



Sociolinguistic Aspects of Popular Abbreviations in Hong Kong Cantonese

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Abstract. This paper aims to study certain popular abbreviations in Hong Kong Cantonese in recent years from a sociolinguistic perspective so as to understand their characteristics and uniqueness. It was found that these abbreviations come from different languages and regions, and different strategies such as Cantonese romanization acronym and translation of foreign languages into Chinese characters were used in the process of abbreviation. In terms of grammar, they are mainly composed of adverb-verb and verb-object structures, and the part of speech may change in some cases. Some abbreviations also have rhetorical effects related to homonyms or taboos. These abbreviations are mastered by younger generations and are mostly used in informal domains. The main consideration for adopting abbreviations is of practical concern as well as their function of “insider communication”. Respondents rated Cantonese abbreviations as overall positive.

Keyword: Hong Kong Cantonese · Abbreviations · Contraction Strategies · Domain

1 Introduction

Different scholars hold slightly different views about the abbreviations and their related concepts (cf. Yu [9]; Chen [2]). This paper is based on the definition of Yu [9] and refers to the discussion of Guo [4] before positing some conditions. Yu [9] postulates, the abbreviation of words is a name for commonly used polyphonic words, phrases, or in some fixed forms, in which some of the partial forms represent the whole in the development of diachronics, under the premise that the meaning remains unchanged, it becomes a basic unit of discourse. In this regard, two limiting conditions for abbreviations are proposed here:

- (1) An abbreviation must have a relatively fixed full form that corresponds to it;
- (2) An abbreviation must shorten or omit certain linguistic units of the full form.

For example, in Hong Kong Cantonese, 狗衝 *gau2 cong1*¹ is generally used to describe “like a dog rushing forward blindly” (Lai [7]). It is also interpreted as “males

¹ The Cantonese romanization scheme “Jyutping” of the Linguistic Society of Hong Kong [6] is adopted throughout the whole paper.

rushing toward a subject stimulated by the outside world like a dog” (5.Hong Kong Internet Encyclopedia Website [5]). Nevertheless, these are merely explanations and not fixed full forms, which do not meet condition (1), so they cannot be considered abbreviations. Furthermore, such as the popular term 姜糖 *goeng1 tong2*, although there is a relatively fixed full name (姜濤粉絲 *goeng1 tou4 fan2 si1* “Fans of Keung To²”), the word 糖 *tong2* in that term is not abbreviated from the linguistic unit of the full form, which does not meet condition (2), and therefore it cannot be considered an abbreviation, it is just a nickname or alias. There is also a numeral generalized statement, like 雙失 *soeng1 sat1* “dual loss” (失學兼失業 *sat1 hok6 gim1 sat1 jip6* “dropping out of school and unemployed”). Chen [2] and Wu [8] consider it a kind of abbreviation, but Guo [4] holds a negative stance. According to the above-mentioned limiting conditions, this paper agrees with the latter view. There is no corresponding linguistic unit for 雙 *soeng1* in the full statement 失學兼失業 *sat1 hok6 gim1 sat1 jip6*; likewise, similar expressions like 三國 *saam1 gwok3* “Three Kingdoms” (魏 *ngai6*, 蜀 *suk6*, 吳 *ng4*), 五常 *ng5 soeng4* “Five Constant Virtues” (仁 *jan4*, 義 *ji6*, 禮 *lai5*, 智 *zi3*, 信 *seon3* “Benevolence, Righteousness, Propriety, Wisdom, Fidelity”), none of them have adopted any linguistic unit from the complete statement, so they do not meet condition (2). This paper does not consider these as abbreviations but refers to them as general terms.

Based on the definition and limiting conditions mentioned above, this paper has collected some examples of popular abbreviations in Hong Kong Cantonese from the observation of the media, the internet, and daily communication. Observations and analysis have been conducted from different perspectives to understand its uniqueness as well as users’ views and attitudes.

2 Some Characteristics of Popular Abbreviations in Hong Kong Cantonese

Based on the aforementioned definition, we collected 30 examples of Hong Kong Cantonese abbreviations through the observation of people’s daily communication and different channels such as the media and the internet, for further exploration³. Furthermore, we have used WisersOne news database to search for the occurrences of these abbreviations in all major and minor newspaper media and web media throughout Hong Kong in the past five years to confirm that these terms are widely used among the public. These abbreviations can be divided into general, traffic, society, politics, entertainment, swear words, food and drink, and video games, as shown below:

² Keung To (姜濤), Hong Kong male artist, singer and actor, currently a member of the Hong Kong boy band MIRROR.

³ Referencing web resources include: Trendy Expression Dictionary (<https://hkdic.my-helper.com/>), “Google Hong Kong 2021 Search” Trendy Expression List (<https://trends.google.com.hk/trends/yis/2021/HK/>), 2021 Yahoo search “Top Ten Trendy Expressions” ranking list (<https://ynews.page.link/VbQy>), etc.

Table 1. The abbreviations studied in this paper

No.	Abbreviation	Full form	Meaning	Category
1.	世一 <i>sai3</i> <i>jat1</i>	世界第一 <i>sai3 gaai3 dai6 jat1</i>	The best in the world	General
2.	LM	留名 <i>lau4 ming4</i>	Leave a name	General
3.	盲反 <i>maang4 faan2</i>	盲目反對 <i>maang4 muk6 faan2 deoi3</i>	Blind opposition	General
4.	脫單 <i>tyut3 daan1</i>	脫離單身 <i>tyut3 lei4 daan1 san1</i>	Get rid of being single	General
5.	中同 <i>zung1 tung4</i>	中學同學 <i>zung1 hok6 tung4 hok6</i>	Secondary school classmate	General
6.	八半 <i>baat3 bun3</i>	八點半 <i>baat3 dim2 bun3</i>	Eight thirty (8:30)	General
7.	PM	Private Message	Private Message	General
8.	巴迷 <i>baa1 mai4</i>	巴士迷 <i>baa1 si2 mai4</i>	Bus fan	Traffic
9.	巴總 <i>baa1 zung2</i>	巴士總站 <i>baa1 si2 zung2 zaam6</i>	Bus terminal	Traffic
10.	港女 <i>gong2 neoi2</i>	香港女性 <i>hoeng1 gong2 neoi2 sing3</i>	Hong Kong girls	Society
11.	醉駕 <i>zeoi3 gaa3</i>	醉酒後駕駛 <i>zeoi3 zau2 hau6 gaa3 sai2</i>	Drink and drive	Society
12.	藥駕 <i>joek6 gaa3</i>	濫藥後駕駛 <i>laam6 joek6 hau6 gaa3 sai2</i>	Drug and drive	Society
13.	法援 <i>faat3 wun4</i>	法律援助 <i>faat3 leot6 wun4 zo6</i>	Legal aid	Society
14.	綜援 <i>zung1 wun4</i>	綜合援助 <i>zung3 hap6 wun4 zo6</i>	Comprehensive Social Security Assistance	Society
15.	企跳 <i>kei2 tiu3</i>	企圖跳樓 <i>kei2 tou4 tiu3 lau2</i>	Attempt to jump off a building	Society
16.	港豬 <i>gong2 zyul</i>	香港豬民 <i>hoeng1 gong2 zyul man4</i>	Hong Kong "Pig", i.e. politically apathetic individuals	Politics
17.	和理非非 <i>wo4 lei5 fei1 fei1</i>	和平、理性、非暴力、非粗口 <i>wo4 ping4 lei5 sing3 fei1 bou6 lik6 fei1 coul hau2</i>	Peace, Rationality, Nonviolence, No Swear Words	Politics
18.	逃恥 <i>tou4 ci2</i>	《逃避可恥但有用》 <i>tou4 bei6 ho2 ci2 daan6 jau5 jung6</i>	"The Evasion Is Shameful But Useful", a TV drama	Entertainment
19.	神劇 <i>san4 kek6</i>	神級劇集 <i>san4 kap1 kek6 zaap6</i>	Epic drama	Entertainment
20.	膠劇 <i>gaau1 kek6</i>	硬膠劇集 <i>ngaang6 gaau1 kek6 zaap6</i>	Crap drama	Entertainment
21.	網紅 <i>mong5 hung4</i>	網絡紅人 <i>mong5 lok3 hung4 jan4</i>	Internet influencer	Entertainment

(continued)

Table 1. (continued)

No.	Abbreviation	Full form	Meaning	Cate- gory
22.	鏡粉 <i>geng3 fan2</i>	MIRROR ⁴ 粉絲 <i>MIRROR fan2 si1</i>	Fan of MIRROR, a music group	Entertainment
23.	爵屎 <i>zoek3 si2</i>	呂爵安 ⁵ FAN屎 <i>loi5 zoek3 on1 fen1 si2</i>	Fan of Edan Lui	Entertainment
24.	嘍模 <i>leng1 mou4</i>	嘍妹模特兒 <i>leng1 mui1 mou4 dak6 ji4</i>	Young female model	Entertainment
25.	CLS	癡撚線 <i>ci1 lan2 sin3</i>	Go crazy	Swear words
26.	JM9	做乜鳩 <i>zou6 mat1 gau1</i>	What the hell	Swear words
27.	SLS	笑撚死 <i>siu3 lan2 sei2</i>	Dying of laughter	Swear words
28.	珍奶 <i>zan1 naai5</i>	珍珠奶茶 <i>zan1 zyu1 naai5 caa4</i>	Bubble milk tea	Food & drink
29.	FF	Final Fantasy	Final Fantasy	Video games
30.	GG	Good Game	It's Over	Video games

We first collected popular examples and then tried to categorize them. We did not deliberately pursue an equal number of examples for each category, but it does not affect the analysis in the paper. Below we will preliminarily analyze some characteristics of these abbreviations from the perspectives of sources, abbreviation strategies, syllables, grammar, and rhetoric.

2.1 Sources

These popular abbreviations come from different sources. In terms of language, some are derived from Japanese (such as 逃げるは恥だが役に立つ “Escape is shameful, but it is useful,” abbreviated as 逃げ恥 “Escape is shame” and then referred to as 逃恥 *tou4 ci2*), and from English (such as “Final Fantasy” is abbreviated as “FF,” and “Private Message” is abbreviated as “PM”); in terms of regions, some are derived from Mainland China (such as 網絡紅人 *mong5 lok3 hung4 jan4* are abbreviated as 網紅 *mong5 hung4*, and 脫離單身 *tyut3 lei4 daan1 san1* is abbreviated as 脫單 *tyut3 daan1*), Taiwan (such as 珍珠奶茶 *zan1 zyu1 naai5 caa4* is abbreviated as 珍奶 *zan1 naai5*), and of course there are ones from Hong Kong itself (such as MIRROR 粉絲 *MIRROR fan2 si1* are abbreviated as 鏡粉 *geng3 fan2*, and 嘍妹模特兒 *leng1 mui1 mou4 dak6 ji4* is abbreviated as 嘍模 *leng1 mou4*).

2.2 Abbreviation Strategies

In terms of abbreviation strategies (referring to Wu [8]), they can be mainly divided into: First, extracting Chinese characters (such as 和平、理性、非暴力、非粗口 *wo4 ping4 lei5 sing3 fei1 bou6 lik6 fei1 cou1 hau2* abbreviated as 和理非非 *wo4 lei5 fei1 fei1*); second, using the initial of Cantonese romanization (such as 鬩撚線 *ci1 lan2 sin3* abbreviated as CLS); third, substituting with numeric homophones (like 做乜鳩 *zou6 mat1 gau1* abbreviated as JM9); fourth, translating foreign languages into monosyllabic Chinese characters (like MIRROR 鏡粉 *MIRROR fan2 si1* abbreviated as 粉絲 *geng3 fan2*).

2.3 Syllable Characteristics

The characteristics can primarily be categorized as follows: First, disyllabic abbreviations (such as 神級劇集 *san4 kap1 kek6 zaap6* abbreviated as 神劇 *san4 kek6*); second, trisyllabic abbreviations (like 笑撚死 *siu3 lan2 sei2* abbreviated as SLS); third, quadrisyllabic abbreviations (like 和平、理性、非暴力、非粗口 *wo4 ping4 lei5 sing3 fei1 bou6 lik6 fei1 cou1 hau2* abbreviated as 和理非非 *wo4 lei5 fei1 fei1*). As mentioned in Chen & Luo [1], the most easily found abbreviations are disyllabic, followed by trisyllabic, and the fewest are quadrisyllabic.

2.4 Grammatical Features

In terms of grammatical features, most abbreviations retain the word classes or sentence elements of the full form, such as nouns: 中學同學 *zung1 hok6 tung4 hok6* abbreviated as 中同 *zung1 tung4*, and 八點半 *baat3 dim2 bun3* abbreviated as 八半 *baat3 bun3*; Verbs: 盲目反對 *maang4 muk6 faan2 deoi3* abbreviated as 盲反 *maang4 faan2*, and 脫離單身 *tyut3 lei4 daan1 san1* abbreviated as 脫單 *tyut3 daan1*. However, there are also exceptions, mostly when nouns are converted into verbs. For instance, Final Fantasy is originally the name of a video game, which is a noun, but when abbreviated as FF in Hong Kong Cantonese it becomes a verb meaning excessive fantasy (such as “唔好FF咁多啦 *m4 hou2 FF gam3 do1 laa1*”, which means “Don’t fancy too much”); similarly, Private Message is a noun, but after being abbreviated to PM in Cantonese, it acts like a transitive verb (like “記得PM我 *gei3 dak1 PM ngo5*” “Remember to send me a PM”).

From the perspective of grammatical structure, full forms of different grammatical structures have examples of abbreviations, such as the joint structure 和平、理性、非暴力、非粗口 *wo4 ping4 lei5 sing3 fei1 bou6 lik6 fei1 cou1 hau2* abbreviated as 和理非非 *wo4 lei5 fei1 fei1*, modifier-head structure 神級劇集 *san4 kap1 kek6 zaap6* abbreviated as 神劇 *san4 kek6*, 盲目反對 *maang4 muk6 faan2 deoi3* abbreviated as 盲反 *maang4 faan2*, predicate-object structure 脫離單身 *tyut3 lei4 daan1 san1* abbreviated as 脫單 *tyut3 daan1*, 做乜鳩 *zou6 mat1 gau1* abbreviated as JM9), predicate-complement structure (笑撚死 *siu3 lan2 sei2* abbreviated as SLS), and subject-predicate structure (腦內補完 *nou5 noi6 bou2 jyun4* “Finish in mind” abbreviated as 腦補 *nou5 bou2*, which is out of the above list). There are also examples of entire sentences being abbreviated, like 《逃避可恥但有用》 *tou4 bei6 ho2 ci2 daan6 jau5 jung6* abbreviated into 逃恥 *tou4 ci2*. However, the modifier-head and predicate-object structures are the most common.

2.5 Rhetorical Effect

Some abbreviations also have rhetorical effects. The first is homophonic puns (Chin [3]) like the abbreviation 爵屎 *zoek3 si2*, being the homophone of 雀屎 *zoek3 si2* “bird droppings,” which can also harmonize with 爵士 *zoek3 si6* “nobility”; and another one is 香港居民 *hoeng1 gong2 geoi1 man4* “Hong Kong residents” homophonically pronounced in Mandarin as 香港豬民 “Hong Kong pig people” (the Mandarin pronunciation of 居 *jū* “reside” is similar to the pronunciation of 豬 *zyu1* “pig” in Cantonese), meaning politically apathetic individuals, which is further abbreviated as 港豬 *gong2 zyul*.

Moreover, euphemisms are also a type of rhetoric. In the abbreviation strategy, many of those using Cantonese romanization initials as abbreviations or numeric homophones as substitutes (see Sect. 2.2.) fall into the category of swear words. For instance: 撚 *lan2* in 撚撚線 *ci1 lan2 sin3* and 笑撚死 *siu3 lan2 sei2*, and 鳩 *gau1* in 做乜鳩 *zou6 mat1 gau1* are all swear words, in their abbreviations the phonetic initial “L” and numeric homophone “9” are employed respectively to avoid using the vulgar language.

3 Sociolinguistic Findings

This paper also attempts to explore the characteristics of these abbreviations at the pragmatics or socio-psychological level. This section collects data through an online questionnaire. The questionnaire data was collected via Google Forms from December 10–17, 2021. The sample size was 132 individuals, all Cantonese speakers and people who have lived in Hong Kong for at least ten years and/or whose native families communicate in Cantonese. Males and females respectively make up 45.5% (60 respondents) and 54.5% (72 respondents) of the sample; in terms of age groups, 15.1% (20 respondents) are 11–20 years old, 25.8% (34 respondents) are 21–30 years old, 21.9% (34 respondents) are 31–40 years old, 34.1% (34 respondents) are 41–50 years old, and only 3.1% (4 respondents) are over 51 years old.

3.1 Analysis by Age Group

The first part of the questionnaire asks which of the abbreviations listed in Fig. 1 are recognizable to the respondents. The following compares the recognition rates of these abbreviations among different age groups⁴:

⁴ There were only 4 people over the age of 51 in the sample, and they were excluded from the age group analysis.

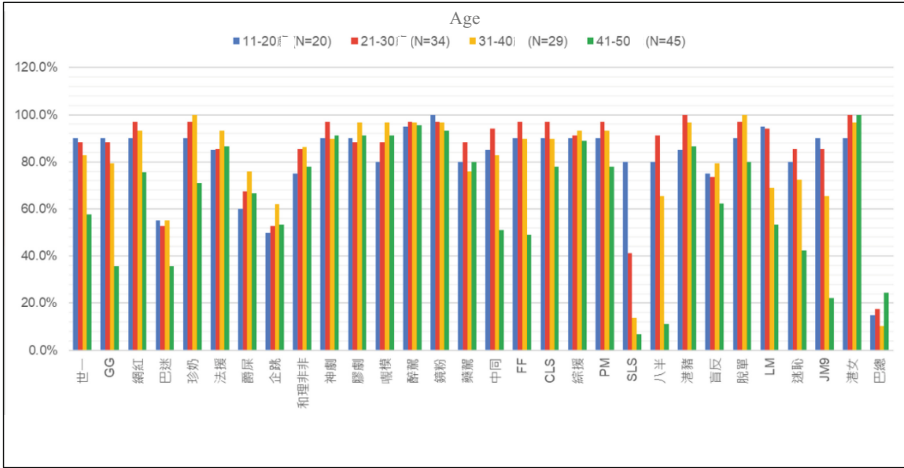


Fig. 1. Recognition of different abbreviations (comparison across age groups)

From the above figure, it can be seen that overall, the younger generation (30 years old and above) has a higher recognition rate of these abbreviations (average recognition rate of 83%); the second is the 31–40 age group (average recognition rate of 79.9%), and the 41–50 age group’s grasp of these abbreviations is significant lower (average recognition rate of 64.5%).

Upon closer observation, it can be found that those with similar mastery rates across age groups are generally more formal abbreviations, like 醉駕 *zeoi3 gaa3* (the difference between different age groups is no more than 2.1%), 綜援 *zung1 wun4* (the difference between different age groups is no more than 4.2%); for newer abbreviations, like “SLS,” there are significant differences between the groups, and the mastery level decreases with age (11–20 years old: 80%; 21–30 years old: 41.2%; 31–40 years old: 13.8%; 41–50 years old: 6.7%). From this, it can be inferred that new abbreviations are often derived from the youngest group, and then gradually spread to the older groups.

3.2 Analysis by Domain

The second part of the questionnaire proposed five different scenarios: communication with families, communication with friends, chatting online, examinations, and job interviews, corresponding respectively to five domains: family, friendship, entertainment, education, and work. It asked whether the respondents would use each of the abbreviations listed in Table 1 in those scenarios (either verbal or written usage), and sought to understand the reasons for using or not using abbreviations in those scenarios. The following compares the usage rates of these abbreviations in different domains:

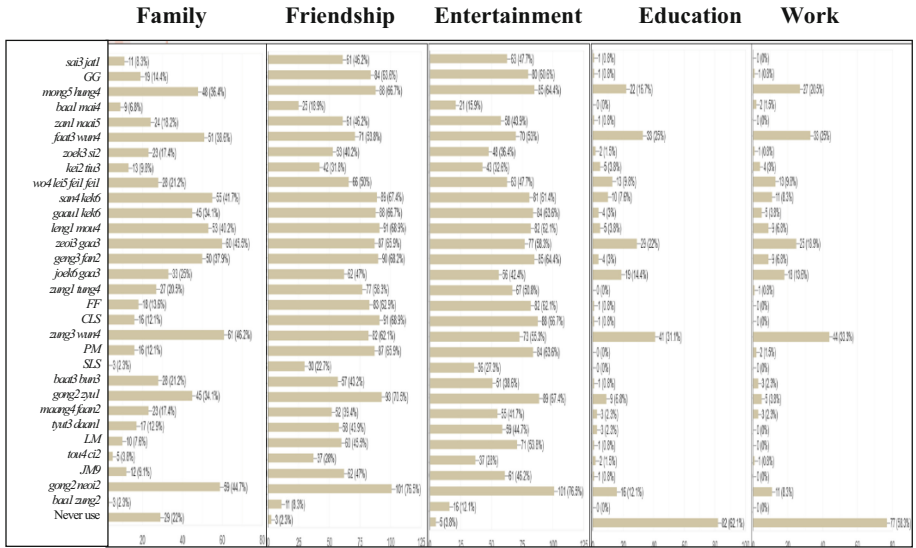


Fig. 2. The usage of different abbreviations (comparison across domains)

From Fig. 2, it can be seen that the abbreviations examined in this paper are mostly used in informal domains. It is most common among friends (friendship domain) and in online chats (entertainment domain). Among the 30 abbreviations examined, there are 26 abbreviations used by 30% or more of the respondents in each case, and there are 16 abbreviations used by more than half of the respondents in these two domains. Next is when communicating with family members (family domain). Among the 30 abbreviations examined, there are 10 abbreviations used by 30% or more of the respondents, but no abbreviations are used by more than half of the respondents in this domain. Overall, in the three informal domains of family, friendship, and entertainment, the usage rates of each abbreviation are roughly proportional. However, the proportion using swear words is significantly smaller in the family domain, with usage rates only between 2.3% and 12.1%.

As for the more formal scenarios of exams (education domain) and job interviews (work domain), over 80% and over 70% of respondents respectively indicated that they would never use these abbreviations in these situations. Among the abbreviations, only one - 綜援 *zung1 wun4* from the society category - is used by over 30% of respondents. Other slightly more commonly used abbreviations like 法援 *faat3 wun4* and 醉罵 *zeoi3 gaa3* are also from the society category, with the only exception being 網紅 *mong5 hung4* from the entertainment category, but this is also a kind of social phenomenon.

The following analyzes the main reasons for respondents’ use or non-use of abbreviations in different domains.

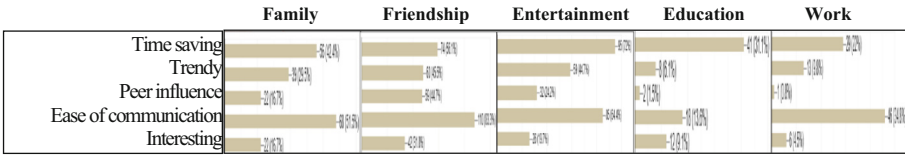


Fig. 3. Main reasons for using abbreviations (comparison across domains)

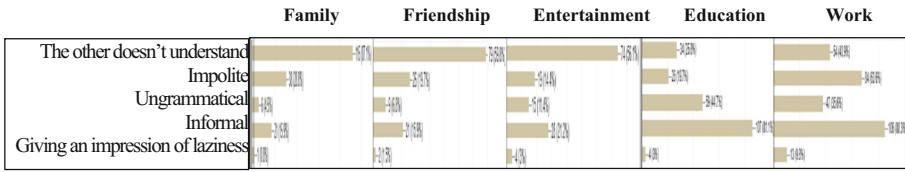


Fig. 4. Main reasons for not using abbreviations (comparison across domains)

Based on Fig. 3, the primary reason for using abbreviations fundamentally lies in pragmatic considerations (time-saving, ease of communication), these reasons being the most prevalent across all linguistic domains. As for the affective aspect, such as peer influence, being interesting or trendy, these are secondary considerations.

Figure 4 illustrates that the primary reason for not using abbreviations also stems from pragmatic considerations. In linguistic domains such as family, friendship and entertainment, the consideration of whether the other party understands the meaning is the top priority, accounting for between 56.1% and 87.1% of responses. However, in more formal linguistic domains such as education and work, whether or not a word is formally used is the primary consideration (accounting for 81.1% and 80.3% respectively). Abbreviations are considered to be informal, thus respondents tend to avoid using them.

An overview of these two figures reveals a seemingly contradictory phenomenon: while most respondents view abbreviations as “easy to communicate” (as illustrated in Fig. 3), they simultaneously fear that “others might not understand the meaning” (as shown in Fig. 4). In reality, this reflects that abbreviations serve as a form of “in-sider communication” or secret language, promoting communication internally while potentially excluding others.

3.3 Overall Evaluation

Section three of the questionnaire asked respondents about the overall impact of abbreviation usage on Cantonese. Here are some main responses (Fig. 5).

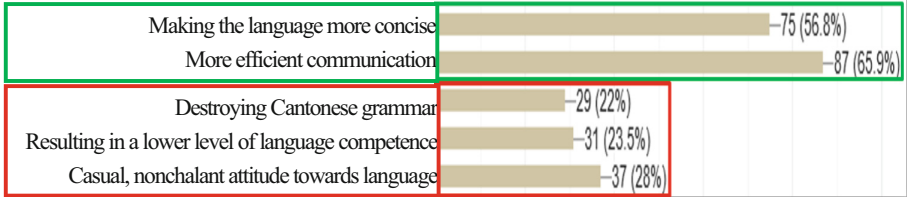


Fig. 5. Main impact of using abbreviations on Cantonese as perceived by the respondents

If these responses were categorized into positive, negative and neutral, “making the language more concise” and “more efficient communication” would be positive evaluations; “destroying Cantonese grammar”, “resulting in a lower level of language competence”, “casual, nonchalant attitude towards language” would be negative evaluations. The percentages reveal that positive evaluations (56.8%–65.9%) far exceed negative evaluations (22%–28%).

There were 22 individual remarks, each raised by a single respondent (accounting for 0.8% each). Among these, there were 13 positive comments (like “makes Cantonese more interesting”, “makes the conversation lively and interesting”, “having a common language makes it easy to bring up topics and resonate”, “more contemporary features”, “greater lexicon”, “identifying, reinforcing generational identity” etc.), 8 neutral remarks (“no comment”, “cannot generalize”, “language evolves with cultural shifts, always developing” etc.), and merely one negative comment (“some abbreviations imported from other Chinese-speaking regions affect the tradition of Cantonese vocabulary and cause weird phonetic situations”). Therefore, the overall evaluation of abbreviations by respondents is positive.

4 Conclusions

This study finds that popular Cantonese abbreviations in Hong Kong originate from different languages and regions, with various abbreviation strategies adopted (including extracting Chinese characters, Cantonese romanization initials, homophonic numeric substitution, translating foreign words into Chinese characters). Some abbreviations involve a change in part of speech (from noun to verb). These abbreviations originate from different grammatical structures, but primarily from modifier-head and predicate-object structures. Some individual abbreviations present homophonic or avoiding taboos rhetorical effects. From a sociolinguistic perspective, the younger generation (30 years old or below) has better command over these abbreviations. Furthermore, abbreviations are prevalently used in informal linguistic domains like family, friendship, and entertainment, being less used in formal linguistic domains like education (exams) and work

(job interviews). The main reason to use abbreviations is the pragmatic aspect, the affective aspect is secondary. Abbreviations also function as insider communication or secret language. Overall, the respondents' evaluation of Cantonese abbreviations is positive.

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