that most primary schools teach through Cantonese seems to be relatively uncontroversial. Historically, colonial language policy was to encourage the use of Cantonese as a medium of instruction and limit the teaching of English, creating a limited class of elite brokers who were able to deal in both languages (Evans 2011). During the late colonial period in the 1980s and 90s, schools were more or less free to choose their MOI; for many schools, this meant claiming to be in English while in practice teaching in a mixture of English and Cantonese (Evans 2008).

However, in 1997–1998 this policy was changed, and all secondary schools were required to begin using Chinese as the medium of instruction. This was partially in reaction to ideologies which disparaged the codeswitching strategies teachers had used to mitigate the challenges of English-medium instruction (EMI) as “Chinglish” and “not language at all” (examples from Lin 2000). The use of this “mixed code” in classrooms is explicitly discouraged by the government (Hong Kong Education Bureau 1997). Students also were said to largely not be capable of effective, dynamic learning in English, resulting in classroom instruction that was focused on memorization rather than debate.

The Education Bureau claims that “mother tongue education” is preferred by students and results in higher scores in all subjects, including English (Hong Kong Education Bureau 1997). However, this policy was unpopular with teachers, students, and schools alike and eventually was adjusted. First, almost immediately
after implementation, 114 secondary schools were allowed to continue teaching in English on the grounds that they could “prove” their students were strong enough academically to benefit from English. Unsurprisingly, this led to a highly stratified system in which English-medium schools had their pick of the best students and attending Chinese-medium schools was equivalent to being streamed into the “non-university track” (Lin and Man 2009; Tsang 2009). In 2011 “fine-tuning” measures were introduced which have progressively given schools more freedom in choosing their medium of instruction. The Education Bureau no longer officially classifies schools as English- or Chinese-medium, but the stratified school system that resulted from these policies is still relatively unchanged.

Access to the mainstream English-medium schools is very competitive, and if working-class South Asians cannot afford the (very expensive) school fees at private English-medium international schools, their choice of secondary schools is primarily between Chinese-medium government schools, which generally lack any systematic provision of Chinese as a Second Language support, and the formerly so-called “designated schools”. Designated schools are designed specifically for ethnic minorities and teach in English, yet they do not share in the prestige of other English-medium schools and generally do not result in high rates of university admission. Their structure has also been criticized as segregationist. In 2013–2014, the Education Bureau ceased using the “designated school” label and introduced funding incentives designed to get more mainstream schools to accept minority students, but the former designated schools still exist in largely unchanged form. In 2009, about one fourth of Hong Kong’s South Asian student population attended designated schools, while the majority were attending Chinese-medium government schools (Tsung, Zhang and Cruickshank 2010: 18).

Though the government states that it expects all secondary graduates to attain the trilingual/biliterate standard (Hong Kong Education Bureau 2014), actual policies are underspecified in terms of what trilingualism/biliteracy should really look like on a societal level. Even within this system, it is evident that not all forms of “trilingualism” are created equal. Historically, this has meant an overwhelming focus on English as the language of social and economic advancement, both for individual Hong Kong residents and for the city as a whole (Lin 1997). Yet for Hong Kong South Asians, a general acknowledgement of their English skills has not resulted in the kinds of mobility that English is supposed to unlock – an apparent contradiction which will be explored further below.

The data on which these arguments are based comes from an ethnographic study conducted in a multiethnic Hong Kong secondary school as well as analysis of Hong Kong media and policy. At the time of my fieldwork in the first half of 2013, the school, which I call MSC Secondary, had recently undergone some significant changes. Previously, it had primarily served recently immigrated students
from mainland China. However, enrolment was down and the school was facing the threat of closure, so in 2011 the decision was made to begin recruiting ethnic minority students to boost enrolment numbers. During the period of my fieldwork, about two thirds of these students were from either Indian or Pakistani backgrounds, as well as smaller numbers of students from Nepali, Filipino and a range of other backgrounds. This analysis will particularly focus on the role of South Asians in the Hong Kong language ecology, within a more general consideration of the relationships between language, race, and stratification.

4. Defining languages and speakers

In recent work sociolinguists have argued that “languages” do not have an objective reality but are socially constructed (Makoni and Pennycook 2007), yet emphasize that the idea of distinct, bounded languages is one that still carries great weight. As Haugen (1972) writes, “the concept of a language as a rigid, monolithic structure is false, even if it has proved to be a useful fiction in the development of linguistics”. Therefore, examining the way in which the linguistic space is carved up can be taken as a first step toward understanding the local language ecology.

Perhaps nowhere in Hong Kong is the negotiability of linguistic labels more apparent than with regard to “Chinese”. As noted above, “Chinese” in Hong Kong is typically understood to mean spoken Cantonese and written standard Chinese in traditional characters. However, the ambiguity of the term leaves it necessarily open to alternative interpretations. This is especially noticeable in light of further changes to the “mother tongue” policy and the teaching of “Chinese” in schools. As outlined in Section 2, the rationale given for requiring secondary schools to teach through the medium of “Chinese” was that students would learn better in their “mother tongue” (implicitly Cantonese). However, since the early 2000s there has been a shift toward teaching the subject of Chinese in Mandarin. This policy was rationalized on the grounds that, since written standard Chinese is lexically and syntactically different from spoken Cantonese, learning Chinese through Mandarin would improve students’ literacy in Modern Standard Chinese (Pérez-Milans 2014).

This was also presented as a valuable enhancement of “biliteracy and trilingualism” even while it obviously contradicts the mother tongue policy. This policy is a clear illustration of the potential slippage in the understanding of what “Chinese” actually means. The moderator of a pro-Cantonese Facebook page writes, “There’s an intentional loophole in the Basic Law. The official languages of Hong Kong are English and Chinese. As for Chinese, Cantonese is Chinese, so is Mandarin. So the government can replace Mandarin with Cantonese and still can say they
follow the Basic Law” (“Cantonese Language” 2014). The shift toward teaching Chinese in Mandarin, coupled with concurrent trends like offering preschool in either English or Mandarin, rather than Cantonese (Yau 2014), suggest that the ambiguity of “Chinese” leaves openings for language shift away from Cantonese. The ambiguity of the term is echoed in ambiguous attitudes toward Cantonese itself. Cantonese has been characterized as a symbol of pride which should be embraced in schools, but also as a language not fit for official functions, and even as a hindrance to the highly valued goal of learning English (Zhao 2013b). Because of ideologies which emphasize Chinese national cultural and linguistic unity, it is politically difficult for the government or other Hong Kong institutions to commit to the position that Cantonese is a distinct language rather than a dialect of Chinese. Accordingly, Cantonese has never really been standardized, and the belief persists that it is not really a proper language (Groves 2010). This has significant implications for the way that Cantonese is taught, and partially helps make sense of the decision to teach Chinese lessons in Mandarin. This also has consequences for the provision of Cantonese as a Second Language education. Teachers at MSC Secondary reported resistance amongst some of their colleagues to teaching students Cantonese as it is really spoken in Hong Kong, as they did not view it as a legitimate variety.

This is one factor which helps explain why for many years Hong Kong had no official provision for Chinese as a Second Language (CSL) at all. CSL provision in Hong Kong is wildly inconsistent, as the existence and quality of any CSL curriculum or materials is up to the will, time, and knowledge of individual teachers and schools. Some schools, like MSC, had teachers who were committed to developing a CSL curriculum, although they had to do this themselves and without broad-scale support or coordination; at other schools, South Asian students were just incorporated into the Cantonese-speaking mainstream without any special support at all. Although Hong Kong’s Chief Executive vowed in 2014 to begin addressing the needs of CSL students (Hong Kong Information Services Department 2014), the resulting “CSL curriculum” provided by the Education Bureau does little to improve provision, as it is just a list of targets for students and schools without any accompanying methods or materials.

As both a prestigious global language and the language of former colonizers, English is a resource of great symbolic importance in Hong Kong (Lin 1999). Hong Kong’s colonial legacy as well as ideologies of multilingualism as “parallel monolingualisms” (Heller 1999) have had a significant influence on the type of “English” that is promoted in Hong Kong education and policy. There is a developing awareness of a distinct Hong Kong variety of English (Bolton 2002), but Hong Kong English is generally not taken as seriously as “inner circle” varieties (Kachru 1992; Zhang 2013). “Mixed code” – the use of both Cantonese and English linguistic
resources – serves important identity functions and has had a significant role to play in education (Lin and Man 2009), although its use is officially discouraged by the Education Bureau (Hong Kong Education Bureau 1997). Access to English plays an important role in constructing a unique Hong Kong identity as distinct from mainland China, and is seen as a key factor that will keep Hong Kong from becoming “just another Chinese city” (Lin 1996). Overall English is seen as important both as a link to international capital/culture as well as a sign of “local Hong Kong” status and integration.

As outlined above, many languages are spoken in Hong Kong beyond those that are officially promoted by government policy. However, many of these are discursively erased in much of the public discourse, including in the trilingualism and biliteracy policy itself. The analysis that follows will particularly focus on the roles of the three languages that fall under “biliteracy and trilingualism”, particularly English and Cantonese, as these two languages play the most significant role in regulating access to education and the workforce. In taking this focus, I am aware there is a risk of contributing to the discursive erasure and marginalization of these other languages. Because English, Cantonese, and – increasingly – Mandarin are so consequential to the lives of everyone living in Hong Kong, it is useful to consider how these languages interact with each other, and with demographic categories such as race, in constructing the Hong Kong social order. Yet this is not meant to imply that other languages present in the ecology are unimportant.

In addition to languages, in describing the local ecology it is also useful to consider how individuals are sorted into broad social groupings. There are several major ideologized groups, which are generally defined on criteria of race, nation, and class – the “local” Hong Kong Chinese (who can be further demarcated along class lines), the mainland Chinese, working-class South Asians/“ethnic minorities”, foreign domestic workers (overwhelmingly women, the majority of whom are from Indonesia and the Philippines), and middle/upper-class “expatriates” (who are typically imagined as white). These groups are “ideologized” because the extent to which they actually form “groups” that can be objectively demarcated in some meaningful way is highly questionable; yet they are nevertheless socially significant as race is a highly salient factor in Hong Kong’s social categorization and hierarchization. The next section will explore further how race is tied to evaluations of linguistic competence and legitimacy.
5. Race and legitimate speakerhood

Race is a central factor in determining who is recognized as a legitimate or appropriate speaker of English and Cantonese. The ideology persists subtly – or not-so-subtly – that only ethnic Chinese are legitimate, authentic speakers of Cantonese. This is evident on a very basic policy level – the Education Bureau officially classifies ethnic minority students as “non-Chinese-speaking”. Although it is framed in linguistic terms, this is an ethnic, not linguistic, label; it is applied to all South Asian or other minority students without regard for their actual linguistic ability. Many South Asian students at MSC were fluent Cantonese speakers, and were confident in describing themselves as such. However, these abilities were generally not ratified either within school activities and categories, or on a wider societal basis.

The belief that South Asians cannot and/or do not want to speak Cantonese was held by many teachers at MSC, and is circulated by the media and NGOs (Ngo 2013a, b, 2014; Zhao 2013a). Even academic literature has sometimes reinforced the stereotype of South Asians as “linguistically/culturally deficient” (Gao 2012: 91) by focusing only on perceived failures related to Cantonese – either seeking reasons for the failure of South Asians themselves to learn Cantonese, or of the system to adequately provide for them. It has not always questioned why or how Cantonese becomes such a significant barrier.

On the other hand, South Asian students at MSC were constructed as legitimate English speakers, at least within the context of the school, again largely on racial grounds rather than on the basis of actual individuals’ skill. For instance, as part of its efforts to encourage interethnic communication and improve Chinese students’ English abilities, MSC organized an “English Day” every Wednesday. All students were supposed to use English all day, although this was not strictly enforced, and Chinese students – but not South Asian students – could get special points by speaking to designated “English ambassadors”. All South Asian students were eligible to become English ambassadors, regardless of actual English competence, with the result that some of the ambassadors actually were not particularly confident in English.

So South Asians at MSC were constructed as English resources for their Chinese classmates to draw upon, but reverse expectations – that Chinese students should act as linguistic resources for their South Asian classmates – did not necessarily hold true to the same extent. Although MSC had other activities meant to promote bilingual language use and learning, many students seemed to share a perception that the “real” default language of the school was Chinese. When I asked students why they thought there was an English Day and not a Chinese Day, the most common response was that MSC was a Chinese school and so a Chinese
Day would be unnecessary. Example1 provides an example of one such answer, from a male student of Nepali background.

(1) Kara: Why do you think there is only an English Day and not a Chinese Day?

Keshav: Uh because we mainly use Chinese, we use Chinese mainly every day because it’s a Chinese school so a lot of Ch- a lot of people who non-Chinese come to this school, they just started English uh two years ago so we started English Day to improve their English and our English lil bit, so yeah

Though this reasoning about MSC being a Chinese school matches a number of other respondents, Keshav was the only student who suggested that the ethnic minority students’ English could also improve through English Day, or needed to improve at all. More typically, South Asian students were assumed to already be good enough English speakers, and students were aware of and to various extents enjoyed their positioning as English experts.

Yet although working-class South Asians are ratified as legitimate English speakers to a greater extent than their working-class ethnic Chinese peers and were treated as English resources at MSC, this recognition does not necessarily translate into the professional sphere. In these contexts, middle- and upper-class “expatriates”, especially white expatriates, are often considered the most legitimate speakers of English. Here again, racial categories can override linguistic criteria; some schools and parents in Hong Kong have a preference for Caucasian English teachers over ethnic Chinese or otherwise non-white native English speakers, even when the Caucasian is not a native speaker (Sung 2011).

Upper- and middle-class “expatriates” have another salient difference from working-class South Asians in terms of linguistic perceptions: although they are also widely considered non-Chinese speaking, there is no equivalent discourse or policy that this group should learn Cantonese. Indeed, many expatriates who express an interest in learning Cantonese find themselves told by Hong Kong Chinese not to bother – that Cantonese is too difficult for them to learn and in any case unnecessary (Dewolf 2015).

As this analysis makes clear, racial categories are consequential not only for establishing legitimacy as speakers of various languages, but also in associating particular groups with linguistic deficits. Overall, for South Asians, the overwhelming emphasis in official and widely circulated portrayals of their linguistic repertoires is on their lack of Cantonese, not their English ability or any Cantonese abilities they did possess. Languages in which South Asians might be seen to have a primary claim are not treated as important or institutionally legitimate. This perceived lack of Cantonese is presented not only as the key feature of their linguistic
repertoires, but also as a central reason for any social disadvantage or problem attributed to South Asians. Likewise, for working-class Chinese, a lack of English is a central feature of their imagined repertoires. Thus Cantonese and English emerge as potential liberating and empowering forces – if these groups could just learn the language in question, they would certainly be able to access better education and jobs, or so the story goes. However, the beliefs about access and mobility too need to be contextualized, and doing so suggests that language is not the only factor in restricting educational and economic access, and ultimately not the most consequential one at all.

6. The myth of mobility

As this analysis demonstrates, race is a central part of representations of linguistic competence and authority, which can override the evaluations of individuals’ actual linguistic repertoires. The legacy of colonial power structures reinforces a language hierarchy which privileges white native speakers of English, and parallel processes recognize Chinese as more legitimate when spoken by ethnic Chinese persons. These constructed resources and deficits are, in turn, treated as the central determining factor in both individual and collective success or failure, so that language is tied in key ways to discourses in Hong Kong concerning socio-economic mobility.

For example, English is viewed as the decisive factor in determining personal success for the majority Hong Kong Chinese population. Lin (1996) has called this “‘the Hong Kong dream’ – that anyone can enter this elite class; the only condition is that he or she has to attain a good mastery of the English language, the most highly valued resource in the symbolic market”. The pervasiveness and centrality of this belief can be seen in the importance placed on English-medium education in Hong Kong, even at the cost of learning in other subjects (Lin 1996, 1997), and there is a widespread sense in Hong Kong that English is the key to the status, stability and prosperity that Hong Kong enjoys, and an accompanying anxiety that a decline in English abilities will inevitably mean a decline in living standards on both an individual and societal level.

For South Asian students, the arguments run in parallel – they simply focus on Cantonese, rather than English, as the perceived deficit that, once corrected, will serve as the means to personal success and societal integration. The South Asian community is often portrayed in Hong Kong media as insular and unwilling to engage with the majority population, and also as violent and prone to drug addiction (Erni and Leung 2014). Perceptions of linguistic deficits contribute to and are used to explain this portrayal of South Asians as fundamentally problem-prone
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and outside Hong Kong life. As a report by one Hong Kong NGO puts it, “While many of the ethnic minorities (EM) are quite successful in Hong Kong, some face a lot of difficulties. This is mainly due to the language barrier. Hong Kong has two official languages, English or Cantonese. A lot of EM in Hong Kong do not speak English or Cantonese. The second generation of EM mainly speaks English but not all of them speak Cantonese” (Novianti 2007: 64).

In other words, South Asians are expected to assimilate to Hong Kong Chinese linguistic (and implicitly cultural) norms, and Cantonese is presented as the key to this assimilation. Only once Cantonese is acquired can minorities hope to attain even working class jobs – NGOs and media reports often express sentiments along the lines “they don’t even have enough Cantonese to work in a shop or restaurant”. Thus ethnic minorities are required to achieve local status by acquiring the right repertoire, cultural practices, and social networks, before they can ever hope to achieve socioeconomic advancement. In other words, in a process of “upward-and-inward assimilation” (Silverstein 2003: 547), the “inward” movement – assimilation to Chinese cultural and linguistic norms – comes before any “upward” movement. Though the specifics are unique to Hong Kong, similar discourses of diversity and integration have been described for a number of other societies, including Belgium, Spain, and Denmark (Blommaert and Verschueren 1998; Martín Rojo 2010; Jaspers 2011; Karrebæk 2013). Non-elite minority students across contexts are often framed as lacking “local” authenticity (Blommaert and Verschueren 1998; Stroud 2004; Martín Rojo 2010), who must acquire whatever resources and repertoires necessary to fit in with the local market, as a prerequisite to social mobility.

Most South Asian students at MSC said that they would not describe themselves as locals, and many of them cited linguistic deficiencies, such as these two female students in Example 2, Mary Grace and Faryal, of Filipina and Pakistani background respectively:

(2) Mary Grace: I always describe myself as more uh Filipino because I’m not that fluent in Cantonese.
Faryal: Me too.
Kara: Okay. So what do you think it means to be local, do you think you have to speak Cantonese to be -
Mary Grace: Yeah
Faryal: Yes. Must. It’s like the major -
Mary Grace: Major, major

Yet even the South Asian students who confidently described themselves as fluent Cantonese speakers did not describe themselves as locals either. Asma, in Example 3, is a Pakistani background girl who would seem to have a strong claim
to a “local” identity – she had been born in Hong Kong, spoke fluent Cantonese, and had close friendships with ethnic Chinese girls. Yet she was also reluctant to label herself a “local”:

(3) Kara: If somebody asked you like… where are you from, where would you say?
Asma: I would say I’m from Pakistan. But then I spend my – most of the time in Hong Kong. Yeah. Because my parents are both from Pakistan, so I cannot say that I am from Hong Kong. I just live here.

Clearly, moving “inward” is easier said than done. Ideologies like those outlined above link race to legitimate speakerhood, and more fundamentally, reinforce the idea that only ethnic Chinese can ever be truly “local” or authoritative speakers of Cantonese. This can be explained through the fact that although there is a nationalist element to the category that distinguishes the “local” Hong Kong Chinese from mainlanders, the “local” and “non-local” distinction is also fundamentally a racial one. To be truly “local” is to be ethnically Chinese; everyone else, no matter what other claims of length of residence, family history, or personal identification, is forever a foreigner.

This hierarchical structure also helps explain why the middle- and upper-class “expatriates” are not the subject of discourses demanding they learn Cantonese. Like the working-class South Asians, the expatriate elite is not considered local, but in a sense they have bypassed the need for local belonging. Of course, this is not to say that expatriates do not face any issues in accessing employment or getting around Hong Kong if they do not speak Cantonese. Expatriates who come to Hong Kong not as internal transfers within a company but as either independent job seekers or “trailing spouses” may have significant trouble locating employment if they are not bilingual (or trilingual). Nevertheless, there is basically no public discourse of linguistic concern about these non-Chinese-speaking expatriates. The few exceptions, such as Dewolf (2015, under the headline “In Hong Kong, should expats learn Cantonese?”), frame learning Cantonese not as a necessary step toward “integration”, but as an option, albeit one which is very difficult and potentially impossible. But in this system, the expatriates have already superseded “local” concerns; their English is evidence for and ticket to an elite transnational orientation to which upper- and middle-class Hongkongers also aspire. Cantonese would effectively represent a step backwards, away from this elite global identity. Working-class Hong Kong Chinese, on the other hand, are already supremely local; for them it is English which is presented as the key to moving up into the transnational elite.

So South Asians are positioned within a frame that requires them to assimilate, while also making it effectively impossible for them ever to be acknowledged
as having assimilated successfully. Their English abilities are framed as useful resources for their Chinese classmates to draw upon, but are not particularly helpful in ensuring their own successes. Overall, ideologies of language and race present linguistic factors as the key to social mobility in ways which hide the real difficulty of overcoming racial and class boundaries.

7. Conclusion

This paper has illustrated how a contextualized, ecological view of language can provide revealing insights into how languages and speakers are understood, and ultimately how language is used to structure and justify inequality. Both working-class Hong Kong South Asians and working-class ethnic Chinese are constructed as linguistically deficient, in ways which help to locate the reasons for inequality with individuals and mask other factors. It is difficult for individual speakers to override these perceptions and get themselves taken seriously as legitimate users of these languages once these ideologies of deficit are in place; not to mention getting their other linguistic resources valued outside those that are officially ratified as English or Chinese.

A contextualized view which considers the relationships between these languages and social groupings demonstrates how broad ideologies of language, race, and inequality operate. Claiming that advancement opportunities hinge on language hides the racial aspects of social divisions, and allows responsibility for the social structure to be placed with individuals. The “Hong Kong dream” (Lin 1996) states that anyone can attain English if they work hard enough, and that English skills will result in social mobility, and includes a corresponding Cantonese version for South Asians. This ignores issues of inequality and access to those varieties. Assuming that learning Chinese is the key to social harmony and integration also ignores evidence from other contexts in which social integration has not been achieved despite a shared language.

This analysis also illustrates possible consequences of the ambiguity of “Chinese”. Further analysis could illustrate in greater depth how perceptions that Cantonese is merely a dialect contribute to poor provision of second language education, and how policy ambiguity leaves room for Mandarin to overtake functions of Cantonese.

This paper has focused particularly on race, as it plays a significant role in the construction of linguistic legitimacy and national belonging, but that should not be taken to imply that race is the only factor involved. Class in particular is important in the interpretation of individuals’ repertoires and in the construction of social hierarchies (see Fleming 2015 for more on the role of class in this context).
Research in other contexts has shown that multilingualism among non-elites is often seen as disorderly, problematic and a barrier to school success, while multilingualism among elites is valued as a personal and economic asset (Hill 1999; Cummins 2000). Racial and class identities are also tied closely together, as “expatriates” are assumed to be both white and upper/middle class, and “ethnic minorities” to be working class.

Overall, an ecological perspective helps explain the roles of languages and their social consequences in ways that would be impossible through focusing on just one variety or group. Just as MSC was seen by students and staff to be fundamentally a “Chinese school” within which English acquisition was emphasized, language ideologies in Hong Kong frame it as “Chinese society”, but one in which English is key to claiming a global cosmopolitan identity which distinguishes the city from the Chinese mainland. However, South Asians’ English is not included in this construction of elite cosmopolitanism. Instead they are asked to make themselves linguistically and culturally “local”, but are prevented from doing so by ideologies that link “local” legitimacy to race. Meanwhile Hong Kong elites are engaged in a process of “emptying out of the local… in their thorough-going pursuit of the ‘global’” (Lin and Man 2009: 8). Despite the overwhelming importance placed on language in these processes, and although improving the quality of CSL and ESL provision is certainly a worthy and helpful goal, ultimately no amount of language learning can be sufficient to erode these boundaries as long as such beliefs about language, race, and belonging remain unquestioned.

References


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Author's address

Kara Fleming
School of Humanities – Linguistics
The University of Hong Kong
Pokfulam
Hong Kong

kfleming@connect.hku.hk