Authenticity, Belonging, and Charter Myths of Cantonese

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Authenticity has been identified as one of the ideological complexes that underpin linguistic authority in the modern world (see, e.g., Gal and Woolard 2001; Woolard 2016). To be considered authentic, a language must be rooted in a "somewhere." This "somewhere," I argue, does not merely refer to a place, but more specifically, to a time-space configuration. This study reveals a chronotopic tension in the ideological complex of authenticity. Analyzing language activists' arguments for protecting Cantonese against the encroachment of Putonghua/Mandarin in post-1997 Hong Kong, it shows how two contrasting ideologies of authenticity are mobilized to endow Cantonese with authority, and how these ideologies shape the charter myths that pro-Cantonese activists have constructed for their mother tongue.

For activists who espouse the traditionalist ideology, the authentic offers a sense of continuity by linking the present to the past. They regard Cantonese as a "living fossil" that plays a critical role in preserving the past glories of the Chinese nation. To construct a charter myth that presents Cantonese as more authentically Chinese than Putonghua, traditionalists: (1) highlight lexical and phonological features of Middle Chinese that are found in Cantonese; (2) gloss over areas in which Cantonese is less conservative than Putonghua; and (3) exaggerate the influence of non-Sinitic languages on Putonghua and downplay their influence on Cantonese. Reminiscent of Benjamin's (1968) "messianic time," traditionalists' charter myth juxtaposes the present with the past. It likens the Chinese Communist Party to Manchu invaders who came from the North to impose their rule on the Han Chinese. Cantonese speakers, like the revolutionaries who overthrew the Qing dynasty, must rise up to protect their culture, language, and homeland.

Unlike traditionalists, activists who embrace the localist ideology focus on present-day Hong Kong rather than the glorious past of the Chinese nation. For them, the authentic should represent the here and now. Drawing an essential link between language and culture, they see Cantonese as a core symbol of the local identity that separates Hongkongers from mainlanders. Exemplifying Benjamin's (1968) "historical time," localists' charter myth depicts how Cantonese has evolved over time, incorporating elements from such diverse sources as Chinese, English, and Tai-Kadai languages. Localists celebrate the richness and vitality of Cantonese by highlighting colloquial expressions and Cantonese-English codeswitching, which they believe distinguish Cantonese from Putonghua, contribute to the distinctiveness of Hong Kong Cantonese, and justify the recognition of Hongkongers' unique identity.

This study underscores the importance of examining how authenticity undergirds linguistic authority in different cultural contexts. The increased mobility following Hong Kong's return to Chinese sovereignty in 1997 has not facilitated its integration into the motherland; rather, it has led many Hongkongers to question their sense of belonging to the Chinese nation and the Communist state. As this study shows, their angst manifests itself through different conceptualizations of the relationship between Cantonese and Putonghua. The two ideologies of authenticity are intimately tied to how Hongkongers view their place in the Chinese nation, and whether they assess the value of Cantonese at the national or local level.

References:

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