The Kind of Dictionary Chinese Students Need in Hong Kong
A Biliterate and Trilingual Dictionary

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This is primarily a report1 on a dictionary project on which I have been working since 2002 with Li Lan at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University and Tom McArthur, lexicographer, author and editor of ‘English Today: The international review of the English language’, Cambridge University Press. In this paper, I point out that the Hong Kong government, before and after the 1997 political handover, has stressed the importance of the population at large becoming both biliterate (in reading and writing Chinese and English) and trilingual (in speaking and understanding Cantonese, English and Putonghua). To date, there has been no dictionary produced in the region or elsewhere that can support a programme of this kind. We are now at work on such a ‘BiTri’ dictionary.

Introduction

In 2002, I presented a paper at the International Conference ‘Translation and Bilingual Dictionaries’ at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. It was co-authored with Tom McArthur and entitled Could there be a dictionary tailor-made for Hong Kong: both trilingual and biliterate? In that paper, we considered the special language needs of the territory. Since at least the 1997 political handover, the Hong Kong government has stressed the importance of the people of the special administrative region being able to read both Chinese and English and to speak first Cantonese, the mother tongue of the majority, then Putonghua/Mandarin, the national language of China, and also English, as the world’s lingua franca. However, no current dictionary addresses such a complex requirement, and in our paper we considered the need for, and the nature of, a biliterate and trilingual dictionary.

At the present time, we have a team of five people whose expertise covers the relevant languages, compilation and critical commentary. At the heart of the project are three lexicographers, in effect one for each language: Li Lan of Hong Kong Polytechnic University for Putonghua/Mandarin, Tom McArthur for English, and myself for Cantonese, coordination, and integration. To meet the ambitious language policy aims of the Hong Kong government, we currently envisage at least two dictionaries: that is, the basic dictionary (the BiTri Basic) on which work is currently proceeding, and an intermediate dictionary that can be developed partly at the same time and partly once the first level is completed. Our approach has been to create the BiTri Basic first, with the early stages of its more advanced partner building up behind it and after it comes out. Since the groundwork will make the BiTri Basic an initially slower but accelerating project, BiTri ‘Advanced’ is likely to be a faster operation, but we assume that the first will appear well before the second.

The BiTri Basic

There are two sections in this elementary dictionary, the English-based section and the Chinese-based section. We conceive the BiTri Basic as initially a paper product with the — we hope strong — possibility of an electronic version in one

1 This paper derives from a presentation at the AsiaLex Japan in 2003. It is the third of a series of papers related to the Bi-Tri project. The first was published in Lexicographica Series Maior 119 and the second in two related India-based online journals: Language in World and Language in India and in the proceedings of the Congress of the World’s Major Languages, organized by the Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka (Institute of Language and Literature, Malaysia). See ‘References’ for details.
or more delivery formats, e.g. in a palm-top device such as a PDA (personal data assistant), or as one of the features in mobile phones — using technologies such as WAP (wireless application protocol), J2M\textsuperscript{2} and Bluetooth\textsuperscript{3}, and to be carried by USB\textsuperscript{4}-memory-sticks, iPods and any other types of portable hard disks.

The primary target users of the BiTri Basic are lower-secondary school students in Hong Kong (Secondary 1 to 3, age around 13 to 16), almost all of whom are mother-tongue speakers of Cantonese who need a sound basic vocabulary in both English and Putonghua, as well as recognition and reading skills in the roman alphabet (for English), Hanyu Pinyin\textsuperscript{5} (for Putonghua), and a Jyutping\textsuperscript{6}-based romanization (for Cantonese), as well of course as Chinese characters.

Other anticipated users are adults of many backgrounds who for various reasons need to know the basics of the three languages and their script systems, as well as those who wish to speak a Chinese language without focusing strongly on learning Chinese characters.

An additional aim is to supplement the BiTri Basic with sets of practice materials and turn it into a wordbook so as to teach children Cantonese romanization once they have learned to read and write. This is in effect an attempt to match the basic language-teaching approach in the mainland, where Putonghua Hanyu Pinyin is taught to students as early as their kindergarten education and serves as a starting point for learning to read and write characters.

In creating these products, the default language base is English, because more work has been done on the teaching and learning of English as a second or foreign language than on any other language in the world, as a consequence of which it has a stronger tradition of learners’ dictionaries than any other language. Since Putonghua and Pinyin have received considerable linguistic and lexicographical attention, we do not anticipate any problems with them. The most innovative element, however, is the foregrounding and in effect ‘equalizing’ of Cantonese, on the grounds that it is the key linguistic medium of Hong Kong and as such should serve as the anchor point for the majority of local users.

This means that, perhaps for the first time, a Cantonese-speaking Hong Konger could have the relief and reassurance of studying two more or less alien mediums in a close and harmonious relationship with the home language, and on a basis of equality: a radical move in itself. We strongly consider that this will provide a uniquely valuable psychological and pedagogical base for the project and that it offers a majority of prospective users serious and reassuring support. At the same time, non-Cantonese users will have their comfort enhanced by being able to use either English (and its version of the roman alphabet) or Putonghua (with Pinyin) as their way into a three-dimensional relationship which can only become more significant in and around Hong Kong as time passes.

Inevitably, any work which seeks to present information of this kind will be visually and organizationally complex, even at an ‘elementary’ level. We consider that the format we have chosen is the simplest way in which such a dense and demanding range of material can be presented to our primary target users. Users are already expected to know and use such complexly contrastive systems and we believe that the present layout of the BiTri Basic is one of the simplest and most economical ways in which they can be helped to achieve and integrate these demanding skills.

**The choice of vocabulary items**

The vocabulary to be covered in the BiTri Basic will be drawn from two main sources: one of them universal, the other special to Hong Kong. In its initial form it will be a fairly standard ‘basic’ word list for English, augmented by matching, parallel, and other lexical material that the compilers consider necessary in the Chinese-language sections. Because more work has been done on restricted and specialized word lists in English than any

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\textsuperscript{2} A kind of programming language like J2EE (Java 2 Platform Enterprise Edition) (Webopedia, March 2005).

\textsuperscript{3} Chip technology enabling seamless voice and data connections between a wide range of devices through short-range digital two-way radio (Webopedia, March 2005).

\textsuperscript{4} An abbreviation of Universal Serial Bus. USB is a protocol for transferring data to and from digital devices and it connects external devices (such as digital cameras, scanners, and mice) to Windows 98 and Macintosh computers (Webopedia, March 2005).

\textsuperscript{5} Hanyu Pinyin is the most common pinyin system used in the People’s Republic of China. There is more than one type of pinyin system for Putonghua. Two others are Tongyong Pinyin and Ziran Pinyin, both with users in Taiwan.

\textsuperscript{6} Similarly, there are a number of different romanization systems for Cantonese. The most commonly used systems are the Yale, the Sidney Lau and the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA).
other language, and because Tom McArthur has for many years had a special interest in, and knowledge of, such word lists, the foundation vocabulary will be English. As the work proceeds, however, there will emerge three parallel lists: for English, Putonghua, and Cantonese. The core area of work on word lists for learners of English was done throughout the 20th century by a succession of researchers and compilers, notably beginning with the ELT pioneers Harold Palmer and Michael West. The latter’s General Service List (GSL, 1953) evolved from ground-breaking lists created in the 1930s and (published by Longman) to become a classic in the 1950–60s. Current descendants of West’s original list include the defining vocabularies of various major present-day English language teaching (ELT) dictionaries, notably the advanced and intermediate works published by Oxford, Longman, Cambridge and Macmillan. Any present-day list of key vocabulary items in English, constructed within the tradition of Palmer and West, consists of some 2–4,000 words such as baby, back, bad, bag, ball in their commoner senses and uses. The BiTri Basic therefore draws on a successful long-established tradition.

While continuing and extending the Palmer and West tradition, the BiTri Basic will also respond both to the perceived needs and expectations of Hong Kong users and the lists that emerge for the two Chinese languages. Similar, but not restricted, to The Oxford 3000 (OALD, 7th Edition, 2005), the words selected are both frequent and used in a variety of contexts and in a wide range of different types of text. Some words that are not frequently used but are important and familiar to most users of English are also included, such as words for household contents, electrical appliances and parts of the body. At the moment the overall list can only be conceived in terms of English, but in due course there will be three parallel basic learners’ lists, the words in each serving to ‘define’ the words in the others.

The second source of English material is special to Hong Kong and the interests of its people, and will include such items as bird’s nest, cantopop, dai pai dong and lai shi. This local material will be culled from the South China Morning Post (SCMP), a major English newspaper in Hong Kong, and other reliable sources, and ties (as an appendix) in with a set of themes that will include local geography, travel, transport, food, restaurants, and education.

The organization of entries

The English-based section

As shown in Extract 1, the flow of information underlying each entry consists of:

- the English head word
- its grammatical category
- its British and American variants (if any)
- its Chinese-character equivalent
- the Hanyu Pinyin equivalent of the Chinese characters
- the spoken Putonghua in characters and in Hanyu Pinyin (if any, shaded)
- the Cantonese Romanization
- the spoken Cantonese in characters and in Cantonese romanization (if any: shaded)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>cheque</th>
<th>BrE, check</th>
<th>AmE</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>P.</th>
<th>C.</th>
<th>zi1 piu3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>child</td>
<td>n 儿</td>
<td>P.</td>
<td>ér tóng; xiǎohūi</td>
<td>C.</td>
<td>yi4 tung4; zi1 lou5 zai2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Extract 1. The English-based section (items selected from C)

The Chinese-based section

The relevant sequence of vowels is emboldened in the first line of the format of each entry, which consists of:

- the Putonghua Hanyu Pinyin headword (shaded, when in colloquial Putonghua)
- its Chinese character equivalent
- its Cantonese romanization
- the spoken Cantonese in characters and in Cantonese romanization (if any: highlighted by shading)
- its English equivalent
- its grammatical category

as illustrated in Extract 2.
Pronunciation

The default romanization system for Putonghua is Hanyu Pinyin and for Cantonese is a modified form of the Jyutping system, which has been developed and promoted by the Linguistic Society of Hong Kong. The Society’s Jyutping Pronunciation Guide has been prepared over the past ten years by a group of academics working in five Hong Kong universities.

At this stage, no English phonetic pronunciations will be added in the BiTri Basic, so as to avoid having more symbols and contrasts than users can comfortably handle. Probably the neatest ultimate solution to the problem of pronunciation for all three languages would be to have spoken equivalents available on request in an electronic version, using either a male or a female voice, or both. As regards English pronunciation and its variations, American, British and Australian are all possible in principle, but British will be the sole form, at least to begin with, because it is traditional in Hong Kong and remains the most fully described for ELT purposes.

Mutual definition

The words used in the three languages anywhere in the body of the dictionary constitute a mutually defining circle of words. That is, headwords are defined by means of other headwords.

Although all the above procedures create their own areas of difficulty and complexity, we hope to keep procedures in the BiTri Basic as simple as possible despite the complexities. While stressing that we consider any project of the kind we are proposing immensely valuable (perhaps even crucial) for language education in Hong Kong in the future, it is important to stress that there can be no magic simplicity in any dictionary which seeks to address the needs of learners and users of the English and Chinese writing systems on the one hand and spoken English, Putonghua/Mandarin, and Cantonese on the other. We believe we have found the simplest possible BiTri procedure within the complexity which Hong Kong students and others face (although we remain open to further possibilities and refinements). As a result, we need throughout the wordbook (and especially in the brief biliterate introduction) to be honest and direct with users in this matter.

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The two A–Z sections will be followed first by a set of supplementary thematic lists (perhaps with some line-drawing illustrations) which will cover such distinctive situations as travel, food and restaurants, then by a Chinese stroke-and-character list and a Jyutping-based romanization list.

Conclusion

It has always been the desire of the Hong Kong government, before and after the British departure, to raise the standard of the use of both English and Chinese in the territory. The present Hong Kong government’s determination to enact a biliterate and trilingual language policy is inevitable and was recently reconfirmed by the setting up of a top-level inter-departmental group whose function has been to study community-wide measures to
raise language standards for Chinese and English in Hong Kong. As the territory’s Permanent Secretary for Education and Manpower, Fanny Law Fan Chiu-fun, has noted:

‘The setting up of the working group shows that the government has placed a strong emphasis on biliteracy [in Chinese and English] and trilinguality [in Cantonese, Putonghua and English] in the community.’

—SCMP, 28 June 2003

The call for action is urgent. Currently, for better or worse, the learning culture for Hong Kong students is ‘listen and follow’ rather than ‘read and understand’. To help realize the government’s extraordinarily ambitious language policy, the first BiTri dictionary will lean more towards prescription than description, but later steps can be more relaxed and expansive. It is our considered view as linguists and language teachers that such work as the BiTri Basic must at some time be undertaken in Hong Kong. We decided that now is a good time.

References


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Find-a-Linguist

The Institute has a website, which currently functions as a source of information for the general inquirer, as a news site for members and as a means for businesses and individuals to locate expert language services, through the Find-a-Linguist service.

The service is a searchable database of Fellows, Members and Associates who are available for work and have put themselves forward for inclusion by completing the registration form. Registration is free of charge and you may wish to view the facility on our website before applying. Information: <http://iol.org.uk/linguist/default.asp>.

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