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Abstract

This paper analyses online disputes amongst a group of students about the use of language (Cantonese vs. Putonghua) in Hong Kong. Using evidentiality and identity positioning frameworks, we analyse 44 student posts to a proprietary online forum. Particular attention is paid to the construction of a Hong Kong social identity, the various identity positions that underpin such a construction, and how such identity work is supported by the use of evidentiality. The analysis shows that Hong Kong locals are most often constructed as an oppressed, marginalised minority who are denied the right of authentic expression and are subject to a process of politically expedient cultural denigration. The analysis also shows that evidential choices are intimately bound with identity positions at both the discourse production level and discourse content level. The paper concludes by discussing the implications of these findings for applied linguistics in Hong Kong's schools and universities.

Keywords: evidentiality; identity positioning; Cantonese and Putonghua in Hong Kong classrooms; online discussion.

Evidentiality and identity positioning in online disputes about language use in

Hong Kong

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1 Introduction

It goes without saying that school subjects are not taught in a social or political vacuum. Certain science subjects may not require teachers to be acutely aware of how research findings may be interpreted and applied in particular socio-political environments, but for most humanities and social science disciplines, educators should be aware that what they teach cannot be separated from current political issues that students are preoccupied with (Elbaz-Luwisch 1997). Nor can they be separated from the zeitgeist of an era, which, because of globalization and modern communication technology, is likely to be shared by large numbers of (young) people around the world.

Hong Kong, a former British colony and since 1997 a Special Administrative Region of the People's Republic of China (PRC), has been marred with social upheaval and political conflict in recent years. Many of the contentious issues that have led to demonstrations and clashes between pro-democracy and pro-establishment

(pro-Beijing) camps have been directly related to education (with language playing a central role), or political reform. In 2012, the Hong Kong government's attempt to introduce national education in all local schools led to widespread protests and a 10-day siege of government headquarters. Another recent highly contentious issue is the Occupy Central movement. In response to a PRC state council White Paper, activists occupied key business districts in Hong Kong in order to push the Hong Kong and PRC governments to come up with a democratic reform package that would meet international standards. The demand was 'genuine democracy' that gives people 'real choice', not 'democracy with Chinese characteristics' (Mey and Ladegaard 2016). The campaign lasted 79 days; protesters were eventually dispersed by the police following court injunctions, and although the protesters' demands were not met, the movement significantly changed the social and political climate in Hong Kong. The battle for democracy continued, not least in Hong Kong's universities where democracy walls were set up. On these walls, local students would write pro-democracy slogans (such as 'HK is not China', see Figure 1), put up pictures of Gandhi or make mocking comments about the Mainland (usually in English), and Mainland students would oppose the comments and reiterate their stance that Hong Kong is part of China (usually in Chinese).

[Insert Figure 1 here]

During 2016 and 2017, the conflict further intensified. The government pushed for harsher punishment of the most prominent student leaders from the Occupy Central movement, who had already been given community service by the court, and they were subsequently sentenced to prison; six pro-democracy lawmakers were disqualified and deprived of their seats in the Legislative Council because of ‘inappropriate oath-taking’ during a swearing-in ceremony; and a report by a Mainland scholar arguing that Cantonese is a dialect and therefore not suitable as medium of instruction in Hong Kong classrooms is endorsed by the Education Bureau leading to widespread protest and fierce public debate.

It is in this political climate that we teach an introductory course in sociolinguistics to second year English Major students. The course did not specifically address any political issues, but focused on traditional sociolinguistic topics. Students were encouraged to post questions and discuss issues arising from the lectures on an online discussion forum. The 63 comments posted by the students in this class comprise the data of this study. We will focus on the students’ discussion of the use and status of Cantonese and Putonghua in Hong Kong; whether these varieties should be considered languages or dialects; and how these issues relate to the identity positions available to people in Hong Kong. We use evidentiality and identity

positioning as our analytical and theoretical frameworks. In the following section we will outline the analytical frameworks and research questions that inform the current study. We will then detail the data used, followed by the analysis section. Finally, in the conclusion section, we will summarise the main findings and present the wider implications.

2 Analytical and theoretical frameworks

Evidentiality in English is not morphologically marked. As a discourse category, it is relatively unexplored in English and is often treated in an undifferentiated way with other phenomena. Indeed, the discourse phenomenon of hedging (Hyland 2005) subsumes evidentiality along with other potentially discrete categories (e.g. objective epistemic modality, Lyons 1977). As the validity of hedging as a category is called into question (Sanderson 2008), we see evidentiality as a discourse category worthy of exclusive investigation in its own right. Furthermore, the bulk of the literature thus far has focused on the impact of evidentiality upon speaker commitment. Whilst this is still a relevant line of enquiry, a number of studies have probed the pragmatic intentional use of the phenomenon in English (Hill and Irvine 1993; Fox 2001). The present study seeks to build on this trend by looking at the use of evidentiality in the creation of identity positions.

The concept of evidentiality comprises two core aspects: source (i.e. who is

responsible for the content of the utterance?) and method (i.e. how was the information acquired?). In terms of source, producers can explicitly code an utterance in two basic ways. Producers can explicitly mark self as responsible for an utterance (e.g. through the use of the first person singular in clausal verbs such as ‘I think’). Although the issue is not settled within the literature, we subscribe to the view that marking source as self has a direct impact on speaker commitment in that it frees a producer from full commitment to the factuality of an utterance should a challenge arise (Lyons 1977). This includes cases where the producer asserts ‘to know’ something:

Instead of asserting *I know that p*, language users simply assert *p*...the explicit use of *I know that* often indexes doubt about such knowledge...politicians who state *We all know that* usually express a belief that is not usually known at all as was the case with Tony Blair and his knowledge about WMDs in Iraq (Van Dijk 2014: 31).

Producers can also mark other as responsible for an utterance (e.g. through reported speech such as ‘Amy said’). Mushin (2001) convincingly demonstrates that there is no inherent relationship between reportive evidentiality and speaker

commitment. For instance, a person who lacks authority in a given communicative situation may cite a more authoritative source to display a strong belief. Alternatively, reported speech may be used to convey distance between the current producer and the utterance.

In terms of method (i.e. how was the information acquired?), van Dijk (2014) details three basic means of knowledge acquisition: perception (embodied sensory experience), inference (induction or deduction), and discourse (text or talk). Similar to reportive evidentiality, the explicit coding of method has proven to be problematic in terms of generating insight into speaker commitment. Mushin (2001) claims that direct evidential methods of knowledge acquisition (such as observation) imply a higher degree of speaker commitment, whilst more indirect methods (such as discourse) are more ambiguous. Bednarek (2006) advocates a contextually sensitive approach in which researchers should inquire as to whether the method (referred to as basis in her study) is construed as internal (hence more subjective) or external (hence more objective).

Producers can also choose not to code evidentiality. Mushin (2001) highlights the fact that studies into evidentiality often neglect to comment on information that lacks overt evidential coding. When the evidential source is unspecified, it is assumed that the current producer is responsible for the utterance. Utterances in which no evidential

information is supplied are treated as categorical assertions in the present study. That is, writers are taken as categorically committed to the factuality of such utterances.

In our analysis we focus on the use of evidential clausal verbs. Three factors inform this choice: clausal verbs are the most frequently coded evidential strategy in our data; clausal verbs involve the coding of both aspects of evidentiality (i.e. source and method); and clausal verbs are potentially interesting identity positioning devices. Indeed, ‘to interpret events, to establish fact, to convey opinion, and to constitute interpretations as knowledge – all of these are activities involving socially situated participants’ (Hill and Irvine 1993: 2).

In terms of identity, a broad social constructionist approach is adopted, i.e. identity is something people do as opposed to innately possess (De Fina, Schiffrin and Bamberg 2006). That is, identity is a discursive construction negotiated through the process of communication (Bucholtz and Hall 2005). The conceptualisation of identity as a process allows for consideration of the ‘ways in which people will assume identities, attribute to each other membership of various categories, or resist such attributions’ (De Fina 2011: 267). In this article we are particularly interested in the social identities constructed for Hong Kong people and the way in which writers use their own identities to support such constructions. The concept of identity positioning (Bamberg 2004) is particularly useful for the examination of identity

construction within an interactive environment like online discussion boards.

According to the concept of positioning, identity construction can be understood as taking place on various levels. This paper focuses on the discourse content level of identity construction, and the immediate interactive environment in which the discourse is produced (what we call the discourse production level of identity construction). The discourse content level of identity construction concerns the object world or phenomenon focused on by discourse producers. At this level, individuals typically construct identity positions for figures (Goffman 1981) in their discourse both vis-à-vis each other and vis-à-vis the producer as a figure is his or her discourse.

The discourse content level of identity construction focuses on ‘the interactive work that is being accomplished between the participants in the interactive setting’ (Bamberg 2004: 336). At this level, individuals construct identity positions in relation to their immediate interlocutors (i.e. students who posted in the forum) and wider audience members (i.e. classmates and teachers). Such identity positioning can be achieved when the discourse producer takes a stance towards himself or herself as a discourse figure (i.e. past self) as well as through interaction with interlocutors.

The analysis explores the interplay of evidentiality and identity positioning. At the content level and discourse production level of identity construction, we pay particular attention to 1) the construction of a Hong Kong social identity; 2) the way

writers take various identity positions to support such constructions (e.g. do they endorse or reject such social identities?); and 3) the role evidential strategies play in the achievement of such identity positions.

3 Data

The present paper uses data spontaneously posted to a Blackboard online discussion forum in which students were encouraged to discuss and share ideas encountered whilst attending class. The forum was intended as a pedagogical tool, which would allow learning to extend beyond the classroom; teachers did not monitor the discussion and the only advice given to students was that they had to be respectful towards others. A total of 69 students attended the course, including 12 non-local students: six from Mainland China; three from Korea, one from Nepal, one from Poland, and one from Sweden. A total of 63 comments, all in English, were posted by 38 students; most students (26 of the 38) posted just one comment; one student posted seven comments. The majority of the comments were between 150-300 words in length, three of the posts were particularly lengthy (over 600 words). Only course participants could access the forum. The identity of the students who posted was visible to those that had access to the forum. After the closure of the forum, we obtained consent to use the content of the posts from those who had participated.

Identifying information like names have been replaced with pseudonyms or removed.

Various topics were discussed in the forum including the role of standard languages versus dialects, language policy, minority languages, language in educational settings, neologisms, and language and identity. Whilst posts were self-initiated, they were often preempted by discussions in class. Hong Kong was frequently referenced: 44 of the 63 posts contained such a reference. The fact that the students called upon a context to which they had immediate access is perhaps unsurprising. However, 32 of the posts that referenced Hong Kong involved discourse concerned with the arguably contentious use of language in Hong Kong, focusing particularly on the use of Cantonese versus Putonghua.

4 Analysis

Although the present study does not take a quantitative approach, in order to help the reader comprehend our findings, Table 1 presents the distribution of the various evidential categories we observe in the discussion of language use in Hong Kong.

Evidential category		Examples	Frequency	
			n	%
Source	Self	I; my	76	92.7
	Other	first name; author name	6	7.3
	Total		82	100
Method	Perception (embodied sensory experience)	observe; found	9	10.9
	Inference (induction or deduction)	think; believe; guess	49	59.8
	Discourse (text or talk)	agree; found; heard	24	29.3
Total			82	100

As the table shows, self is by far the most frequently marked evidential source explicitly coded by writers in the forum. Over half of the constructions in which self is marked as source involve inference as the explicitly coded method: 27 of these comprise the mental state predicate ‘I think’. Just one post does not contain a construction in which self is marked as source, and a mental state predicate is used to mark inference. This challenges Nuyts’ (2001a) assumption that due to the planned nature of writing, mental state predicates are not particularly important in written communication. However, our data suggests mental state predicates are often utilised as important positioning devices in communicative settings characterised by opposition.

Participants also frequently mark self as source of the immediate utterance and discourse as the method of information acquisition: 18 of these involve the use of the clausal verb 'I agree'. Excluding three instances in the data, the complement of 'I agree' always involves an unattributed paraphrase of something previously stated in the forum. The clausal verb is therefore taken as a form 'contextually capable of expressing evidentiality' (Friedman 1986). Such expressions of intersubjective agreement frequently occur in constructions that contain, or are juxtaposed directly next to, subjective assertions of disagreement (e.g. 'I agree with X...but/however I think Y'). This suggests the expression of bare agreement is driven by interpersonal factors as much as by evidential reasons. Indeed, the presence of the course teachers as potential readers of the forum may well have influenced the relatively polite nature of the debate.

Occasionally, participants use other evidential strategies, including observation (Examples 1 and 3), hearsay (Example 3), and learning experience (Example 6).

Personal experience narratives, although rare in the data, provide a powerful means for the expression of critical points of view. This may be driven by epistemological factors in which direct evidence is harder to refute than more indirect, and hence less reliable, methods of knowledge acquisition. Finally, there are only six cases of explicitly attributed statements in the data, three of which occur with agreement

clausal verbs; the remaining three occur as citations, e.g. ‘Janet Holmes mentioned’.

We will now move on to present a number of the qualitatively analysed posts.

The posts concerned with language use in Hong Kong can be grouped into two main issues of contention: language choice (i.e. motivations for the use of Cantonese, and a perceived rejection of Putonghua); and, the official status of Cantonese (i.e. dialect or language). It should be noted that some posts addressed more than one of these contentious issues. As far as possible, the data will be presented in the order in which it appeared in the forum to preserve the sequential nature of the interaction. Although the main focus is on evidential clausal verbs, where appropriate we will include other aspects of the discourse.

4.1 Motivations for using Cantonese

Seven posts in the data focused solely on the use of Cantonese. A particular issue of contention concerned accusations of ill-intent in the use of Cantonese by Hong Kong locals. In Example 1, reproduced in full, a male Hong Kong student (Mark) responds to a post by another Hong Kong student. In the previous post, a general argument had been made that people like to use language as an expression of their cultural identity. Whilst agreeing in principle with such a point, Mark expresses a more pessimistic view in relation to the use of Cantonese in Hong Kong.

Example 1

1. I agree with Monika that people speak in a specific language pattern to
2. show that they are special. On the other hand, people would
3. intentionally change their language speaking features if they are not
4. happy about being classified as the member of a specific group. One of
5. the examples I observe in daily life is the language choice between
6. Cantonese and Mandarin of Hong Kong people. In some of the
7. arguments between Mainlanders and Hong Kong people, even though
8. the people from Hong Kong can speak fluent mandarin, they keep using
9. Cantonese in the argument. Normally, it is not effective communication
10. as the Mainlander could not understand Cantonese. However, to stress
11. the Hong Kong identity and to mark themselves off from outsiders, they
12. would prefer Cantonese.

In terms of social identity, Mark constructs Hong Kong locals as a stubborn minority who consciously use Cantonese as a tool to assert an identity of difference (note the way he represents the psychological motivations of Hong Kong locals in lines 10-12).

At both the discourse production and discourse content levels of identity construction, Mark expresses distance from this social identity. At the discourse production level

(i.e. the level at which the current interaction takes place), he uses evidentiality to construct a personal identity of a polite and reasoned debate participant. In lines 1-2, he opens the post with an expression of intersubjective agreement. This essentially functions as an act of conventional politeness in that it gives recognition to the contribution of his interlocutor. Although the expression of bare agreement is often used by writers in the forum to support the expression of subjective disagreement (i.e. a position of difference), there is also a sense in which it supports a position of similarity. In complying with the civil nature of the forum debate, individual writers display themselves as similar to one another (i.e. civil debate participants).

In lines 2-4 and 9-12, Mark expresses his substantive ‘present point of view’ (Miglbauer 2017: 213). In the use of the mental state predicate (‘I think’) in line 2, he marks himself as the source and evidential inference as the method of the subsequent utterance, i.e. people can use language in a specious sense. Read in isolation, the utterance could be taken as a deductive hypothesis. However, a wider reading of the co-text reveals that the utterance is inductively based on Mark’s evidence, not mere conjecture. In other words, in front of his teachers and other debate participants, he positions himself as a reasoned thinker. The subjectivisation of the utterance also allows him to position his stance as contrary to his immediate interlocutor. In lines 9-12, Mark offers another current opinion that displays a negative stance towards the

behaviour of Hong Kong locals. Although the present paper does not focus on epistemic commentary, the adverbial extent marker in line 9 ('Normally') is worthy of note. Anaphorically, it implies that the previously stated observation is based on a regular occurrence. Cataphorically, it suggests that the use of Cantonese does not usually result in effective communication. Utilitarian appeals for effective communication also surface in other posts.

Mark's representations at the content level (i.e. the level that deals with past events in the object world) reaffirm the identity positions expressed at the discourse production level. In his descriptions of the public altercations, he uses the plural form to reference Hong Kong locals (line 7) and the singular form to reference Mainlanders (line 10). He also places Hong Kong locals in the agentive role. In other words, he positions Hong Kong locals in a position of relative power vis-à-vis Mainland visitors. This is not typical of posts in the forum (in fact, the opposite is more typical, i.e. the construction of Hong Kong locals as oppressed victims). In terms of his own positioning as a figure in the discourse, in line 5 Mark evidentially indexes himself as an observer. This suggests a degree of detachment from the situation and conveys a sense of distance from the figures in the discourse (note the use of the third person plural pronouns in lines 8 and 11 to refer to Hong Kong locals). Interestingly, in three of the other posts that expressed a degree of negativity towards language use in Hong

Kong, subjective personal experience (i.e. perceptual observation) was cited as the evidential base for such claims (Example 3). The literature suggests that personal experience is hard to refute (Ladegaard 2011) as it is often predicated on (supposedly) objective evidence (Sweetser 1984).

Example 2, reproduced in full, contains a response, by a female Hong Kong student (Molly), to the post in Example 1. It is the only post in the data that attempts to refute the accusation of ill-intent to Hong Kong locals in the use of Cantonese (some posts even explicitly accept the idea of ill-intent, see Example 4). Indeed, Molly presses for a re-evaluation of the motivations of Hong Kong locals.

Example 2

1. I agree that this kind of communication is not effective but I think there are a
2. few more reasons that can be added. For example, it's easier for them to
3. express their anger or emotion even though they can speak fluent Mandarin.
4. I think it's quite similar to the reason why people use code-switching.
5. Using a specific language can help them to express their emotion.
6. So I think it's not only applicable to Hong Kong people, it can also apply to
7. other bilingual people.

In terms of social identity, Molly implicitly constructs Hong Kong locals as an oppressed minority (the idea of oppression is more explicit in Example 4). Although she refers to Hong Kong locals with the use of third person plural pronouns, suggestive of distance, her discursive labouring suggests an identity position of affinity. At the discourse production level, not only does she assert the universal right of people to use language as a tool for the authentic expression of embodied experience (Everett 2013), she also sets up a position in which it could be construed as unfair or oppressive to deny Hong Kong people such a right. Interestingly, none of the participants directly address or challenge the ideas in Example 2.

In the relatively short post, Molly explicitly enters the text four times to evidentially index herself as the source of the immediate utterance. In line 1, she opens her post by foregrounding agreement with a previously stated argument, i.e. the use of Cantonese over Mandarin is not conducive to effective communication. As in the previous example, the form allows Molly to construct a persona of a polite debate participant who recognises the contributions of others and who observes similar debate decorum to her interlocutors. In lines 1, 4 and 6, she uses the mental state predicate 'I think' to express a number of opinions. The mental state predicates in lines 1 and 6, which express a contrary stance to the previous post, allow Molly to position herself in opposition to her immediate interlocutor. In line 1, she calls for

greater nuance in the debate, which itself could be taken as a rather sympathetic act towards the Hong Kong locals under discussion. It also implicitly positions her interlocutor as presenting a rather simplistic view. Given the presence of other classmates and teachers, this act could be taken as a serious face threat. As will be seen in the discussion of Example 6, the positioning of Hong Kong locals with relatively heretical views (e.g. a stubborn minority, or Cantonese is not a language) as misinformed or lacking the necessary information surfaces elsewhere in the data.

In line 4, she presents an opinion (i.e. the use of Cantonese in arguments is similar to codeswitching) and evidentially supports it with surrounding statements of general knowledge (Van Dijk 2014) that express justifications for the use of vernacular language in heated exchanges (i.e. ease of use and authentic expression). The writer opens the second sentence in line 6 with a consequential transition ('So'). This explicitly links the previous statement of general knowledge to the subsequent opinion, i.e. use of one's mother tongue in heated exchanges is a universal phenomenon. As we have already seen, the linking of opinions with unqualified categorical assertions elsewhere in the text is a typical pattern found in the data. Again, it is a particularly powerful strategy that allows writers to construct an identity of reasoned thinker in the presence of classmates and teachers, and as observing the same epistemological rigour as other writers in the forum.

4.2 The rejection of Putonghua

Six posts in the forum solely focused on the related topic of the perceived refusal of Hong Kong locals to use Putonghua. In a previous post, to that contained in Example 3, a female Mainland Chinese student (Amy) enquired as to why local people refuse to use Putonghua with Mainland visitors. The post was ignored for two days. In Example 3, reproduced in full, a male Korean student (Ji-hoon) responds to Amy's post in order to restate the question.

Example 3

1. Hi Amy!
2. As a foreigner (Korean), I have also observed that Hong Kong people's
3. level of Mandarin is actually good even though their pronunciation is not
4. that perfect. I heard that many Hong Kong students (in primary, secondary
5. and even university) are still learning Mandarin which is why they can
6. communicate to mainland people. I wonder why they become so offensive
7. whenever other Mainland people talk to them. Since I can speak Mandarin,
8. I always use it whenever I order food or shopping because it is convenient.
9. Sadly, they don't welcome me :...(Ironically, when I tell them that I am

10. Korean, they are surprised and politely asked me to learn Cantonese

11. ASAP (Just some of them!!) Some of my friends told me it's because of

12. political reasons? I really want to know too!

As in Example 1, an identity of stubborn minority is once again constructed for a subset of Hong Kong locals who refuse to use Putonghua. At both the discourse content and discourse production levels, Ji-hoon constructs himself in contrast to Hong locals who refuse to use Putonghua, and as confused as to the behaviour he observes. He opens the post by indexing himself as an outsider, perhaps indicative of a degree of objectivity, and as an expression of solidarity with his immediate interlocutor (a Mainland student). In lines 2-6, he switches to the discourse content level, where he uses evidentially marked observation and hearsay to construct Hong Kong locals as having the ability to speak Putonghua. Two things are worthy of note in this stretch of discourse. Firstly, the evidential echo regarding the Putonghua proficiency of Hong Kong locals, independently reports the same phenomenon and thus elevates the observation of both writers from individual perception to intersubjective reality. Secondly, the statement of hearsay ('I heard'), in lines 4-6, regarding the educational exposure of Hong Kong locals to Putonghua positions Ji-hoon as taking an active interest in Hong Kong society (and in the presence of the

course teachers, arguably constructs himself as a good student of sociolinguistics).

The statement also works to set up the subsequent question (i.e. why do locals take offence?). In posing the question, Ji-hoon positions himself as an outsider who is bewildered by the behaviour he observes (the same can be said for the statement of hearsay in lines 11-12).

In lines 6-8, at the discourse production level, Ji-hoon frames a subsequent personal narrative. In doing so, he constructs himself as a reasonable person who utilises language skills for the sake of convenience (lines 7-8). This identity position is in clear contrast to figures in the personal narrative who ‘sadly...don’t welcome’ his use of Putonghua. Whilst Ji-hoon is quite negative in terms of his construction of Hong Kong locals, he does qualify the extent of his representations with a parenthetical comment (‘Just some of them!!’, line 11). This serves to mitigate the potential alienation of his Hong Kong classmates by avoiding a sweeping generalisation. The closing desiderative statement (‘I really want to know’, line 12) reinforces the writer’s identity position of bewildered outsider.

The idea that Hong Kong locals take offence at being spoken to in Putonghua is not subject to challenge by any of the writers, neither is the idea that Hong Kong locals consciously refuse to speak Putonghua. As in the following example, and in Example 2, when defences are mounted, they are grounded in identity claims. In

Example 4, a local male student (Sam) provides more insight into the possible motivations that lie behind the behaviour previously discussed in other posts.

Example 4

1. (Omit 8 lines in which the writer backchannels agreement that Putonghua has
2. practical benefits within the commercial sphere).
3. With infrastructure and services strained by mainland visitors flooding into
4. the city, the issue of replacing Cantonese with Putonghua as the medium of
5. instruction at schools adds to friction over policies seen to be relegating Hong
6. Kong's interests and identity in favour of mainland priorities.
7. This policy therefore gains resistance from a number of language scholars and
8. teachers, and from the younger generation.
9. I understand that if the trend continues, our local culture and identity will be
10. pushed to the fringe. Yet I believe this is not going to happen since many
11. Hong Kong people have stood up defending the language we are most
12. familiar with. :)

In the excerpt above, Sam constructs a social identity of an oppressed minority. He presents the Hong Kong identity as under threat (note the use of the water metaphor in

line 3 which evokes an image of a city that is being overwhelmed by an immense force, van Dijk 2008). Furthermore, Sam aligns with the social identity he constructs for Hong Kong locals (note the use of inclusive pronouns in lines 9-11). In lines 3-10, he engages in identity work at the discourse production level. In lines 3-8, in order to support the opinions he subsequently presents in the second paragraph, he provides general background information concerning the present ongoing situation in Hong Kong. Again, this evidential strategy allows for the construction of a personal identity of diligent thinker and reasoned debater. In lines 4-6, he presents the idea that the replacement of Cantonese with Putonghua forms part of a wider policy objective in which Hong Kong interests and identity are subjugated. Evidentially, the statement is coded as a commonly held perception ('seen to be', line 5). This allows Sam to suggest that the evidence is more objective than a simple subjective inference (Bednarek 2006). In lines 7-8, the resistance to language policy in Hong Kong is linked (notice the consequential transition 'therefore') to the policy of subjugation.

In the final paragraph, Sam presents a number of evidential inferences as to what will happen in the future. In lines 9-10, he uses a powerful discourse strategy in which a contingent dystopian vision of the future is presented (Jaworski and Fitzgerald 2008), i.e. a future in which Hong Kong interests and identity are suppressed. In lines 10-12, he calls upon the past to present the necessary action needed (i.e. an identity

struggle) for the achievement of a more preferential future. Two things are noteworthy in terms of identity. Firstly, the behaviour of Hong Kong people is essentially justified as an act of identity resistance (Franziskus 2017). Secondly, it could be argued that in the very act of predicting the future, Sam constructs an expert identity for himself (i.e. someone who understands the complex processes of telic causation).

4.3 The official status of Cantonese: dialect or language?

The second main contentious issue in the data concerned the official status of Cantonese (in terms of language versus dialect). Fourteen posts focused solely on this issue. Interestingly, just one post, by a female Hong Kong student (Ina), triggered thirteen contrary responses (all from Hong Kong students). Example 5 contains the initial post that precipitated the discussion. It was the 19th post of the forum. Previously, within the thread, the use of Cantonese for the purpose of exclusion had been contentiously discussed.

Example 5

1. Hello fellows, this is Ina.
2. I've been reading your comments and I somehow wanna throw in another
3. question that might be even closer to discuss.

4. I understand the struggles why some of the locals have been claiming and
5. agreeing that Cantonese is a language itself. But I personally regard
6. Cantonese as a dialect of china based on the history and the distribution
7. though I do agree that Cantonese somehow refers to the values and identity
8. especially in Hong Kong due to some controversy in the society. From a
9. political view, it is rather a dialect than a language but I feel like it doesn't
10. matter much if Cantonese is a dialect or not as the government anyway has
11. its own decisions to make for policy reasons.
12. I wonder how you guys think of this, leave comments down below to share
13. your thoughts :) Also feel free to talk about language policy in Hong Kong and
14. different factors that might affect your opinion!

In the example above, Ina takes a dismissive stance with regards to identifications taken by others in the forum and does not align with the majority position expressed by her peers. At the discourse production level, she uses evidential strategies to both construct herself as holding non-conformist views in relation to her peers, and as holding a degree of sympathy for Hong Kong locals.

Ina opens with a salutation that cues solidarity ('Hello fellows', line 1). In line 4, she builds on this with the use of an evidential clausal verb that cues empathy (i.e.

claims to understand those who fight for the recognition of Cantonese as a language).

However, she also positions herself as outside of such a group ('some of the locals',

line 4) and subsequently builds an alternative position (from the majority view).

Indeed, in lines 5-6, she proposes that Cantonese is not a language. Although she

evidentially marks the claim as an opinion ('I personally regard', line 5), she does not

present it as a baseless claim. She evidentially supports it ('based on', line 6) with

reference to historical and usage factors (again, allowing her to construct herself as a

reasoned contributor like other writers in the forum). Interestingly, she buttresses her

first heretical claim amongst two relatively sympathetic arguments (notice the

expression of bare agreement in line 7), thus suggestive of a degree of apprehension.

In lines 8-11, Ina adopts an institutional perspective ('From a political view',

lines 8-9) to repeat her earlier opinion, i.e. Cantonese is a dialect. It could be argued

that this has ramifications for the construction of agency. Unlike most other writers in

the forum, Ina constructs an identity based on an acceptance of the political reality.

She does not conceive of herself as engaged in an identity struggle, but as an

undergoer subject to a political process outside of her control. In line 9, she expresses

another opinion ('I feel like') that the issue is not of great importance. Nuyts (2001b)

notes that the mental state predicate 'I feel' is inherently subjective and shows that the

writer does not regard the statement as necessarily shared by others. In other words,

Ina positions herself as holding a unique view vis-à-vis her interlocutors. Nevertheless, she again presents the reasoning behind such an inference, i.e. the government will decide language policy on political grounds (largely accepted in the forum). The desire to present her views as unique and not attributable to others may well have informed her choice of evidential marking rather than evidence based reasoning (Fox 2001).

In the final paragraph (lines 12-14), Ina acts in the role of debate host and directs others to how they should respond. She closes her post with a ‘feel free’ directive in which the writer entreats others to respond candidly to her post (as they do). In doing so, it could be argued that she takes an authoritative identity position within the forum. Ina’s views can be contrasted with positions taken in Example 6 (representative of the wider data). In the following example, a local female student (Kally) directly refutes the historical argument put forward by the writer in Example 5.

Example 6

1. Here is Kally and I truly believe the question Ina raised is really
2. worth discussing.
3. I do agree that Cantonese is a dialect when we are looking at the political
4. aspect. However, it is very interesting that you have mentioned the

5. historical background since from my aspect, what I have learnt is that
6. Cantonese has a much longer history which can be traced back to Qin
7. Dynasty while Mandarin can be traced back to Yuan, Ming and Qing Dynasty
8. which is based on the capital Beijing local language which is influenced by
9. Mongolian language and Manchurian language development. In fact,
10. when we look at those famous poems as an example, we can see the beauty
11. of rhyming in Cantonese instead of Mandarin. I guess the historical and
12. cultural background is actually one of the major reasons why people who
13. speak Cantonese insist Cantonese should be seen and treated as a language.
14. (Omit 15 lines in which the sender discusses and exemplifies the unique
15. development of Cantonese in Hong Kong versus Guangdong province).
16. Besides the mutual intelligibility criterion, the uniqueness of Hong Kong
17. Cantonese which provides people in Hong Kong a sense of identity and
18. solidarity has also provided the confidence to recognise Cantonese as a
19. language.
20. Hopefully my response has given you slightly more information concerning
21. the topic :)

In the excerpt above, Kally presents Hong Kong locals as justified in their calls for

recognition of Cantonese as a language, and expresses sympathy for Hong Kong Cantonese speakers engaged in a wider identity struggle. At the discourse production level, two things are particularly interesting about this excerpt: Firstly, the positioning implications of the evidential challenge to the historical issue (lines 4-11); secondly, the positioning implication of Kally's claim about the status of Cantonese (lines 11-19).

After expressing initial agreement in lines 3-4, Kally quickly moves on to signal disagreement. Interestingly, early in the utterance, she both indexes herself as the source ('from my aspect', line 5) of the utterance, and her own learning experience as the method of knowledge acquisition ('what I have learnt', line 5). This may have provided a more persuasive way for the writer to present her argument, i.e. through the projection of a more humble persona. Interestingly, in lines 4-11, she expresses a discourse of resistance (van Dijk 2009). That is, in the representation of Putonghua as an adulterated dialect, and Cantonese as an older language, Kally attempts to resist perceived domination. Again, this suggests that the idea of Hong Kong people as an oppressed minority is salient. In contrast to Ina in Example 5, Kally provides a greater level of detail regarding the historical issue. The presentation of detailed arguments has been discussed as a powerful discourse strategy that can supplement the use of evidentials in making a text more credible (van Dijk 2014). In other words, in

providing more historical detail, Kally imbues her argument with greater credibility, and constructs herself as particularly knowledgeable on the particular topic. Indeed, in lines 4-5, she seemingly displays an awareness of the insubstantial evidential basis of the arguments put forth in Example 5 (i.e. Ina is represented as having merely ‘mentioned the historical background’). This is reinforced in lines 20-21 where Kally essentially positions herself in a teacher role vis-à-vis Ina.

In regard to the status of Cantonese, Kally expresses a belief as to why Hong Kong locals feel justified in claiming it is a language. Her discursive labouring suggests that she includes herself in the group of ‘people who speak Cantonese’ (lines 12-13). The mental state predicate (‘I guess’, line 11) has been coded as expressing a weak belief for which the producer does not have firm evidence (Nuyts 2001a). However, again, its use in the example above may have been driven more by a pragmatic desire to portray a humble persona than evidence-based reasoning. In fact, throughout the post, Kally marshals a good deal of evidential material in support of her argument. Furthermore, in lines 16-19, she essentially restates her claim in stronger terms (notice the lack of subjective qualification) and introduces the idea that Hong Kong Cantonese is a particularly unique variant. Again, regardless of speaker intent, within the realm of utterance interpretation, the use of the evidential device allows for latter maneuver if subject to a challenge.

5 Discussion and Conclusion

In the following discussion, we shall summarise the findings from our main lines of enquiry, highlight some important themes within the data and discuss their wider implications. In most of the posts by Hong Kong locals, the people of Hong Kong are constructed as an oppressed minority. Cantonese is frequently represented as an identity linked symbolic resource. Its fate is portrayed as intimately bound with wider socio-political trends in which Hong Kong locals perceive the right to flag their local identity as under threat. Within such discourse, accusations of nefarious behaviour are often accepted and even discursively reproduced as acts of resistance. That is, behaviour that may otherwise be regarded negatively is legitimised by the perception that it forms part of a current struggle for survival (Žižek 2008). Furthermore, at the discourse content level and/or discourse production level of identity construction, most writers who engage in the construction of an oppressed minority either express great sympathy for Hong Kong locals or explicitly embrace such an identity. In a minority of posts, Hong Kong locals who continue to preference the use of Cantonese are implicitly represented as a stubborn minority. Given the negative terms in which it is constructed, it is perhaps unsurprising that those who propose such a social identity do not align with it.

As noted throughout, many of the evidential choices we observe in our data may primarily serve as identity positions rather than evidence based qualifications. At the discourse production level, the use of mental state predicates allows writers to subjectively mark their current views with regard to events and situations described in the discourse. In terms of identity positioning vis-à-vis other interlocutors, the use of mental state predicates (e.g. I think) allows writers to mark subjectively different positions to immediate interlocutors and thus manifest an identity of difference.

Through the use of mental state predicates backed by general knowledge, writers also manifest an identity of similarity with other debate participants (i.e. by observing the epistemological norms of the debate). The same applies to the use of the clausal verb 'I agree', which allows writers to construct an identity of polite debate participant.

Evidential clausal verbs feature less frequently at the discourse content level (as did the description of actual past events in general). The use of observation is particularly noteworthy in the sense of distance it allows writers to convey from the figures in their discourse.

The findings suggest a number of practical considerations for applied linguistics in schools and universities in Hong Kong. Firstly, any further actions seen to denigrate Cantonese, or restrict its use, are likely to be received as akin to pouring salt on an open wound. The use of Cantonese has already been severely restricted in

educational settings in Hong Kong where English is widely used as the medium of instruction. Such moves have identity implications and may lead to radicalisation of the local Hong Kong identity (Davison and Lai 2007). Secondly, policy makers should be advised to respect and uphold Hong Kong's core values and unique characteristics, including the people's attachment to Cantonese. Failing to do so could precipitate an (antagonistic) ethnification of the Hong Kong identity, and further advance intergroup tension and anti-Mainland sentiments.

A local university which requires students to study Putonghua to fulfill their Chinese language requirement has seen violent clashes in recent months between students and staff. The students demand they be allowed to study Cantonese and this suggests that local students are not ready to embrace the instrumental value of Putonghua because of identity implications, as our analyses have found. Students see enforced Putonghua not as a practical tool for efficient communication, but as a token of an enforced Mainland identity, which they vehemently reject. Thus, policy makers might attempt to shift the debate away from a narrow identity-based discourse. One possible avenue to achieve such a goal could involve recasting the debate in terms of the instrumental value of Putonghua. In the forum, participants agreed that Putonghua may serve as a tool for effective communication, which was seen as important to personal and social success. Indeed, the notion of the multilingual effective

communicator may prove as a useful base for a more global inclusive identity of belonging that could complement language policy in Hong Kong.

Because of the internationalisation of university education and increased student mobility, universities have become important transnational spaces and therefore also sites for creative translanguaging and identity negotiations. Wei and Hua (2013) found that Chinese students with diverse linguistic and migration backgrounds (Mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and British-Born Chinese) studying in a U.K. university opted for creating new multilingual, transnational groups for themselves and displayed flexible and fluid ethnolinguistic identities in their talk. Sadly, this is not what happened in this discussion forum. The aim for discussion forums is not only to extend the learning beyond the classroom, but also to provide a forum for students to discuss potentially difficult issues in a safe environment (Ladegaard 2011). However, they may also be sites for expression of ethnocentric views (as we found in our data). Sadly, when the semester finished, the relationship between local and Mainland students had further deteriorated. This suggests that pre-established negative stereotypes are a powerful source supporting the status quo (Stephan and Stephan 1996), and it suggests that a cohesive universe with a well-defined negatively stereotyped outgroup, and an equally well-defined positively stereotyped ingroup, reinforces a positive identity, both at the group level and at the individual level (Hogg

2000; Tajfel 1982).

We argue that applied linguistics and foreign language classrooms should acknowledge the importance of students' socio-political environment and, as far as possible, include it in classroom and online discussions. Discussions about language are not apolitical, and if we as scholars and language teachers can further embrace the socio of sociolinguistics, we might also be able to further guide our students in a debate of intergroup difference that is sensitive to and embraces 'the disquieting tension in the other culture in its difference' (Bredella 2003: 238).

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Figure 1 and caption.

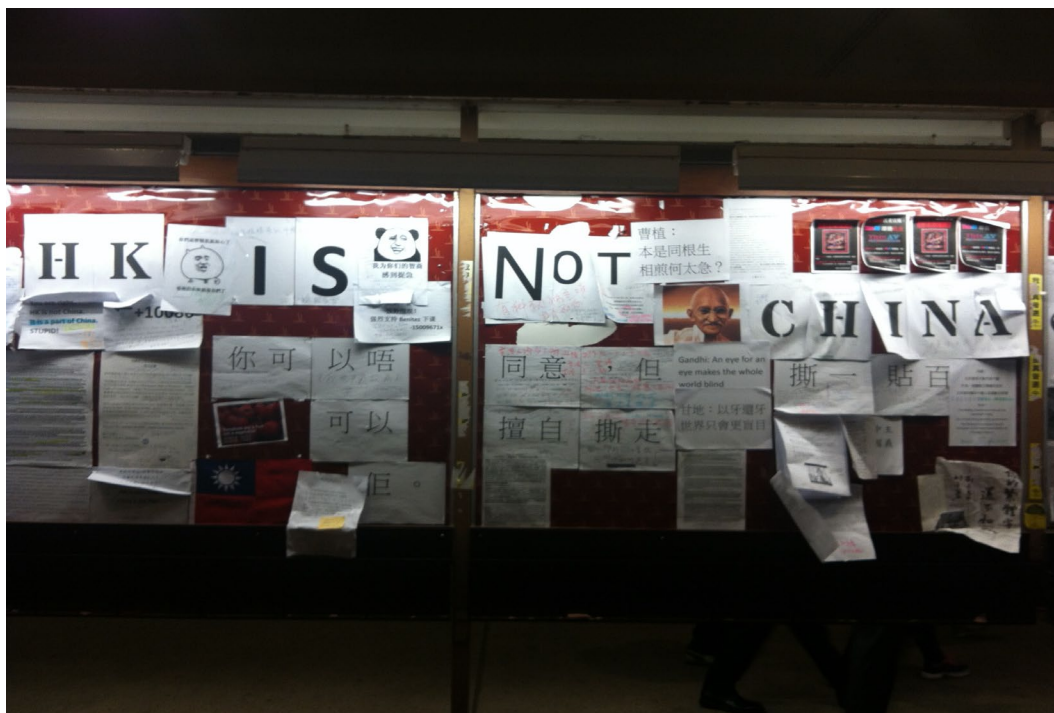


Figure 1: The Democracy Wall in a Hong Kong University, December 2015

Table 1 and title.

Table 1: Explicit coding of evidentiality in posts concerned with language use in Hong Kong

Evidential Category		Examples	Frequency	% Frequency
Source	Self	I; My.	76	92.7
	Other	First name; author name.	6	7.3
	Total		82	100
Method	Perception (embodied sensory experience)	Observe; Found;	9	10.9
	Inference (induction or deduction)	Think; Believe; Guess.	49	59.8
	Discourse (text or talk)	Agree; Found; Heard.	24	29.3

	Total		82	100
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