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A Letter to Parents who Speak Cantonese

Dear Cantonese-Speaking Parents,

As someone who grew up with a Cantonese-speaking mother, I beg of you to try your best to pass down the language to your kids. Some would classify Cantonese as a dying language, and whether or not you believe that there is still so much value in your kids both understanding and speaking your native language. Many members of the diasporic community from Hong Kong or Southern China living in Canada may resign themselves to or prioritize English as the language when they are out in public. Even more would have their children focus on English as well, even if that is at the expense of their Cantonese-speaking ability. Too few parents play an active role in attempting to teach their kids the language through actual education, resorting to communicating to them through Cantonese hoping they might pick it up. However, living in Canada – where English is the dominant language outside of the home – poses a challenge in allowing immersion at home to flourish. Without constant communication with others, it is easy for the language to diminish, particularly as a language learner and even more with a language as difficult as Cantonese. Cantonese's tonal nature shares little overlap with the non-tonal English, requiring added effort from learners to pick up, which is why it is crucial for parents to intentionally and deliberately make an effort when attempting to pass the language on to their children.

Due to the number of different tones in the Cantonese language, even those who have exposure at home may make mistakes when attempting to distinguish between distinct tones. A

study was performed on homeland – those who come from a place that speaks Cantonese – and heritage – those who are descended from parents who speak Cantonese – in order to find out if they had similar findings between the two groups (Lam, 2018). Unsurprisingly, homeland speakers performed better on the tasks than heritage speakers to varying degrees based on its specificity. Most dissimilarly came the findings from distinguishing meanings of single syllables or words with a disparity of about 30%. This indicates that solely based on tones, heritage speakers perform far weaker than homeland speakers. The gap decreases with semantic context provided, however it is still a noticeable difference. The findings from this study demonstrate that heritage speakers rely far more on semantic cues compared to auditory. This suggests that heritage speakers struggle with the tones present in the Cantonese language, and as a result, rely far more on getting the overall gist of a message rather than demonstrating a full understanding and grasp of the language. While this may be a satisfactory level overall, having a stronger comprehension of Cantonese would aid with speakers' confidence levels in their abilities and would likely find greater interest in practicing or passing the language down in the future.

Within children, there are even differences between those who speak Cantonese at home and those who speak Mandarin. In a study conducted on Chinese-children speaking children in Texas, the kids' vocabularies in both their English and heritage languages were compared (Li et al., 2021). The Mandarin group outperformed the Cantonese-speaking children in both facets, which ultimately demonstrates a larger issue with the ease of passing Cantonese down to children. The researchers pose several different possibilities for why this might be, the first of which is the number of tones in Cantonese compared to those in Mandarin. In addition to a larger variety, there is also greater differences in the endings of Cantonese words compared to those in Mandarin which would only end in vowel sounds. These subtle variations are an added challenge

that children have on top of learning a second language. You might ask if that means it is too difficult for your child to do. Not at all! Your child is fully capable to pick up both English and Cantonese, however, it will be more difficult, which is why you must be willing to step up and take an active role in their education. Li et al. (2018), also note the fewer number of resources that exist for Cantonese learning. This is absolutely true, but there are definitely materials out there, which are not limited to dubs of television shows – many of which are for children – or books and apps aiming to teach vocabulary. The number continues to grow as more people create resources as well, so there is no shortage of aids to help you as you teach them. You might also wonder whether a language school may be helpful. In their study, Li et al. (2018) note that attending a heritage language school does not increase vocabulary and cite possible reasons being unqualified teachers, limited resources, or low expectations of children's abilities. While this may be unique to the area the study was conducted in and your community may have a great school, you should not rely solely on a teacher once a week to teach your child the language. You have a responsibility to also communicate with and teach your child Cantonese as well.

As your child grows up, they very likely will not have a native-level proficiency in Cantonese, especially if they grew up in Canada, and that is okay. A common thing many Cantonese as L2 learners may end up doing is code-switching – communicating using a combination of both Cantonese and English. Yim & Clément (2019) explore this phenomenon in a study focusing on code-switching among Chinese-Canadian youth and how this makes them feel about their ability level in the language and Chinese identity. They found that code-switchers often had some mixed perceptions of their ability to speak Cantonese, often having a dual relationship with the practice. On one hand, it was a reminder of their inability to communicate their ideas and thoughts fully in Cantonese, but on the other, it marked their ability to engage

with the language to a certain degree as well. If your child ever feels inadequate as they rely on code-switching, remember to encourage them! They are simply trying their best with what they know and remember, and your support will be important to them continuing to persevere even if they are finding difficulties. Additionally, this can be a teaching moment in which you can teach some new vocabulary or correct their mistakes. Language learning is a constant practice, and mistakes are bound to happen. Your role as a parent and teacher would be to help them along their journey through both moral support and active education. As noted by Yim & Clément (2019) as well, code-switching can also play a huge role in your child's cultural identity. Language is absolutely one marker of connection to one's heritage and background, so even having a partial connection through code-switching can be beneficial for your child and their relationship to their Hong Kong or Chinese identity. Especially since they will have a multiculturally informed view of the world with their dominantly North American life here, having Cantonese as a link will allow them to feel a greater connection to you and your background. Having a better relationship with their Chinese identity also allows them to be more confident in code-switching and their Cantonese-speaking abilities as well (Yim & Clément, 2021). If they do not see Cantonese as their sole connection to their heritage, they will feel less inadequate about the mistakes they will make or the reliance they might have on code-switching. Sometimes it will be difficult for your child to balance the two sides of their identity of where they are and where they come from, but language is one crucial way for them to still feel tied to their Chinese heritage when they may feel like they are "not Chinese enough."

How families engage with Cantonese at home can be very different from household to household. Some see English as the most important language upon moving to Canada, potentially seeing themselves as guests and therefore, obligated to assimilate to the dominant

society (Li, 2006). However, I greatly disagree with this idea and believe that it is possible and important to build proficiency in both languages. Although the guest reasoning is understandable to a degree, moving here also makes this your home, in which you might have your own language and practices that do not have to align with the dominant culture. Canada prides itself on being a multicultural country, so you do not need to and should not sacrifice your native language in favour of English. There is also the idea that children might be able to learn it when they get older (Li, 2006). This is also not entirely true, as children are far better equipped to learn a language while their brains are still forming than an adult learner. My mom fell in this category where she expected me to be able to pick up Cantonese over time without actively teaching me and solely through speaking to me through the language. Although I could understand her, I struggled with speaking for a very long time as a result.

I absolutely have regrets about my lack of dedication to learning Cantonese as a child and now that I am an adult, if I were able to go back and change anything about my upbringing, that would be near the top of my list. However, as a child there would have been no way for me to know that, nor would I have fully understand the gravity of that situation. It is the responsibility of parents, as adults who have more wisdom and knowledge about what this might look like to make an effort to teach their children from a young age. This could include speaking to them in Cantonese, teaching them conversational abilities, providing resources and media in Cantonese for them to consume, and correcting them when they make mistakes. There is no perfect way to teach, nor is there a specific method that will work for everyone. This will depend on your child and you will become the expert. Do not be afraid for yourself to make mistakes either! You are simply the guide to help them grow in their language journey.

Best of luck, *someone who was in your child's position*

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