



## Deseret Language and Linguistic Society Symposium

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Volume 4 | Issue 1

Article 2

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3-30-1978

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### BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Bishop, Lowell D. (1978) "Some Implications for Teaching Cantonese to LTM Missionaries on the Basis of Cantonese Diglossia," *Deseret Language and Linguistic Society Symposium*: Vol. 4 : Iss. 1 , Article 2.  
Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/dlls/vol4/iss1/2>

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SOME IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING CANTONESE TO LTM MISSIONARIES  
ON THE BASIS OF CANTONESE DIGLOSSIA

Lowell D. Bishop

WHAT IS DIGLOSSIA?

A noted linguist, Charles A. Ferguson, defined diglossia as:

. . . a relatively stable language situation in which in addition to the primary dialects of the language (which may include a standard or regional standards), there is a very divergent, highly codified (often grammatically more complex) superposed variety, the vehicle of a large and respected body of written literature, either of an earlier period or in another speech community, which is learned largely by formal education and is not used by any sector of the community for ordinary conversation. (Ferguson, 1959, p. 16)

The most important factors to note here, that distinguish a diglossic condition from other language situations, are 1) that the superposed variety of the language or dialect is learned through formal education, that is, neither acquired nor normally spoken in the home and 2) that absolutely no one in the community uses the superposed variety for ordinary conversation with any other member of the community. This precludes such language situations as those which are commonly referred to as bilingual as well as those which merely have a distinction between polite and informal speech.

Both the superposed variety (which Ferguson calls "H") and the primary variety (which he calls "L") have their specific functions. Trudgill, a sociolinguist, says:

. . . This varies from community to community, but typically the high variety is used in sermons, formal letters, political speeches, university lectures, news broadcasts, newspaper editorials and high poetry. The low variety, on the other hand, is used in conversation with family and friends, radio serials, political and academic discussions, political cartoons, and 'folk' literature." (Trudgill, 1974, p. 117)

A person using either one of the varieties in the wrong context would be an object of ridicule. One using the H variety in his daily conversation would be looked at as rather weird just as one using the L variety when quoting a scripture in the text of a sermon would be considered uncouth.

Ferguson notes that:

. . . diglossia is not assumed to be a state which occurs always and only at a certain point in some kind of evolution e.g. in the standardization process. Diglossia may develop from various origins and eventuate in different language situations. (Ferguson, 1959, p. 2).

Also that it

. . . typically persists at least several centuries and evidence in some cases seems to show it can last well over a thousand years. (Ferguson, 1959, p. 10).

### CANTONESE DIGLOSSIA

Cantonese is a prime example of diglossia. There are two distinct levels of language: one, 語體文 (Yuh tai mahn), the formal form, is used by the more educated for virtually every situation requiring communication based on writing, and the other, 白話文 (Baahk was mahn), the colloquial form, is used by everyone for daily conversation with any other person in the community. Natives of the language regard 語體文 (Yuh tai mahn), which we will refer to as H, as being the proper form of the language and (Baahk was mahn), which we will refer to as L, almost as a slang.

Ferguson suggests:

. . . There is usually a belief that H is somehow more beautiful, more logical, better able to express important thoughts, and the like. And this belief is held also by speakers whose command of H is quite limited. To those Americans who would like to evaluate speech in terms of effectiveness of communication it comes as a shock to discover that many speakers of a language involved in diglossia characteristically prefer to hear a political speech or an expository lecture or a recitation of poetry in H even though it may be less intelligible to them than it would be in L. (Ferguson, 1959, p. 7)

The written form has become so ingrained in the people that even when brought to an understanding of the necessity of writing in the L form for foreign students of the language, most Chinese cannot bring themselves to do it totally. (Bishop, 1977, p. 5)

The only way that the true L variety of Cantonese can appear in written form is by use of many 'coined' characters

which even the majority of educated Cantonese, let alone the uneducated, are generally unfamiliar with.

Here it should be noted that the 'coined' characters corresponding to the L variety are analogous to ungrammatical English forms such as "I ain't goin'" to a Cantonese. It is not accepted as correct speech in terms of written communication but could readily be acceptable on a spoken level. (Bishop, 1977, pp. 16-17).

#### EXAMPLES OF CANTONESE DIGLOSSIA

A common sight in Hong Kong is a little table and two stools just outside of a post office. Seated at the table will be a man more or less educated in Cantonese H and another Cantonese, usually of the older generation, who is illiterate. The latter will be conveying a message to the former in verbal Cantonese L which is then transposed and written down in Cantonese H in a letter to be mailed. What ends up getting mailed is not a verbatim quote but rather a formal representation of what was said.

A likewise common occurrence is a young adult at home reading an article from a Chinese newspaper written in H and either transposing it to L directly as he reads or reviewing it in L (after having first read it in H) for the benefit of a grandparent or younger sibling who has not had that education. (The ability of the Cantonese to "transpose as they go" when reading is truly unique. Many become so good at it that the listener could easily believe the article was originally written in L, not in H).

I will now play a tape recording of a text read by a native of the language, first as if it were for a youngster of preschool age and then exactly as it was written. (For those of you who do not speak Cantonese, the distinction to be made is somewhat akin to a situation in English where one was to read the sentence "Fine! I will do you." but respond verbally with "Ng-kay A'll duit for ya.").

The following is a graphic representation of the Cantonese L versus Cantonese H as read by the native speaker. (The first line in each pair is the L representation as it was transposed spontaneously from the original H of the second line. Lines drawn between characters in the pair of lines indicate equivalent representations in Cantonese L and H.):

Contrast between Cantonese L and H

L 兩隻羊仔  
 H 兩隻羊

L 一隻白羊同埋一隻黑羊一齊離到一條窄橋嘅兩邊，  
 H 一隻白羊和一隻黑羊同時來到一條窄橋的兩邊，

L 個條橋只可以讓一隻羊離到行過嘅。黑羊呢係要向東邊行到西邊；  
 H 那條橋只可以讓一隻羊走。黑羊要從東邊走到西邊；

L 而白羊呢就從西邊走對東邊嘅。佢地同時走到橋嘅中間嘞。  
 H 白羊要從西邊走到東邊。他們同時走到橋的中間。

L 黑羊話：我比你先過去，因為，你係應該退後然後讓我過去嘅。  
 H 黑羊說：我比你先來，你應該退後讓我先走過去。

L 白羊就講啦話：我應該比你先去嘅，你應該退後，等我過去。  
 H 白羊說：我比你先來到，你應該退後，讓我過去。

L 黑羊就話：你一定要退後，等我過去。  
 H 黑羊說：你一定要退後，讓我過去。

L 白羊就話：你一定要退後，等我過去。  
 H 白羊說：你一定要退後，讓我過去。

L 拿，白羊同埋黑羊都唔退讓。佢地向橋上面打起交嚟嘞嘞。  
 H 白羊和黑羊都不退後。他們在橋上面打架。

L 最後啦佢地用佢地嘅角離到打交，  
 H 他們用他們的角來打，

L 於是，兩隻羊都跌左向水裏邊，淹死左啦。  
 H 最後，兩隻羊都跌到水裏面去淹死了。

## THE HK LDS MISSIONARY CONFRONTS DIGLOSSIA

One of the first contacts the LDS missionary will have with diglossia in Hong Kong is on his first Sunday when he sits with his investigators in the Sunday School investigator's class. He goes hoping to understand enough to be able to intelligently answer his investigators' questions and finds that he is required to nearly "learn another language" before doing so. Without any training in Chinese characters, he can't make heads or tails of the "的"s (dik), the "說"s (syut) or the "也"s (taa) he hears which have replaced the familiar L equivalents of these words.

As he teaches discussions (which have been translated by native speakers who, you recall, have a strong dislike for "written L"), he finds that people give him puzzled looks as they hear his memorized Cantonese H when, because of the informal nature of the situation, they were expecting Cantonese L. The missionary assumes his tones are bad (which, granted, may have added to the confusion) and doesn't realize that he is using the right variety of language in the wrong context.

Can you imagine living in a country for two years, being almost totally unable to read or write and yet have to communicate the gospel message effectively to the people? You have to have someone translate every referral, read street signs for you, explain the scripture to you (in L) which you just asked him to read (in H), tell you what is on the menu before you can order, and pronounce his name which he has just written down for you. When the missionary does take up character study on his own he immediately runs into the problem of diglossia in connecting the L and H forms of words to get some familiar meaning.

## THE LTM MISSIONARY

Well, what does all this have to do with the LTM? That's where it all begins. The LTM has done much recently to help alleviate this problematic situation. Missionaries are now informed in the LTM that such a condition (diglossia) exists, whereas before, they were left to discover it on their own. Through a new culture program, missionaries learn a little more about the language they will be speaking and are introduced to a few of those "的"s (dik) and "也"s (taa) so that it won't be such a shock to find the people using a "language" other than just what they were taught in the LTM.

Some additional help could still be given. Grammar texts could be scrutinized to correlate lessons using Cantonese L as well as H, being sure to differentiate between the

two. Missionary discussions which are translated by natives could be reviewed by non-natives so that they will eventually come out in the spoken rather than written form. (Native speakers of the language presently transpose the discussions from their present state into L when presenting them but non-native missionaries haven't this ability at first). A complete Cantonese dictionary relating L and H forms has yet to be written. Perhaps something of this nature on a smaller scale could be included in the missionary test materials. Though time is limited, perhaps some initial training in learning to read and write could be given in the LTM.

#### SUMMARY

In summary, I quote again from Ferguson:

. . . The problem of teaching a language with two major forms cannot be solved by teaching only one of the forms. I realize that there are teachers of these languages who feel the only satisfactory solution is just the H variety or just the L variety. It is no doubt possible that this solution is adequate for certain individuals who are studying the languages for certain limited purposes, but it is clear that this solution will not meet the needs of someone who wants to learn to understand, speak, read, and write these languages in a manner approximating that of the educated native speaker. The teacher and student alike must face the fact that there is more to be learned than one language; perhaps it is not as much as two full languages, but it is certainly more than is generally attempted in a single language course. All apart from considerations of the content and procedure of course, it seems clear that more time will be required to achieve results comparable to those obtained in other language courses. . . (Ferguson, 1963, pp. 72-73).

I submit that the LTM might consider this fact in the preparation of all text materials for their Cantonese speaking missionaries.

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