Public discourse in Hong Kong and the change of sovereignty

John Flowerdew, Ron Scollon

Department of English, City University of Hong Kong,
83 Tat Chee Avenue, Kowloon, Hong Kong

1. Introduction

Hong Kong is a British dependent territory located in southern China, with a population of approximately six and a half million. Its total land area of 1076 km² is made up of three distinct parts: Hong Kong Island, ceded to the British in perpetuity in 1842; the Kowloon peninsula, ceded in 1860; and the New Territories, coming under British control according to the terms of a 99-year lease agreed with China, in 1898. Each of the three parts of Hong Kong came under British control following minor Sino-British wars and consequently the legitimacy of Britain's sovereignty has always been contested by China, although that country has never taken any concrete steps to retrieve control. With the approach of the expiry of the lease on the New Territories in 1997, in 1984, Britain and China agreed, under the terms of a 'Joint Declaration', that on July 1, 1997 sovereignty over the whole territory will return to China and that Hong Kong will become a Special Administrative Region of that country. Based upon the 'Joint Declaration', which went into considerable detail in specifying the terms of the handover, China has published its own 'Basic Law', a mini-constitution for post-1997 Hong Kong. Both the Joint Declaration and the Basic Law state that Hong Kong will retain a high degree of autonomy under Chinese sovereignty, and that its current way of life, including its capitalist economic system, its common-law legal system, its free press, its freedom of worship, its right of assembly, its academic freedom, and its two official languages (Chinese and English) will remain the same.

In spite of the guarantees concerning autonomy and the continuance of Hong Kong's present way of life, with such an unprecedented political change in the offing and with sovereignty shifting from one cultural group to another, many questions concerning public discourse are at issue. The purpose of this special issue of the Journal of Pragmatics is to focus on some of the issues connected to Hong Kong's political transition which relate to language and discourse. This brief introduction will provide important background information on Hong Kong and the change of sovereignty, highlight the main areas where language and discourse issues are at stake, and introduce and contextualise the articles that make up the edition.
2. The socio-economic, demographic and linguistic background

During its 150 years as a colony Hong Kong's economy has been dependent on trade; initially its fortunes were tied to the trans-shipment of opium from the Indian sub-continent to China. Since the Second World War, with a tremendous influx of immigrants from the Chinese mainland in the 50s, 60s and 70s, in addition to trading, Hong Kong developed low-value-added industries, making garments and plastic products for export, in particular. In more recent years, with China's 'open door' policy of encouraging business with the West and with its Asian neighbours, Hong Kong has become a service centre, acting as an entrepot for China's import and export trade and focussing on the international financial and information service industries. Most of the Hong Kong factories have now re-located to China, but their administrative functions are still carried out in Hong Kong. Many international corporations have located their headquarters in Hong Kong, using the territory as an East Asian regional business hub. As an indication of Hong Kong's economic success, it now has an average per capita income greater than that of the sovereign, Britain (although the distribution of the wealth created in Hong Kong is very uneven).

In spite of the provisions in the Joint Declaration and the Basic Law, as the date of the transition has drawn near, it has been inevitable that anxiety should have developed within Hong Kong society about what the future might hold under the rule of the People's Republic of China. Hong Kong has always been a place of refuge for people fleeing the various upheavals that Mainland China has experienced. It was only after the second world war, however, that the population of Hong Kong really increased as people sought to evade, first the war between the nationalists and the communists and later the cultural revolution. At the end of World War 2 Hong Kong's population was approximately 600,000. By the 90s, however, as a result of massive influxes during the 50s and 60s, especially, the population has now reached well over 6 million.

For most, Hong Kong has only been seen as a stepping stone on the way to other countries of the huge Chinese diaspora, which includes Australia, Britain, Canada, New Zealand, and the United States, but many have not gone further than Hong Kong and have stayed to make the territory the tremendous economic success that it has become. Li Ka Shing, for example, one of Hong Kong's most successful capitalists, came to Hong Kong from the Mainland in 1940 and worked as an apprentice, a manual worker, a salesman, and manager of a plastic houseware company, before setting up his own factory, in 1950. He soon moved into property investment and development, telecommunications, and other areas, and now controls some of the largest listed multi-national companies in Hong Kong, making him the richest person in the territory, and estimated, already in 1993, to be worth nearly two billion U.S. dollars (Ch'en, 1993).

Since the signing of the Joint Declaration, with the uncertainty that that agreement has created, in spite of its guarantees concerning Hong Kong's future, there has been a considerable flow of Hong Kong people emigrating abroad, to English-speaking countries, especially. Some of these emigrants have settled overseas for good, but a considerable proportion have stayed overseas just long enough or established their
families there just long enough to acquire a foreign passport as a security for what post-1997 might bring, and then returned to Hong Kong to work. The flow of emigrants from Hong Kong rose to a flood, as anxiety about the future increased, following the military intervention against the pro-democracy demonstrations in Tiananmen Square in Beijing in 1989. There are signs of a further surge developing as the handover date draws near and people are disturbed with some of the plans China is announcing for Hong Kong. Coinciding with the flow of emigrants away from Hong Kong and back again has been a large increase in the number of expatriate, mostly English-speaking professionals coming to work in Hong Kong, in response to the booming, and increasingly international, economy. While this expatriate population does not exceed approximately 2 percent, these tremendous, continuous flows of people in and out of the territory have made its population a truly international and multi-cultural society, with important ramifications for cross-linguistic and cross-cultural communication. A local newspaper (Eastern Express, 1996) has described the benefits of Hong Kong's internationalism, as follows:

"Hong Kong is an international city, whose people are citizens of the world. East and West are perfectly blended here; and the formula is one which has brought out the best of both worlds. Its people have long enjoyed freedom of movement all over the globe, and have had the opportunity to live and work abroad in a potent interchange of education and talent which has benefitted all sides.

There can be few other places on earth, if indeed there is any, with such a heritage of cultural interchange."

In spite of the influx of professionals from overseas, the great majority of the population of Hong Kong remains, as it always has been, Chinese (at present about 98%). Notwithstanding this demographic make-up, and indicative of Hong Kong's colonial situation, until 1974, English was the only official language. While Cantonese (the local variety of Chinese) has always been and remains the language of the home and of the street, English is essential for education (from secondary school level up), business, the government, and the law. Whereas in the past English might have been perceived as the colonial language, the language imposed on the majority by the minority ruling class, some scholars believe it is no longer perceived in such a light by the community at large (Johnson, 1995). In their view English has come to be seen as the international language of "upward and outward mobility", enabling Hong Kong people to enter university, to take on positions of greater responsibility in the Hong Kong international business world, or to go overseas to study or to emigrate. While scholars such as Lin (this issue) call into question the implicit ideology of this view, parents, the government, business and educationists seem united in their support for the continuing place of English in the public domain, following the handover.

3. Public discourse in Hong Kong

As the transition is about to take place what are some of the concerns within Hong Kong society concerning public discourse?
3.1. The respective roles of Cantonese, Putonghua and English

First, attention has to be given to the three codes which will be current in Hong Kong post-1997. According to the Joint Declaration and the Basic Law, Hong Kong will retain its two official languages of Chinese and English. The term Chinese, however, is ambiguous in the Hong Kong context. As already mentioned, the variety of Chinese spoken in Hong Kong is Cantonese, but in the PRC, so-called Modern Standard Chinese or Putonghua (also called Mandarin), is promoted as the national standard for spoken language. What will the relative functions of Cantonese and Putonghua, if indeed Putonghua is given an official role, be? Cantonese and Modern Standard Chinese use the same character-based writing system, although even here there are discrepancies. The Mainland has adopted a simplified system of characters, while Hong Kong (like Taiwan) has retained the old system. In addition, in Hong Kong, characters are frequently adapted to fit the local Cantonese variety. Further, Cantonese uses a lot of loan words from English (Li, 1994).

There is also concern about the future role of English. Already, with the approach of 1997, some of its functions are being taken over by Chinese. Speeches in the Legislative Council have within a very short space of time come predominantly to be given in Cantonese, whereas before they were mostly in English. The government, with the localisation of senior positions which were previously held by English-speaking expatriates, is making increasing use of written Chinese and spoken Cantonese, both in its internal communication and in its communication with the public at large. In the courts, also, cases are being tried for the first time in Chinese. Paradoxically, however, in other areas, the role for English is increasing. Tertiary education, which is primarily English-medium, has undergone tremendous expansion in recent years, in response to the needs of the expanding labour market. More and more young people in Hong Kong, therefore, need to be bilingual in Chinese and English if they want to take up the possibility of studying at university level. The growing presence of multi-national business organizations, again, is placing demands on the supply of Hong Kong people fluent in English. Perhaps because of the increased numbers who need to be bilingual, the overall standard of English of those entering the universities and business has gone down. This has created concern on the part of the tertiary education and business communities, who have put pressure on the government to introduce measures to improve the situation.

In spite of the importance of language in Hong Kong and the government’s expression of concern, Hong Kong has never had an official language planning body and, as Johnson (1995) points out, government has only intervened in two domains: the legal system (translating Hong Kong’s laws into Chinese and introducing court proceedings in Cantonese) and education (reforming the school system to allow for more mother-tongue instruction and recommending that English-medium instruction be offered to only the best 30% of pupils (Johnson, 1994)). Johnson ascribes the lack of language planning in Hong Kong to two reasons: the lack of any such mechanism in Britain and the danger that any official focus on the issues that require language planning would raise awkward questions about the definition of Chinese (referred to above) and the status of Cantonese in post-1997 Hong Kong.
3.2. Language, culture and hegemony

During its 150 years of rule in Hong Kong, the policy adopted by the British Hong Kong government has been one of what might be described as ‘paternalistic authoritarianism’. The Governor, under the British parliament and the Crown, has more or less total freedom to decide policy on Hong Kong. The Governor is advised by an Executive Council, but this is made up of his personal appointees. He is also accountable to a Legislative Council, but this again, until very recently, has been dominated by appointees of the Governor. Although the Governor is invested with great powers, Hong Kong has generally been governed benignly and in spite of the lack of participatory democratic government has benefitted from some of the other characteristic features of Western liberal societies, including an independent judicial system, which guarantees the rule of law and most basic individual freedoms, a relatively free press, and freedom of association.

In the last five years, the British Hong Kong government has departed somewhat from its authoritarian stance and, under a new Governor, Chris Patten, since 1992, embarked upon a policy of making the government system a little more democratic, with the introduction of more directly elected seats into the Legislative Council and other measures designed to create greater government accountability. Most commentators have interpreted this late attempt to inject a little democracy into Hong Kong government as a belated effort by Britain to make up for earlier colonial neglect, designed, according to many, to ensure that Britain’s legacy to Hong Kong is interpreted in a positive light by history.

The reforms introduced in the final years of British Hong Kong were not foreseen at the time of the signing of the Joint Declaration and have been rejected by China, who has vowed to dismantle them on her assumption of sovereignty. The acrimonious megaphone diplomacy which has characterised Sino-British-Hong Kong relations in the years leading up to the handover, has highlighted something of a hegemonic struggle over the order of public discourse in Hong Kong. The British Hong Kong government and the pro-democracy camp in Hong Kong have championed greater democratic participation, freedom of speech, the right to public discussion and disagreement, and transparency and accountability in government, as essential features of Hong Kong public discourse which should remain in place after 1997. China and the pro-China camp in Hong Kong, on the other hand, have complained that these aspects of Western-style public discourse were not in place at the time of the signing of the Joint Declaration, but are the creation of Chris Patten and the British Hong Kong government of the last five years. China prefers a more hierarchical, consensus-oriented approach to public discourse, with an emphasis on ‘love for the Motherland’ and ‘patriotism’ as key criteria for public statements and participation. At the time of writing these two discourse systems are at a stage of confrontation. Time will be needed to see to what extent the British legacy remains and the Chinese system takes over in this fundamentally Chinese society which, through trade, the international media and human exchange is so influenced by the West.
3.3. Freedom of expression for whom?

As we have already suggested, freedom of expression is currently in Hong Kong an ideologically unassailable issue. In the public discourse there is a constant assertion that Hong Kong at present does enjoy freedom of expression both for individual citizens and for journalists on the one hand and a considerable fear that in the post-1997 era at least some of this freedom might be lost. A brief news report covering a public discussion may serve to problematize the issue from the point of view of the analysis of discourse.

Radio Television Hong Kong (RTHK), a publicly funded radio and television broadcasting organization produces programmes which “focus on promoting civic responsibility and social awareness” (Howlett, 1996: 324). On 4 December 1995, RTHK Radio 3’s 7:00 a.m. morning news report, in covering the preceding day’s ‘RTHK City Forum’, raised the issue of what has come to be called ‘self-censorship’ during this transitional period. This is the concern that both private citizens and journalists will begin to impose restrictions on their own speech to avoid being accused of expressing anti-Beijing sentiment. Dr Joseph Chan, a member of the Broadcasting Authority, commented that he thought that, in fact, the effect would be just the opposite of that commonly expressed. That is, as the transcript below shows, he argued that it would be most likely that Hong Kong would exert a liberalizing effect on Beijing. In this point he was supported rather strongly by Dr Raymond Wu, a member of the Cultural Subgroup of the Preliminary Working Committee (a body set up by China to prepare for the change of sovereignty).

What surfaces in the transcript below is that it is the journalist, self-identified as Kevin Connolly, who projects onto Dr Chan the idea that self-censorship is a problem. He says, “Dr Joseph Chan said this trend needed to be stopped and people should continue to speak freely”. While, to be fair, Dr Chan might have said this at some time other than in the actuality given below, in what we hear in Dr Chan’s own voice quite the opposite point of view is expressed. As evidence that, in fact, Dr Chan’s intent is to argue that in Hong Kong self-censorship is not currently an issue is Dr Wu’s quick disavowal of the narrator’s position on the one hand and his support of Dr Chan’s position on the other. He is asked the loaded question in which Dr Chan’s falsified position is presupposed, “Do you agree with Dr Chan that local people are tending to censor what they say in public?” Dr Wu answers, “No, no, no”. He, in fact, agrees with Dr Chan’s actual position which he is careful to restate to avoid any misconception. Following the remainder of the report through, what one sees is that when Dr Wu proves unwilling to follow up the journalist’s assertion that freedom of speech is an issue in Hong Kong, he is rather summarily silenced by the journalist. Brackets [ ] indicate latched or overlapping speech.

RTHK Radio 3, 567AM, Hong Kong: 4 December 1995, 7:16am

NARRATOR: Kevin Connolly. Sixteen minutes past seven. A member of the Broadcasting Authority says local people are increasingly curtailing what they say in public in the runup to 1997. Speaking at RTHK City Forum, Dr Joseph Chan said this trend needed to be stopped and people should continue to speak freely. He said if Chinese officials became more accus-
tomed to the levels of freedom of speech in the territory, it stands a good chance they’ll be maintained. He remained optimistic that China would relax its guidelines in the future.

**DR JOSEPH CHAN:** Hong Kong feels the growing pressure, but at the same time we have to look at the other side of Hong Kong. Hong Kong is quite an internationalized and pluralistic society. Given such pluralism in Hong Kong I don’t think Hong Kong will be another Shanghai or Beijing. China people, er, the Chinese people are enjoying a high degree of speech freedom at the level of interpersonal relationships, but when you come to media then, it is all controlled by the Chinese Communist Party, so that we can see there’s a disjunction between what is high up in Beijing and what is at the level of the ordinary people, so in due time I think China will change too, so by that time there will be a convergence. Both China and Hong Kong would have a more liberal environment.

**NARRATOR:** Dr Joseph Chan. Another speaker at yesterday’s City Forum was the Vice Chairman of the Liberal Democratic Federation, Raymond Wu. Dr Wu is also the convener of the Cultural Subgroup of China’s Preliminary Working Committee and has joined us on the line now. Dr Wu, Good morning.

**DR RAYMOND WU:** Good morning.

**NARRATOR:** Do you agree with Dr Chan that local people are tending to censor what they say in public?

**DR RAYMOND WU:** Er, no, no, no. Uh, I think I tend to agree with Mr Chan just now, er because look at China, look at Mainland China compared with a few years ago. People are really free to speak and to criticize on government in China. I think looking into the future of Hong Kong, I think the present degree of freedom of speech, eh, will be maintained. I do not see any threat, er, from outside of Hong Kong that would have effective means and measure to restrict our freedom of speech. I think in, because in the Basic Law the freedom of speech has been guaranteed, other than, er, any legislative measures, I do not see, even if the Chinese Government want to sort of put certain restrictions to the freedom of speech in Hong Kong, I don’t see any any way they can do apart from legislation, but legislation can only be done by the Hong Kong legislature. Of course, I think freedom is not without any constraint or limits in any part of the world. I think the only limitation is the, when one concerns about public interest. So I think freedom has always been guided or restricted by law and ethics.

**NARRATOR:** Do you think that the press after 1997 will be free to criticize the Beijing Government the way [they are now?]

**DR RAYMOND WU:** I think so,] I think so. If they criticize the government, on what measure can the Beijing Government take any action?

**NARRATOR:** Well, all kinds of measures, really, can’t they? I mean ... (laughs).

**DR RAYMOND WU:** Yeah, what kind of measures? I cannot imagine.

**NARRATOR:** Well, for example, er, the, we see now quite a lot of pro-Beijing businessmen buying up newspapers that are critical of Beijing, that’s that’s one kind of way, and there are all kinds of ways that people can frighten members of the press, frighten journalists by [
DR RAYMOND WU: Well, has there been any examples of that? I do not see any of those, er, newspapers bought by other businessmen that they have changed their editorial policy.

NARRATOR: Well, you have Hong Kong journalists who are imprisoned in China because of their reporting of, er, events in China.

DR RAYMOND WU: but that’s,] it is, but that’s the, because they are violating the Chinese law. I think we have to be sort of mindful of the two systems. What applies, because people in Hong Kong always, er, sort of afraid of Chinese law, er, applying to Hong Kong. But that is not the case.

NARRATOR: Well, er, Dr Raymond Wu[er

DR RAYMOND WU: Yeah]

NARRATOR: Convenor of the Cultural Subgroup of the PWC, thank you very much.

ANOTHER NARRATOR: It’s twenty past seven now, the Bar Association...

The daily public discourse is replete with similar instances in which on the content level a liturgical reiteration of Hong Kong’s basic freedoms is carried out while at the same time there is a discursive positioning of various players vis-à-vis the broader political entities concerned. Thus the journalist in this case places himself on the journalistic moral high ground of defending freedom of expression against the threat he implies is posed by China. To achieve this he positions Dr Chan, as a member of the current Hong Kong broadcasting authority, as a defender of the status quo and as an opponent of the Chinese threat. On the other hand, he positions Dr Wu, as a member of the Chinese-appointed Preliminary Working Committee, as an embodiment of the threat. Neither Dr Chan nor Dr Wu has been allowed to appropriate the discursive space to express a position contrary to the ideologically asserted position in this particular segment of the public discourse.

4. Language in education, business, and government

The discursive ties among language, education, business, government and even, or especially, personal identity have long been contested in Hong Kong, but in this period of transition to Chinese sovereignty are all opening again to fresh interrogation. The view taken by the papers collected here is itself contestable as what is represented is largely an English perspective. This is in part a reflection of the special interests of the researchers whose papers appear here, but also in part a reflection of the institutionalization of such analytical perspectives in Departments of English and Education in Hong Kong. As the papers themselves will make clear, one major aspect of the transition to Chinese sovereignty is a heightened awareness of contradictions in traditional views of languages and of their institutionalization in Hong Kong.
In a putatively bilingual society in which education is so strongly perceived as the basis of both societal development and social order as Hong Kong, perhaps it is to be expected that the medium of instruction in public schools is a hotly debated issue. In the first paper in this special issue Tung, Tsang and Lam present the results of a recent study of the change from English-medium to Chinese-medium public school instruction as the society prepares for the increased involvement with China which will come with Chinese sovereignty. They find that the parents they surveyed express a strong preference for English-medium schools in keeping with the widespread belief that English is the key to economic success in Hong Kong (see Lin’s critique of this position below). At least in part because of the parents’ belief, schools are likely to claim English-medium instruction, even where this is not the case so as to attract the best students. Teachers, on the other hand, are more likely to express a belief that Chinese-medium instruction would benefit their students and are thus to some extent at cross-purposes with both the expressed ideology of the schools and their students’ parents.

While the study by Tung, Tsang and Lam focuses on the expressed opinions of parents, students, and teachers, Lin clarifies the ideological contestations which underly these competing discourses of the ‘language problem’ in Hong Kong. While the public debate concerning the medium of instruction is largely informed by the discourse of business needs, Lin argues that more fundamental needs of the children of Hong Kong as well as their mother tongue, Cantonese, are swept to one side by a model of language which discursively constructs the school as solely the site for the preparation of a labor pool.

Both the papers of Bilbow and Li direct their attention to the discursive construction of the identity of individuals. Bilbow focuses on the issue of impression management in the multicultural workplaces which are so characteristic of Hong Kong. He shows how the use of the speech acts of directing and suggesting are differentially called upon and contextualized by Chinese and Western participants to construct presentations of authoritativeness in business meetings of a major Hong Kong airline company. Li’s study first observes a contrast in expectations that in business transactions Chinese prefer to maintain an environment of respectful deference while Westerners seek to quickly develop an ambience of friendship and intimacy. The solution adopted by Chinese Hong Kongers which is, of course, only partially successful is to adopt a Western name specifically for such encounters.

Bhatia’s study like that of Flowerdew focuses on the public discourse as constructed within the contending governments involved in Hong Kong’s sovereignty change. Bhatia’s analysis of the multitude of Hong Kong government consultation papers argues that while the Government of Hong Kong currently gives the impression of widely sampled consultation with the public, the form and style of the consultation papers themselves block any active participation in the consultative process by the segments of the public most directly affected by the issues in question. Through discursively constructing such genres of public discourse as openly consultative but effectively closed, the government is able to maintain a public face of being an active agent in the democratization of Hong Kong. Flowerdew, through an analysis of ten discursive events and four texts, argues that there are two actively
competing public discourses in Hong Kong, a ‘Confucianist’ and a ‘Utilitarian’ discourse. Each of these embodies different historical premises and together they are currently struggling for discursive hegemony as Hong Kong moves from British to Chinese sovereignty in 1997.

References