A Meta-Discursive Analysis of Netizens Comments on the Protection of Cantonese

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Instead of looking at the macro-social trends and tensions in China's language planning and language policy, this study examines the ways how people react to such trends and tensions and understand the relationship between Putonghua and Chinese dialects from a micro perspective. In 2010, a conflict broke out between Putonghua (the national language of the People's Republic of China) and Cantonese (a local language of the Guangdong Province), triggered by a proposal to guarantee the supply of TV programs in Putonghua during the Asian Games to be held in November, 2010. The conflict attracted numerous comments on the internet. Through a meta-discursive analysis of those comments, this study shows that netizens' comments contain various myths which are appropriated to draw a clear-cut boundary between Putonghua and Cantonese. Underlying such discourse is a strong essentialist view of identity. This study also finds some undesirable effects of Cantonese rights discourse and argues that Cantonese rights discourse might become the discourse of discrimination against the outsiders.

Keywords: Putonghua, Cantonese, language myths, China's language planning and language policy

Introduction

Most previous studies on language[1] planning[2] and language policy (LPLP) in the People's Republic of China (the PRC) (e.g., Zhou, 2003, 2004) focus on macro-social trends and tensions between Putonghua and dialects/ethnic minority languages in China's LPLP.[3] It is important to not only look at the macro-social trends and tensions in China's LPLP, but also focus on the ways how people react to such trends and tensions and understand the relationship between Putonghua and dialects/ethnic minority languages from a micro perspective. In 2010, a conflict broke out between Putonghua (the national language of the PRC) and Cantonese (a local language of Guangdong), triggered by a proposal to guarantee the supply of TV programs in Putonghua during the Asian Games to be held in November, 2010. The conflict attracted numerous comments on the internet. Through a meta-discursive analysis of those comments, this study finds that language myths play an important role in the mediated crusade for the protection of Cantonese by highlighting the authenticity of Cantonese and constructing a clear-cut boundary between Putonghua and Cantonese. Some netizens try to erase the linguistic diversity in Guangdong, privilege Cantonese over other dialects, and win the language status for Cantonese. However, the status of Cantonese as a symbol of Guangdong identity also makes Cantonese particularly vulnerable, since much emphasis is given to its symbolic function for Guangdong rather than its communicative function, to the exclusion of people considered to be outsiders. As a result, rights discourse for preserving Cantonese becomes discrimination discourse against other languages and their speakers.

Background

With a territory of 9.6 million square kilometers and 56 ethnic groups, the PRC adopts various strategies, including LPLP to

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[1] The term *language* is used in this study as a cover term for language, dialect, etc. *Chinese dialects* used in this study should be understood in the popular sense, that is, vernacular dialects, such as Cantonese, but excluding Putonghua (the common speech, the national language of the PRC), which is also known as *Guoyu* (the national language) in Taiwan, *Huayu* (the Chinese language) in Singapore, and *Mandarin* (an English term commonly used in Taiwan and Singapore).

[2] When defining *language planning* and *language policy*, scholars have different understandings of the relationship between the two terms (Ferguson, 2006; Poon, 2000). In this study, we do not attempt to make a distinction between the two terms. A broad definition is used in this study to refer to both as the government's efforts to solve language problems.

[3] The term *China* as it is used throughout this study refers to Mainland China and excludes Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan. In addition, the terms *the PRC* and *China* are used interchangeably.

maintain its national unity. The PRC carried out three major LPLP tasks after 1949, that is, the promotion of Putonghua, the simplification and standardization of Chinese characters, and the development of *Hanyu Pinyin* (Chen, 1999). In terms of linguistic legislation, perhaps the most important law regulating language use and guiding LPLP in China is the *Law of the People's Republic of China on the Standard Spoken and Written Chinese Language* (Chinese Government, 2000), which was adopted at the 18th meeting of the Standing Committee of the Ninth National People's Congress of the PRC on October 31st, 2000 and promulgated. It came into effect as of January 1st, 2001. This Law stipulates the use of Putonghua and standardized Chinese characters in different domains, such as government, school, media, etc. In this Law, Article 3 of Chapter 1 expressly states that "the State popularizes Putonghua and the standardized Chinese characters." Although it is until 50 years later after the founding of the PRC that China has its own language law, some laws containing language-related articles have been promulgated in different fields in the PRC. For example, Article 19 of the Constitution of the PRC (Chinese Government, 1982) stipulates that "the state promotes the nationwide use of Putonghua (common speech based on Beijing pronunciation)".

In contemporary China, a large proportion of people are bilinguals proficient in Putonghua and their local dialects (Leading Group Office for Chinese Languages and Scripts Investigation, 2006). Putonghua is usually used in public domains such as government, education, media, etc. and local dialects are mainly confined to families. The contemporary sociolinguistic situation in China is characterized by diglossia with Putonghua as the High variety and dialects / ethnic minority languages as the Low varieties (Chen, 1999; Chu, 2001; Zhou, 2003).

Accompanied with the nationwide promotion of Putonghua is the decreasing vitality of some Chinese dialects and ethnic minority languages. Some dialects and ethnic minority languages are near extinction (Bradley, 2005). Other dialects and ethnic minority languages are approaching Putonghua at phonological and lexical levels (Guo, 2006; Zhou, 2012). However, with the popularity of Putonghua in China, some dialects are also gaining an increased vitality. One of these dialects is Cantonese, "the strongest Chinese dialect in terms of prestige and the number of mainland Chinese attracted to learn it" (Li, 2006, p. 153). Cantonese is widely spoken in Guangdong Province, Guangxi Province, Hong Kong, and Macao. The rise of Cantonese has to do with some factors. The first important factor is the economic situation in the South China. Thanks to China's implementation of the reform and opening up in the late 1970s, Guangdong Province has witnessed a rapid development and Cantonese has gained its popularity with the rise of Guangdong (Zhu & Chen,

1991). The second contributing factor is the economic and cultural advantages of Hong Kong, "the Cantonese-speaking capital of the world" (Bolton, 2000, p. 271). Hong Kong, with its important economic and financial position in Asia as well as its Cantonese cultural products (e.g., TV dramas, films, and songs), becomes the bridgehead in the spread of Cantonese both inside and outside China. Perhaps no other Chinese dialects have enjoyed such a higher status than Cantonese. There are Cantonese media (radio and TV) in Hong Kong, Macao, and Guangdong Province. In Hong Kong and Macao, Cantonese is adopted as the medium of instruction in most of primary and secondary schools and the working language in political and economic domains (Li, 1999, 2006; Yan, 2017). What's more, Cantonese dialectal characters are also widely used in Guangdong, Hong Kong, and Macao (Snow, 2004). All of these indicate that Cantonese is a language of strong vitality in China and the strongest rival of Putonghua. However, with the nationwide promotion of Putonghua and the large-scale migration after the reform and opening-up, Putonghua is spreading quickly in Guangdong (Guo et al., 2005; van den berg, 2010).

In 2010, the Guangzhou local committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference urged Guangzhou authorities to ensure that Putonghua would be used on Guangzhou TV's main programs in the run up to the Asian Games to be held in Guangzhou in November, 2010 (Sun, 2010). Then the rumor spread that the Guangzhou Government would ban Cantonese broadcasting in Guangzhou. Hearing the news, many people took various actions to call for the protection of Cantonese. For example, some young people gathered and sang Cantonese songs in public. Hundreds of people gathered and held a mass rally to defend Cantonese. At the same time, people expressed their different opinions over the protection of Cantonese. On July 28th, 2010, the spokesman of the Guangzhou Government clarified the controversy at a press conference by saying that the government never tries to forbid Cantonese.

Language Myths as a Field of Inquiry

Over the past two decades, the notion of language myths has gained considerable momentum in sociolinguistic studies. Peter Trudgill (2003) defined language myths as "things which are widely believed by non-linguists to be true about language or languages but which are actually not" (p. 76). Many studies have been conducted with the application of language myths to different languages around the world (Bauer & Trudgill, 1998; DeFrancis, 1984; Hannas, 1997; Watts, 2011). Language myths play an important role in the folk people's perception and

evaluation of languages, and are the "stuff that ideologies are made on" (Watts, 2011, p. 21). They also exert an effect on LPLP (Schiffman, 1996). Although language myths have not been included as an important entry in many influential sociolinguistics reference books, it is no doubt that language myths have become a key topic in sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology and a useful tool for us to explore the relationships of power and the construction of identity.

In the conflict between Putonghua and Cantonese, various language myths emerge in netizens' comments. This study makes a meta-discursive analysis of netizens' comments and attempts to address the following questions:

1. What kinds of language myths are employed in netizens' comments?
2. What consequences may be produced by Cantonese rights discourse?

Data Collection and Analysis

Previous studies on the conflict between Putonghua and Cantonese mainly adopt a macro perspective (e.g., Qu, 2011; Wang, 2015; Zhu, 2011), to the neglect of metalingusitic discourse at a micro level (but see Gao 2012 and Liang & Shin 2019). Metalinguistic discourse provides a very important site for investigating and understanding language myths, language attitudes, and language ideologies (Yan, 2013, 2014, 2016). The data used in this study is collected from one forum in *Tianya* Community, one of the influential virtual communities in China. People discuss a wide range of topics in *Tianya* from daily life chores to national and international events. One article entitled *"Yueyu baoweizhan" beihou de huangdan yu kebei* (The absurdity and sadness behind "the war of protecting Cantonese") attracted near 100,000 click rates and more than 1,800 netizens posted their comments there from 2010 to 2013. After the exclusion of those comments not related to language myths and consequences of Cantonese rights discourse, finally a total of 490 comments were collected in 2014.

After the data collection, the comments were read and analyzed to see what kinds of language myths were employed and what consequences may be produced by Cantonese rights discourse. A meta-discursive analysis was conducted to examine netizens' comments. Before the analysis, it is necessary to point out that this study only concerns netizens' responses to the issue of elimination or protection of Cantonese and does not intend to be generalized to the whole population in China because of the complex sociolinguistic situations across China.

Findings
Language Myths in Netizens' Comments

As can be seen from the following five comments, the linguistic homogeneity myth is widely used by both sides in the debate. On the one hand, many netizens support the promotion of Putonghua as a lingua franca across China in order to facilitate nationwide communication. For example, in the following two comments, the first commenter tries to establish an unbroken tradition for Putonghua through its naming practice. Despite the complexity in defining the 'mother tongue' (Skutnabb-Kangas & Phillipson, 1989), the second netizen disregards China's sociolinguistic heterogeneity (cf. Irvine and Gal's 2000 semiotic process of *erasure*) and makes a strong essentialist comment to link China and Putonghua together (cf. Irvine and Gal's 2000 semiotic process of *iconization*).

Example 1[4]
汉语官方标准语早期称为雅言、雅音、通语、正音，明清称为官话，清代又开始称为国语，1956年改称普通话。(猪猪小小)

The standard official Chinese language is called elegant language, elegant pronunciation, communication language, and correct pronunciation in earlier times, Mandarin in the Ming and Qing Dynasties, the national language in the Qing Dynasty, and Putonghua in 1956. (Zhuzhuxiaoxiao)

Example 2
你的祖国是中国，你的母语是汉语，而普通话是现代标准汉语。(贽殿遮那)

Your homeland is China, your mother tongue is Chinese, and Putonghua is modern standard Chinese. (Zhidianzhena)

On the other hand, defenders of Cantonese equate Cantonese with the Cantonese culture. As can be seen from Examples 3-4, such comments overlay Guangdong's sociolinguistic diversity (cf. Irvine and Gal's 2000 semiotic process of *erasure*), presuppose the essentialist links between Cantonese and the Cantonese culture, and construct a homogeneous speech community. Here, the link between Cantonese and the Cantonese culture is both primordial and exclusive: the only possible vehicle for the Cantonese culture is Cantonese.

Example 3
粤语是广府文化的载体，粤语的电视台也是广府文化的

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[4] All examples are first presented in the original form followed by the netizen's nickname and English translations. All translations are by the author unless otherwise identified. In addition, those comments were written in simplified or traditional Chinese characters, and their original style is kept in this study.

电视台。(Austi001)

Cantonese is the carrier of the Cantonese culture, and Cantonese TV stations are TV stations of the Cantonese culture. (Austi001)

Example 4

我们保护粤语更是保护我们的历史和文化。(RAIPING)

We are protecting not only Cantonese but also our history and culture. (RAIPING)

In addition to the essentialist claims of linking Cantonese with the Cantonese culture, many netizens also rely on many other language myths to legitimize the legitimacy and authenticity of Cantonese. For instance, proponents of Cantonese give Cantonese high and positive evaluations, and establish a linguistic pedigree for Cantonese by emphasizing that Cantonese is quite close to Archaic Chinese and superior to Putonghua on various aspects, thus echoing the myth that Cantonese has a long history and an unbroken tradition.

Example 5

粤语是所有方言中保留古汉语语法、音韵最多的一种。其实，说到语言文字的形式美和音韵美，现代白话是远不能及古汉语万一的。就表达上，古汉语也比白话言简意赅。粤语比之普通话，正如古汉语比之现代白话。粤语比普通话雅致，简明而含意蕴，且听起来音韵铿锵，节奏感韵律感非常强。（日夕之羊）

Among Chinese dialects, Cantonese retains the most grammatical and phonological parts of Archaic Chinese. As a matter of fact, Modern Chinese cannot match Archaic Chinese in terms of the formal and phonological beauty. Archaic Chinese is simpler in expression than Modern Chinese. Cantonese is to Putonghua what Archaic Chinese is to Modern Chinese. Cantonese is more elegant, expressive, and concise, and sounds more sonorous and rhythmic than Putonghua. (Rixizhiyang)

Example 6

广东人源自古代越族，在汉唐期间接受中原文化，此后关山障隔，免受胡人沾染，边陲之地，反留有汉音唐风，德国民俗学称此为文化孤岛（德文Kulturinsel）。（俺没嗓子）

The ancient Yue Minority, the ancestor of Guangdong people, was influenced by the Han culture during the Han and Tang Dynasties. Later they were geographically isolated by the mountains and free from the influence of the northern barbarians. Therefore, this borderland has retained the cultural traditions of the Han and Tang Dynasties. In German ethnography, this is regarded as Kulturinsel, meaning "culture island". (Anmeisuzi)

Many scholars (e.g., Edwards, 2009) point out that there are no intrinsic and aesthetic differences between languages. However, some people still believe in some myths about a language and make positive evaluations of it. As is shown in Example 5, the commenter argues that Cantonese retains many phonological and grammatical features of Archaic Chinese, thus establishing an authentic pedigree for Cantonese. Cantonese is viewed as more concise in expression and more elegant in pronunciation, thus acquiring a superior position among Chinese varieties. In Example 6, Cantonese is viewed as the vector of the Cantonese culture, which is derived from the ancient Chinese culture. In this way, the Guangdong Province holds the authentic root of the Chinese culture. It is noticeable that the commenter tries to establish some links between language and the environment. Such a view of environmental determinism assumes that physical characteristics of the environment are responsible for human behaviors (including their language behaviors). The unique and favorable geographic position of Guangdong is highlighted in the comment in order to demonstrate the unbroken tradition of Cantonese and its glorious past. People might conclude that a favorable climate and unique geographical position may give birth to a superior language.

Consequences of Cantonese Rights Discourse

As can be seen from the above analysis, various myths are employed to draw a clear-cut boundary between Putonghua and Cantonese. Netizens may unconsciously naturalize and internalize such "common sense" notions that have an axiomatic quality and require no further justification. However, we need to notice some undesirable effects imposed by such myths. This section discusses such effects brought about by Cantonese rights discourse.

Some netizens, whether consciously or unconsciously, erase linguistic diversity within Guangdong. In their minds, only Cantonese should be privileged and such treatment might affect the rights of other dialects in Guangdong. Some replies point out the limitations in comments from supporters of Cantonese and regard such erasure as a kind of Cantonese hegemony. For example,

Example 7
广东话最主要包含了广州话（粤语）、潮州话、汕头话、客家话、雷州话，但是广东省台却只播粤语不播其它广东话，以至于广州人以为粤语就等同广东话。广州人对外喊被压制而对内却积极压制其它广东方言，所以广州人最没有脸喊方言被压制。(xndzh110)

Dialects of Guangdong mainly include Cantonese, the Chaozhou dialect, the Shantou dialect, the Hakka dialect, the Leizhou dialect, but Guangdong provincial TV stations only broadcast programs in Cantonese, to the exclusion of other dialects of Guangdong. As a result, Guangzhou people equate Cantonese as the dialect of Guangdong. Guangzhou people claim being suppressed but they are suppressing other dialects of Guangdong, therefore, they have no face to say that they are being suppressed. (xndzh110)

Cantonese language myths become a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it legitimizes the protection of Cantonese based on the claims that Cantonese represents the Cantonese culture and the elimination of Cantonese is no different from destroying the roots of the Cantonese culture. On the other hand, such claims make Cantonese the language of Guangdong, neglecting the multilingual situation in Guangdong and threatening other dialects. That's why it is called a hegemonic language and various negative labels are attached to Cantonese and its speakers (cf. van Dijk's 1993 complementary strategies of positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation and Bar-Tal's 1989 strategies of trait characterization and dehumanization). For example,

Example 8
有消灭，才有保护，谁要消灭粤语了？国家不过是普及国语而已，粤语是铁公鸡，一毛不拔呀？(贽殿遮那)

Protection presupposes acts of elimination. Who is to eliminate Cantonese? The country is only promoting the national language. Is Cantonese an iron rooster (a penny pincher)? (Zhidianzhena)

Example 9
很多广州人都这样，因为他们觉得说粤语是件很骄傲的事情，其实呢，其他人都说这是鸟语。
(NeverWinterNight)

Many Guangzhou people feel proud of speaking Cantonese. In fact, others regard it as a bird language.

(NeverWinterNight)

Example 10
该语种实乃正宗鸟语！在广州住过一段时间，越听越恶心！若其能消亡，是件好事! (shiyuanchuan)

This language is the authentic bird language! I live in Guangzhou for a period of time, the longer you listen to this language, the more disgusted you feel! It is a good thing if it could die! (shiyuanchuan)

Examples 8–10 show some netizens' negative attitudes towards Cantonese. For example, a metaphor is used in the first example to view Cantonese as an iron rooster, implying that Cantonese has a strong sense of self-protection and no one can take anything away from it. The use of "bird language" in the other two examples to refer to Cantonese also expresses netizens' negative attitudes towards Cantonese.

In addition, we also notice that the intellectual and moral qualities of Cantonese defenders are viewed negatively in some netizens' comments. For example,

Example 11
广州人为什么对这个反应这么强，跟他们很少走出广东与外面交流有关。他们的自我优越感很强。跟广东人交流的时候你会发现，粤语区以外的东西他们很少知道。(简单的狐狐)

The reason why Guangzhou people have such a strong reaction has to do with their infrequent going out of Guangdong to communicate with the outside world. They have a strong sense of superiority. After the contact with Guangdong people, you may discover that they know little outside the Cantonese-speaking area. (Jiandandehuhu)

Example 12
旗帜鲜明地表明了广州人的保守，守旧，不开放。
（山哪边）

It shows clearly that the Guangzhou people are conservative, old-fashioned, and not open-minded. (Shannabian)

Example 13
不过可以理解有些广东人固守粤语的心态啦，一部分读书不行学历不高，英语不好，普通话不流利，长相马马乎乎无优势，你们还要剥夺他说粤语的最后那点尊严或者优势，在人群里他岂不是一无是处？理解广东人吧。

(lovingseason)

But I can understand the mentality of some Cantonese people in the protection of Cantonese. They do not receive much education, their English proficiency is low and Putonghua is not fluent. They are not good-looking. They will become worthless if you deprive them of their right to speak Cantonese. We should understand the Cantonese people. (lovingseason)

As can be seen from Examples 11-13, Cantonese defenders' moral and intellectual capacities receive negative evaluations. The posters in Examples 11 and 12 directly attribute Cantonese defenders' acts of preserving Cantonese to their conservativeness and narrow-mindedness. The commenter in Example 13 gives a low opinion of the linguistic and intellectual capacities of Cantonese defenders.

Proponents of protecting Cantonese continuously activate and perpetuate in their discourse the marked distinction between Putonghua and Cantonese as well as that between Cantonese speakers and others. Worse still, Cantonese rights discourse becomes the discrimination discourse. For example, in the following comments, it seems that the commenters hold strong prejudice and hostility against those who cannot speak Cantonese. In their opinion, protecting Cantonese is their own business, and others should not step into it. In addition, they just ask those not used to Cantonese to leave Guangdong.

Example 14

保护粤语關你又事，又無逼你地講⋯⋯(面具下的小丑)

The protection of Cantonese has nothing to do with you, and we do not force you to speak it… (Mianjuxia dexiaochou)

Example 15

在广州，保留和保护广州话是广州人自己的事，其他地方的语言受不受保护是各地的人民自己的事，广州人保卫广州话捍卫南粤地方文化不需要外方人来插嘴，也不轮到外方人干涉，因为你们对南粤文化毫无感情和认识。(wwyyk)

In Guangzhou, it is our own business to maintain and protect Cantonese, and it is the business of local people to or not to protect their local languages. The outsiders have no say and should not interfere in the protection of Cantonese and the guarding of the Cantonese culture, since you have no attachment to and understanding of the Cantonese culture. (wwyyk)

Example 16

不懂广东话的在广东怎么办的问题很好解决⋯⋯如果你厌恶或不能学习广东话，而且觉得很不方便。那么你尽可以离开广东或其他粤语流行的区域⋯⋯(关不羽)

It is very easy to solve the problem of not understanding Cantonese in Guangdong… If you dislike or are unable to learn Cantonese and feel uncomfortable, you can leave Guangdong or other Cantonese-speaking areas as soon as possible... (Guanbuyu)

Conclusion

Instead of looking at the macro-social trends and tensions in China's LPLP, this study explores the ways people react to such trends and tensions from a micro perspective and shows that language myths become a useful weapon by the defenders of Cantonese. In their comments, Cantonese is the language of Guangdong Province. They emphasize the authenticity of Cantonese as the true representative of the Cantonese culture and even the Chinese culture. They also give various positive evaluative remarks to Cantonese, creating a mythical Cantonese. For example, Cantonese is regarded as purer than Putonghua. Cantonese keeps many features of Archaic Chinese whereas Putonghua is perceived as a deviation from Archaic Chinese. Those proponents try to create a myth of purity around Cantonese and claim the rights to maintain and protect Cantonese. In one word, language myths surrounding Cantonese play an important role in the mediated crusade for the protection of Cantonese.

Similar to other studies of linguistic minorities (Jaffe, 1999, 2007; May, 2012), Cantonese rights discourse remains dependent on state language ideologies, reproducing within itself the homogenization and exclusion. Many people have pointed out that Guangdong Province is not only the hometown for Cantonese, but also that for other Chinese dialects, such as Hokkien, the Chaoshan dialect, etc. The concern with the authenticity of Cantonese elevates the status of Cantonese but overlays the multilingual situation of Guangdong. For some netizens strongly influenced by essentialist ideologies, their Cantonese rights discourse has become the discourse of discrimination against the outsiders. When discussing negative consequences of essentializing discourses of revitalizing Corsican, Jaffe (2007, p. 64) warns that such discourses can produce linguistic insecurity and a sense of cultural inauthenticity among those who do not speak Corsican or speak it with non-native proficiency. Jaffe's warning also applies in

Cantonese rights discourse where Cantonese is used as a gate-keeper to keep out those outsiders and create linguistic and social boundaries.

These online comments may seem trite, but they are far from trivial and do elucidate the complex relationship between Putonghua and Cantonese. The debate over the protection of Cantonese in 2010 to some extent indicates that the Chinese people are paying more attention to their individual rights. It also serves as an important barometer as it to some extent reflects the complexity in China's sociolinguistic landscape, and may produce certain influences on the future direction of China's LPLP.[5]

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