Cantonese vs. Mandarin: A summary

JMFT

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This short essay is intended to summarise the similarities and differences between Cantonese and Mandarin.

1 Introduction

The large geographical area that is referred to as ‘China’ is home to many languages and dialects. Most of these languages are related, and fall under the umbrella term *Hanyu* (漢語), a term which is usually translated as ‘Chinese’ and spoken of as though it were a unified language. In fact, there are hundreds of dialects and varieties of Chinese, which are not mutually intelligible.

With 910 million speakers worldwide, Mandarin is by far the most common dialect of Chinese. ‘Mandarin’ or ‘guanhua’ originally referred to the language of the mandarins, the government bureaucrats who were based in Beijing. This language was based on the Beijing dialect of Chinese. It was promoted by the Qing dynasty (1644–1912) and later the People’s Republic (1949–) as the country’s *lingua franca*, as part of efforts by these governments to establish political unity. Mandarin is now used by most people in China and Taiwan.

Mandarin itself consists of many subvarieties which are not mutually intelligible.

Cantonese (*Yuetyu* (語) is named after the city Canton, whose name is now transliterated as *Guangdong*. It is spoken in Hong Kong and Macau (with a combined population of around 8 million), and, owing to these cities’ former colonial status, by many overseas Chinese. In the rest of China, Cantonese is relatively rare, but it is still sometimes spoken in Guangzhou.

2 History and etymology

It is interesting to note that the Cantonese name for Cantonese, *Yuetyu*, means ‘language of the Yuet people’. The name *Yuet* was used to refer to a diverse collection of tribes in southern China and Vietnam, and is cognate to the Vietnam term *Viet*. The Cantonese and Vietnamese languages indeed share some similarities in their vocabulary and their pronunciation.

3 Writing and grammar

Although there are many different spoken varieties of the Chinese language, they are all written using the same system of Chinese characters. A given character has different readings in the different varieties. For example, the characters 中國 are pronounced *junggwok* in Cantonese, and *zhongguo* in Mandarin). The characters have the same meaning to speakers of both languages, as the word for ‘China’.

When Chinese is written, the writer usually follows the rules of Mandarin, and it is nonstandard and considered informal to use the grammar or vocabulary of a regional dialect. A Cantonese speaker might use the grammar and vocabulary of Cantonese when speaking or when writing informally, but the grammar and vocabulary of Mandarin when writing formally.

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1This description is deliberately vague, to avoid political issues.
3Mandarin is known as *Guoyu*, meaning ‘national language’, in Taiwan.
It would usually sound unnatural to speak Cantonese using Mandarin grammar. And it would be incomprehensible to speak Mandarin using Cantonese grammar.

For example, the possessive particle (which follows a noun and is equivalent to the ‘s’ in English) is 的 in Mandarin. A Cantonese speaker would pronounce this character as dik, and they would use this character in formal writing. However, the Cantonese speaker would usually use geh in speech. The character appears very rarely in writing.

That said, the practice of writing following the rules of Cantonese is growing amongst younger generations in Hong Kong, especially on the Internet.

Simplified and Traditional script  
Note also that Mainland China uses the Simplified Chinese script, whereas Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan use Traditional Chinese. The two scripts are different but mostly homomorphic, and somebody who can read one script is often able to read the other.

It is a misconception to think that the Traditional script is inextricably linked to Cantonese and that the Simplified script is inextricably linked to Mandarin. The distinction between the Simplified and Traditional scripts is correlated to, but independent from, the distinction between dialects. It is the case that most Cantonese speakers use the Traditional script.

4 Vocabulary

Loanwords  
Owing to Hong Kong’s former status as a British colony, Cantonese uses more loanwords from English, transliterated into Chinese characters. In Cantonese, one can talk of taking the basi (bus) or hiring a diksi (taxi), or eating jugulik (chocolate) and sidobelei (strawberry), or taking a lip (lift).

These neologisms can be transcribed into characters. Sometimes, new characters are introduced to transcribe sounds which were not indigenous to Cantonese: such paak (parking a car), or taai (tyre). These new characters are not seen in formal written Chinese at all.

The equivalent terms in Mandarin Chinese tend to describe the object, and do not try to preserve the foreign pronunciation. For example, a bus in Mandarin is a 公共氣車 gonggongqiche, which literally means ‘public car’; and a strawberry is a 草 caomei, meaning ‘grass berry’. A tyre is a luntai, composed of lun meaning ‘wheel’ and tai, a character which on its own means ‘unborn baby’ but here is used to transliterate ‘tyre’.

Some terms, such as trademarks or company names (‘Facebook’), are not transliterated or translated at all; the English terms are written in Latin characters.

Code-switching  
In Hong Kong Cantonese, it is common for speakers to code-switch: that is, to use English terms in a sentence that is otherwise in Cantonese, especially when talking about scientific or technical concepts where the English terms are easier or more well-known. This is common in informal language, and increasingly common even in formal communication. It is less common amongst Mandarin speakers.

When English terms are interpolated into Cantonese sentences in this way, they are usually written out in the Latin alphabet. They are not transcribed into Chinese characters.

5 Miscellaneous notes on Cantonese

Phonology  
I have mentioned that Cantonese and Mandarin have different readings for the same characters. The most obvious point to non-speakers is that Cantonese has six tones whereas Mandarin has only four, and Cantonese is more rigid about tones.

Cantonese also has more final consonants. Whereas in Mandarin a syllable can only have the final consonants /n/ and /ŋ/, Cantonese syllables can also end with /m/ and /t/.

This is a similarity that Cantonese has with Korean and Middle Chinese. Unlike Korean, Cantonese does not have /l/ as a final consonant.
Particles In spoken and informally written Cantonese, particles are often used at the end of a sentence. The particle can dramatically modify the meaning of a sentence: different particles can make the sentence into a question, or a command, or a request, or an assertion (with implications for the politeness of the sentence). Particles are also used in Mandarin but there are fewer of them.

6 Conclusion

While Cantonese and Mandarin are certainly related languages and there are many parallels between them, there are also important differences between them. These differences reflect the colonial and globalised history of cities such as Hong Kong and Guangdong compared to the inward-looking history of the Qing dynasty and the People’s Republic. They also reflect the fact that, for most of Chinese history, China was a large empire whose administration was based in the north and asserted dominance over the south (and nominally over the entire world), but which in practice was very decentralised, allowing the dialects of the southern land to flourish.

It is hard to compare the difference between Cantonese and Mandarin with the difference between two European languages or dialects. The two languages are mostly mutually intelligible in their most orthodox written forms, but unintelligible in spoken forms.