Orthographies in contact: How written Cantonese is written in the multilingual Hong Kong

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Hong Kong Cantonese has never been standardized by any official body. It has been developed based on not only the needs of local Cantonese speakers, but also the multilingual influences in Hong Kong. Without having its own standardized orthography, Cantonese developed its orthography based on mainly the Chinese character script, influenced by other orthographies in contact, and adapted in various ways to fit the need of Cantonese speakers. In this paper, I attempted to describe how written Cantonese in the multilingual Hong Kong is written with high creativity and proposed a framework of orthographic variations for classification.

With the advancement of technology, informal channels of communication provide written Cantonese with adequate room for development and evolution. From being seen in our physical world, through pen and paper, written Cantonese is now mostly observed in our digital world. To locate a site (or sites) to collect samples of written Cantonese, I identified the 25 most visited sites in Hong Kong and conducted data collection among these sites. Distinctive cases (showing features such as translanguaging – phono-semantic variations, adding/deleting and changing logograms – graphical variations, etc) were taken and carefully classified under the proposed framework of orthographic variations.

The result shows how Cantonese in Hong Kong has a wide range of orthographic variations and is uniquely written with a mixture of orthographies due to its multilingual background. Furthermore, little is known for the case of variation on logographic writing systems, despite the research on spelling variation done on the alphabetic writing systems such as English, Spanish, Thai, Dutch, & etc.. Therefore, this study not only fills in the gap for writing variation in languages, but also provides a broader account on languages in contact, from a perspective of written multilingualism.

Keywords: digital literacy, orthographic variations, multilingualism.