

# **Exemplary Capstone Projects**

## **2022**

(Independent research projects by final year English Majors)



**Department of English**  
**The Chinese University of Hong Kong**

## **PREFACE**

It is with great pride that I introduce the 2022-2023 volume of the Exemplary Capstone Project of the Department of English at The Chinese University of Hong Kong. The Capstone Project requires final year students to carry out an independent research project under the supervision of a faculty member in the Department. The Projects cover a range of areas in Applied English Linguistics, English Literary Studies, and Creative Writing. The Exemplary Capstone Projects in this volume have been nominated by faculty members as representing the best of the Capstone Projects in 2022-2023. The 13 projects nominated this year exemplify the rigorous scholarship, excellent English communication skills, imagination, and creativity that the Department encourages in all of our students. These projects include a study about English language proficiency tests, a collection of rap lyrics, and analyses of literary works by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Milan Kundera. The range of topics highlight the diversity in the skills and content knowledge the Department fosters in our students, not only topic selection but also in theoretical and methodological approaches to the topic. A sincere congratulations to all the students whose work is published in this volume.

Jette G. Hansen Edwards

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## **A Critical Discourse Analysis of Facial Cream Advertisements**

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### **Abstract:**

This paper aims at helping women customers resist discrimination by biased beauty product advertisements. By analyzing 20 pieces of English facial cream advertisements from the perspective of Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 1989), this paper discusses several characteristics of the beauty product commercials. The theoretical framework adopted for this study is the three-dimensional model proposed by Fairclough, which involves the examination of 1) the form of language, 2) the production and interpretation of the text, and 3) the influences of the text in the society. More specifically, this research study explores the linguistic constructions of the text advertisements, the discursive strategies employed by the beauty product companies to manipulate the customers, and the social issues embedded in the discourse. The findings of this study show that the manufacturers use a lot of linguistic constructions such as direct address, questions and positive adjectives in their facial cream advertisements. By doing so, they produce a myth that having young skin is a symbol of ideal beauty of women. What's more, the advertisers use several types of discursive strategies (e.g. positive self-representation/ negative other-representation and scientific proof) to convince the customers to trust the advertised products. These types of strategies maintain power and stereotypes over the audience, by separating the audience into in-group and out-group. While the in-group members who has young skin are appreciated and accepted, members of the out-group who have signs of aging on their skins are constantly depreciated.

## **I. Introduction**

The beauty industry is an industrial sector targeted mainly at women which encompasses cosmetics, skin care, fragrances and toiletries. Due to the growing interest in society towards self-care and wellness-promoting beauty products, skincare has become the most profitable category in the beauty sector in recent years. Since skincare is one of the biggest expenses of most women in the world, companies in the beauty sector compete heavily to make their products more appealing to the female customers. It is noteworthy that the consumption of skincare products by women cannot be separated from the advertisement role, which helps promote the products. By designing advertisements on different forms of media, the companies seek to change the approaches of the consumers, convincing people to purchase their beauty products. Social media allows companies to reach and engage millions of potential customers. Therefore, social media forms a powerful tool for business marketing. As the most widely used social media, Facebook constantly reaches out a vast number of females. It makes Facebook an effective social media marketing platform on which beauty product manufacturers post advertisements to influence customers' self-concept. Most of the advertisements give a lot of information, for instance, the background of the products, its ingredients and effectiveness, as well as feedback from customers who have used the products before. The slogans which usually appear in the advertisements are generally short and condensed, which helps make the advertisement more memorable. Advertisements of beauty products are manipulative. The advertisements often construct a problem that can only be solved by their items, such as dark circles, wrinkles and dull skin. What's more, the advertisements also reflect the ideological concept of beauty in society. Visuals and textual languages used

in these advertisements play a crucial role to attract female customers, by persuading the customers to use a particular product in order to obtain ideal beauty.

In the context of Linguistics study, discourse is defined as the language above the sentence level, the language in use, as well as the language as a form of social practice (Jones, 2012). Discourse is not only a meaning-making system, but a part of the larger system through which people construct their social realities (Gee, 1996). Discourse contains both written and spoken words, as well as signs or symbols that are meaningful in the language. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is a developing area of language study. It refers to a general approach that makes connections between language, power and social ideology. Critical Discourse Analysis analyzes social interactions which focus upon written and spoken discourse. Besides, the CDA approach endeavors to show up the hidden determinants in the system of social relationships. Differ from discourse analysis which only focuses on words, phrases, clauses and sentences, Critical Discourse Analysis emphasizes more on the elements outside the discourse itself, for instance, the social and political issues revealed by the discourse. In this research study, advertising is identified as a media discourse since the language of the beauty product advertisements reflect social processes.

Advertisements provide details about the products advertised. However, they also play a huge role in shaping social values, as well as construct people's identities and attitude. Arumugam, Kuar and Yunus (2013) have identified the ideal look for women by analyzing advertisements of several cosmetics and skincare products, such as mascara and eye creams, collected from Malaysian local magazines. Furthermore, Rohmah and Suhardi (2020) also examined the advertising languages used by companies in TV commercials for products including cleansing foam, facial serum and lip cream . Although there are many studies investigate beauty products from a

Critical Discourse Analysis perspective, most of them do not concern a particular type of beauty product, and focus only on advertisements shown on TV and printed media. Not much academic research is done in the area of advertising beauty products on social media, especially for skincare items. More research is needed to find out how the advertisers sell the skincare products on online platforms and their impacts on recipients' minds. Therefore, this study focuses particularly on advertisements for facial cream, which is a basic and the most fundamental component of daily skincare routine. This study aims to investigate, from a Critical Discourse Analysis perspective, the features of language used by manufacturers to promote their items in facial cream advertisements, and the ideal beauty standards of women shown in the media discourse. This paper also seeks to help women avoid being controlled by the beauty product companies whose facial cream advertisements stir up discontent. Findings from this research can make a further contribution to the studies dealing with advertising, language and society.

## **II. Research methodology**

The data used in this study were 20 text advertisements for facial cream products from social media. These advertisements were issued by various well-known brands, including Shiseido, L'Oréal Paris, Lancôme, Estee Lauder, La Mer, Dior and Kiehl's in the year 2022. The researcher collected the data by searching the advertisements that contain the word 'cream' or 'moisturizer' in the official Facebook page of the brands. The data were categorized regarding the linguistic structures and the discursive strategies that the companies adopted in order to convince the women customers to use the products advertised. The data were then analyzed from a Critical Discourse Analysis perspective using Fairclough's Dialectical Relational Approach (DRA) which is one of the most influential approaches to Critical Discourse Analysis.

This approach reflects Fairclough's view of Critical Discourse Analysis as a method to analyze the dialectical relations between the semiosis and other social elements, for instance, power and social ideologies. According to Fairclough (1989), DRA emphasizes on how language is used as a tool by powerful people to assert dominance on others, as well as how they shape the 'order of discourse' and social order.

Different from other common approaches to CDA such as Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA) and Socio-Cognitive Approach (CSA), Fairclough's approach sets CDA's main objective as raising people's awareness of how language contributes to the domination of some people by others. The Dialectical Relational Approach constantly endeavors to alleviate social problems, rather than accepting the inevitable social inequalities and finding ways to adapt to it. Therefore, Fairclough's approach to Critical Discourse Analysis is particularly suitable for this study which concentrates on exposing the ways in which advertising language causes women to feel dissatisfied with their physical appearances, and helping women combat the problem.

### **III. Theoretical framework**

This research study is designed to explore the social inequalities constituted by language in facial cream commercials. Therefore, the model of Critical Discourse Analysis, which allows a thorough evaluation of word meanings in the text, is suitable for this study. The theoretical framework employed in this study is the Critical Discourse Analysis framework proposed by Fairclough in 1995. The three-dimensional method includes interpreting discourse as text (micro level), discursive practice (meso level), and sociocultural practice (macro level). The first stage concerns the 'form' of advertising language. Different linguistic features e.g. the use of pronouns, adjectives and modal verbs in the advertisements will be described in this level of analysis. The second stage involves studying the production and

interpretation of the text. It explores how the discourse is produced and received, as well as how power relations are enacted. The third stage explains how the choices of linguistic features and the discursive practice are tied to the historical and the socio-cultural background of the society. This stage also deals with the influences of the text on society. The framework aims at exploring the power relations embedded in the advertisements, the social ideology behind it, and how the advertisements manipulate women's beliefs about beauty with the use of linguistic strategies.

Fairclough's three-dimensional framework is chosen because it enables the researcher to focus particularly on the signifiers that make up the text. More specifically, this framework is suitable for studying beauty product advertisements as it involves analyzing the selection, position and sequence of the words, which are the fundamental building blocks of the advertisements, as well as the base of the discursive strategies and social relations embedded in the text. Moreover, Fairclough's framework to CDA is useful for this study since it helps the researcher discover the interesting patterns of the advertisements selected and the ways in which different elements of the skincare advertisements are interconnected and mutually explanatory.

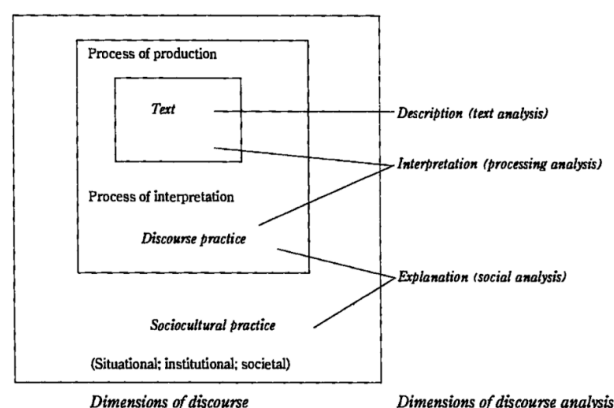


Figure 1. Fairclough's three-dimensional model (1995)

#### **IV. Literature Review**

In this section, the researcher will review a number of previously conducted research studies which adopted the method of Critical Discourse Analysis to examine beauty product advertisements. This part of study summarizes in brief the findings of the research articles that concern the linguistic features used in advertisements. All of the literature reviewed adopt Fairclough's three-dimensional model of Critical Discourse Analysis. Major works are cited with the intention of highlighting the influences of advertising language. By going through significant studies in the field of Critical Discourse Analysis of beauty products, we see the major linguistic features and strategies used by beauty companies in their advertisements, as well as their relations to social issues.

A series of recent research studies has indicated that the manufacturers have adopted several linguistic devices in their advertisements, with personal pronouns being the most frequently used. Kaur et al. (2013) examined the advertisements for both skincare and cosmetics products selected from two Malaysian magazines, namely Cleo and Women's Weekly. The researchers noticed the use of direct address (pronoun 'you') helps engage the customers and delivers the message that the customers are prioritized, since each viewer is addressed individually rather than as part of a mass audience with the use of personal pronouns. What's more, Susanti (2019) compared two shampoo and skin whitening product video advertisements of Garnier and Pantene taken from YouTube. The researcher concluded that the use of personal pronouns have different functions in the two advertisements. Pantene uses first personal and possessive pronoun e.g. 'My' and 'I' to influence the audience as it is the recommendation from the public figure Selena Gomez. On the other hand,

Garnier uses second personal pronouns ‘you’ and ‘your’ to address the consumers directly, building a close relationship with the audience.

Apart from the personal pronouns, positive adjectives also occur in the beauty product advertisements. For instance, Kalsoom and Ali (2019) traced the linguistic devices and techniques in the discourse of fairness products in Pakistan and found out that the most advertisers use positive adjectives such as *Unbeatable* and *flawless* to describe the advantages of their items. Regarding the rhetoric technique, Lestari (2020) specified that simile serves to describe the skin condition after using the product. One example is *What I desire is clean skin like first snow in winter*. The use of poetic devices (e.g. *Satin Soft Skin*) also contribute to boosting the number of buyers (Ali & Kalsoom, 2019). Additionally, Rodmah & Suhardi (2020) noted that questions (e.g. *What if we could see the dead skin cell?*) is an effective tool for advertisers to create a connection with the audience as the questions stimulate informal conversations with the audience. Imperatives (e.g. *Get it soon!*) are also helpful for urging the audience to buy certain items or take actions.

The literature review shows that *Puffery*, which refers to exaggerating the effectiveness of the products, is one of the most prevalent discursive strategies utilized by the beauty product advertisers. A large number of advertisers present their products using subjective and unrealistic opinions. Examples include *Still beautiful, though wet by a tear* (Lestari, 2020), *with Sakura essence to tighten pores instantly* (Susanti, 2019) and *Electro-stimulation for the first time in a cream* (Kaur et al., 2013). It is also common for manufacturers to manipulate women customers by invoking inadequacies. Kaur et al. (2013) discovered that the advertisers in Malaysian magazines first create an ideal image of women and then highlight how effective their products are for solving women’s problem, such as eye bags and wrinkles. By doing



so, the women customers who are unconfident in their appearance will be subconsciously coaxed into buying the items advertised. That is a way in which the advertisers exert their power to the audience as they claim that their products help overcome customers' dissatisfaction. Moreover, the scientific information in advertisements are source of authority that makes the brands more reliable. The scientific evidence helps persuade the consumers to trust certain products that have been tested for several years or are made with advanced technology. Examples of these type of advertisements are *3 levels brighter – Instrument test of 39 Asian women, 4 weeks of use* (Rodmah & Suhardi, 2020), *give your skin up to 60% more pinkish radiance* (Susanti, 2019). Rodmah & Suhardi (2020) also highlight the importance of positive self-representation. As a type of discursive strategy in order to manipulate women, positive self-representation refers to how the manufacturers argue that their products provide more benefits than other brands. Such unobjective and unrealistic descriptions exert power towards readers since the words create a myth in their minds that the products can make them become beautiful (Susanti, 2019).

Regarding the impacts of beauty product advertisements on society, the literature reviewed reports that the most obvious theme of these advertisements is the ideal appearance for women. The beauty companies evoke power towards the public as their advertisements affect how people perceive the concept of beauty. According to Ali and Kalsoom (2019), the advertisements of fairness products reflect and reproduce the stereotype that having fair and flawless skin with no marks or scars is necessary for a beautiful woman, and only when women attain such ideal appearance can they get a great career. The advertisers then manipulate the women by telling the women a myth that buying their fairness products is the only way to obtain a whole new life. Furthermore, the text in the advertisements reflects social wrong by degrading women

self-esteem because it relates beauty to social acceptance and requires women to have a constant beautiful outlook (Lestari, 2020). Moreover, Rodmah and Suhardi (2020) and Kuar et al. (2013) suggested that advertising creates identities as the beauty product advertisements make women want to be part of the ‘in-group’ rather than ‘out-group’. The women believe that they will be like celebrities and models who look good with the product after using it.

The literature reviewed above clearly demonstrates the steps of applying Fairclough’s model of Critical Discourse Analysis to analyzing beauty product advertisements. It helps the researcher conduct the Critical Discourse Analysis in a more precise way. What’s more, the review of literature provides a general understanding of the linguistic structures of the beauty product advertisements, which enables the researcher distinguish new and unknown features in the advertisements more easily. Although previous research has provided a wealth of information about some major issues in the field of beauty product advertisements, not much research has been done to investigate the advertisements written in English. Most of the researchers analyze advertisements of other foreign languages, such as Japanese and Indonesian, and translate them into English. Therefore, there is a need to carry out further research studies particularly on advertisements in English, which is the most widely spoken language in the world. To fill this research gap, this paper identifies the relationship between the discourse and the wider English-speaking society by studying English facial cream advertisements.

## **V. Research Objectives**

This study was designed to compare and analyze the discourse used in advertisements of various well-known beauty companies which advertise facial cream or moisturizers. This study will address the following research questions:

- 1) What are the linguistic structures used in different facial cream advertisements?
- 2) What are the discursive strategies employed by manufacturers in facial cream advertisements to manipulate women customers?
- 3) What social ideologies regarding beauty do the facial cream advertisements indicate?

## **VI. Findings and Discussion**

### ***1. Textual analysis (miso level)***

The textual analysis answers the first research question with regard to the linguistic features that appear in the facial cream advertisements. Various grammatical structures, which are pronouns, verbs, adjectives, conjunctions, questions, imperatives and rhetorical techniques, are discussed at this level of analysis.

**Pronouns and possessive adjectives/ determiners.** Pronoun is a word used to replace the noun. It was found that in this study a lot of manufacturers had adopted direct address to engage with the customers by using first (i.e. I, we and us) and second person pronouns (i.e. you). In Susanti's study (2019), most of the producers use 'I' and 'my' to persuade people as the products are recommended by public figures. However, the advertisements in this study do not involve any celebrities or models. The most commonly used pronouns are 'you' and 'we', as shown in Table 1 in Appendix B. According to Kuar et al. (2013), the pronouns help create a friendly atmosphere in the advertisements because it ensures that the companies are directly communicating with their potential buyers. The pronouns indicate that the companies are making sincere and honest promises to the women, which make them more likely to accept the products. What's more, the findings from this study show that the manufacturers also put the determiners 'our' and 'your' into their advertisements. In

advertisement discourse, ‘we’ and ‘our’ are regarded as authoritative and implies power as they create an us-versus-them dichotomy. In addition, Fairclough (1994) asserts that synthetic personalization, which refers to the use of ‘you’ and ‘your’, can give the impression to the audience that they are highly appreciated. Similarly, Susanti (2019) also argued that ‘you’ and ‘your’ address the recipients on individual basis and create intimacy between the advertisers and the audience. The second person pronouns are useful in advertising as they reflect personal engagement by producing a sense of closeness between the brand and the audience.



Figure 2. Example of personal pronoun ‘we’

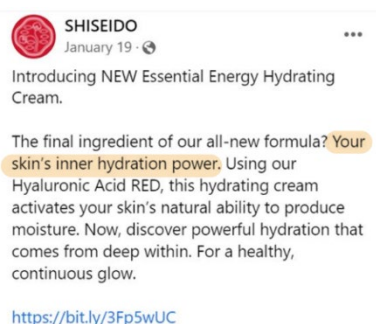


Figure 3. Example of determiner ‘your’

**To-infinitive.** To-infinitive is used to explain why an action is done. It is formed by the particle ‘to’ and an infinitive verb. In this study, to-infinitive appears in almost all of the advertisements collected (refer to Table 2 in Appendix B). The manufacturers use this grammatical structure to describe the key functions of certain facial creams. The to-infinitive structure is the semantic bedrock of reason texts as it produces a clear exposition of the benefits upon purchasing the products (Simpson & Mayr, 2010, as cited in Kuar et al., 2013). It is noteworthy that a majority of to-infinitive is associated with the verbs that contain the morpheme ‘-re’, which denotes the meaning of ‘back, again’. This shows that the manufacturers tend to advertise their products’ ability as a ‘tool’ to restore their customers’ skin to its natural beauty.



Figure 4. Example of to-infinitive

**Adjectives.** Adjectives describe conditions or characteristics. Positive adjectives are usually used to mention the quality of the beauty products and their impacts, whereas negative adjectives are related to some pre-existing issues due to not using the products (Kalsoom & Ali, 2019). Most of the advertisements collected from the data contain only positive adjectives (refer to Table 3 in Appendix B). According to Lestari (2020), the positive adjectives in beauty product advertisements serve to persuade the customers that their skin conditions will get improved after putting the products onto their faces. In this study, adjectives such as *youthful*, *radiant* and *plump* do not only show the functions of the facial creams, but also portray the qualities of an ideal woman which arouses fantasies and dreams among the women, compelling them to buy the products (Kalsoom & Ali, 2019).



Figure 5. Example of positive adjectives

**Conjunctions.** Conjunctions link phrases, words or clauses together. In beauty product advertisements, they express the reasons why the products should be brought. conjunctions can be seen as a way in which the companies build image of their products (Susanti, 2019). As stated by Kuar et al. (2013), the conjunctive adjuncts mostly appear in reason advertising which refers to facts, clinical truth and needs. Findings of this study aligns with Kuar et al.'s theory (2013). The data collected are mainly reasoning texts with a majority of conjunctions being 'and' or 'as well as', which are additive conjunctions joining two elements of equal grammatical rank and syntactic importance. This type of conjunctions complete and enrich the information in the advertisements, which make the products seem more effective and multifunctional. Subordinating conjunctions that join an independent clause and a dependent clause also appear in the sample. Similar to additive conjunctions, the subordinating conjunctions 'while' in the text mention the multiple effects of the products. It also emphasizes how convenient are the products to use.



Figure 6. Example of conjunctions

**Questions.** In beauty product advertisements, questions can engage customers as they stimulate informal conversations and a personal connection with the audience (Rodmah & Suhardi, 2020). The most frequent type of questions found in the data is rhetorical questions, for which the questioners do not expect a real answer (as shown in Table 5 in Appendix B). These questions are usually used to start the discourse.

They contain elements about the core functions of the products, for instance, *hydrated, healthier looking skin* and *a more lifted look*, in order to catch the attention of the audience. Moreover, questions show that the manufacturers are interested in women's lives. The viewers may feel that the brands care about them genuinely rather than simply selling them products. What's more, some questions in the facial cream advertisements, e.g. *In need of a little skin plumping?*, are quite informal that they do not strictly follow the grammatical rules. These informal questions set up a closer association with the recipients. Although the rhetorical questions seem create a friendly atmosphere in the discourse, they in fact promote a sense of inequality between the customers and the advertisers. The questions give pressure to the audience that they must purchase the products or else they will suffer from the loss (Kalsoom & Ali, 2009). For example, the question *Dreaming of hydrated, healthier looking skin?* implies that the viewers will have less hydrated and healthy skin if they do not use the facial cream advertised.

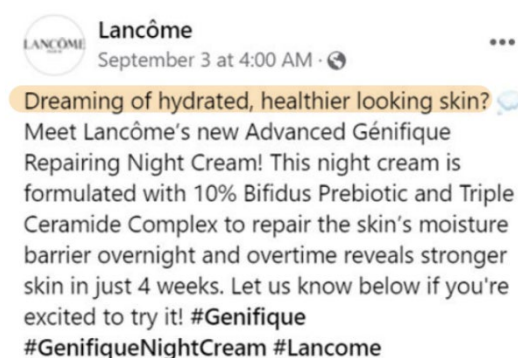


Figure 7. Example of question

**Imperatives.** Imperatives are sentences starting with a verb. They work by giving a command or an order to the person being addressed. The companies exert pressure and authority on the audience with the use of imperatives that represent a required or desirable action. Customers will thus be subconsciously convinced to buy

the products. Examples of imperatives in this study are shown in Table 6 in Appendix B.



Figure 8. Example of imperative

**Rhetorical techniques.** Rhetorical techniques are also found in some advertisements in this study. This strategy uses language as an art to evoke emotional response from the audience (Lestari, 2020). Simile is a kind of rhetorical technique that draws equalization between two different ideas. They serve to compare skin conditions before and after using the products in facial cream advertisements. For instance, the advertisement of La Mer compares the feel of applying their facial creams with spring, as both of them are refreshing. Alliteration is the repetition of the initial consonant sound in a phrase. An example is *barrier-boosting benefits* in La Mer's advertisement. With the use of alliteration, it is easier for the recipients to remember the key message conveyed by the manufacturers, which is normally the core functions of the items. Parallelism is the most frequently adopted rhetorical technique in the facial cream advertisements (Kalsoom & Ali, 2019). It refers to the repeated use of similar grammatical structure for simplicity, effectiveness and attractiveness so that the audience can capture the brands' intention more easily (Susanti, 2019). Examples are in Table 7 in Appendix B.





Figure 9. Example of simile



Figure 10. Example of alliteration

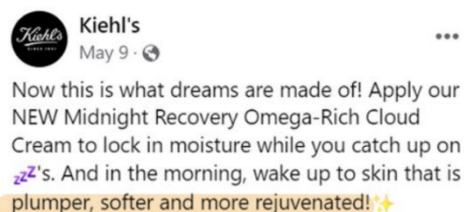


Figure 11. Example of parallelism

## 2. Discourse practice analysis (micro level)

The discourse practice analysis is related to the second research question. This level of analysis studies the production and consumption of the facial cream advertisements, as well as the enforcement of power relations. It attempts to identify the strategies employed by the brands to attract prospective customers. From the findings, it can be seen that the manufacturers in this study have applied various discursive strategies, e.g. scientific evidence, invoking inadequacies and puffery, to influence women. The discursive strategies found in this study are summarized in Table 8 in Appendix B.

The manufacturers flatter women by exploiting positive images of their products in the audience's mind. Positive self-representation is evident when the brands claim that their products are beneficial. This strategy is often accompanied by the use of several positive adjectives, such as *plump* and *hydrated* and the determiner *our*, which shows the uniqueness of the products. It stimulates women's desire to get better skin conditions. Women will thus be persuaded to buy the products. On the other hand,

advertisements in the data of this study often show statements that invoke inadequacies, which leads to negative other-representation of the audience. One example is *To fight the key signs of aging* in L'Oréal Paris's advertisement. The word *fight* in this phrase involves a conceptual metaphor which draws a parallel between the signs of aging and enemy. The statement turns the natural aging process of women into an enemy which women have to fight against. Similarly, in another advertisement, the sentence '*to correct visible signs of aging around the brow bone, eyelid, crow's feet and under-eye*' identifies aging as a problem that needs to be corrected. These advertisements engender a feeling of low confidence and dissatisfaction. The advertisers then promote their products as the solutions to solve the problems.



Figure 11. Example of positive self-representation

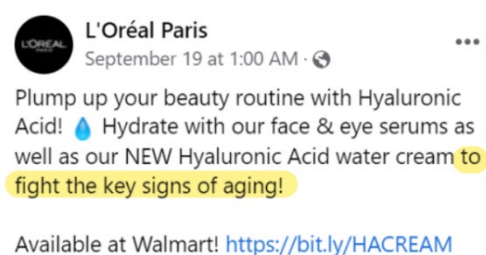


Figure 12. Example of invoking inadequacies

Including scientific proof is another type of strategy that manufacturers often adopt to convince the viewers. The scientific evidence is usually related to laboratory tests, which increases the trustworthiness and the reputation of the products. Therefore, compared to directly mentioning the functions of the facial creams, adding scientific information to the text establishes a stronger relationship between the advertisers and the audience (Kalsoom & Ali, 2019). According to the survey findings in the study implemented by Rodmah & Suhardi (2020), people tend to ensure whether the products are safe and beneficial for their skin before they purchase the

products. Therefore, the scientific evidence in facial cream advertisements have a strong power over customers' choices, showing how the manufacturers dominate people's mind.

Apart from scientific proof, a large number of advertisers have also employed social proof in the advertisements so as to make the product information more reliable. Social proof is originated from the idea that people will emulate others' behavior when they shop (Lestari, 2020). It is a softer strategy compared to scientific proof as social proof does not establish a direct authority to the recipients' choices. Social proof shows that the product is popular and purchased by many people. For instance, the manufacturers will include the positive comments or recommendations by the customers who have tried the products before. The audience will therefore be more likely to buy the products as social proof leads the audience to subconsciously copy other consumers' behaviors.

Puffery is another discursive strategy commonly employed by the advertisers to promote their facial creams. According to Tellis & Amber (2007), puffery is an advertising strategy that praises products with subjective opinions or exaggerations with no specific facts. Differ from scientific proof or social proof which involve views from other parties, puffery is entirely based on the brands' own ideas that are often unrealistic. With the use of puffery, the brands exercise power to the customers by creates a delusion towards people's mind that the products are magical solutions to every skin problems (Susanti, 2019).



Figure 13. Example of scientific proof



Figure 14. Example of social proof



Figure 15. Example of puffery

Other discursive strategies such as emotional appeal and exotic words are not directly related to the benefits or functions of the products. Instead, these strategies manipulate the inward feelings of the customers (Lestari, 2020). For example, the sentence ‘*Once you’ve tried Genaissance de la Mer The Eye & Expression Cream, there’s no going back.*’ in La Mer’s advertisement builds a sense of belonging in audience’s mind. In another advertisement by Kiehl’s, the sentence ‘*Now this is what dreams are made of!*’ draws a potential appeal that encourages the recipients to reach their dreams by using Kiehl’s facial cream. In addition, many manufacturers have included exotic or foreign words in their facial cream advertisements. Examples include *Génifique* and *Orchidée Impériale*. The foreign words make the products sound more prestigious, superior and imaginative, creating a high-class and luxurious image of the brands. Therefore, the manufacturers who use these foreign words are

more likely to be perceived as high status brands, which elicits pride among the customers.



Figure 16. Example of emotional appeal



Figure 17. Example of exotic words

### 3. Sociocultural practice analysis (macro level)

The sociocultural practice analysis deals with the third research question. This level of analysis puts emphasis on the ideal standards of female beauty shaped by the text and the discursive practice in the facial cream advertisements. Social problems reflected and reproduced by the advertisements will also be discussed in this section.

**The ideology of beauty.** The beauty product companies create and present beauty myths by advertising through the use of adjectives and verbs. Based on the above textual and discursive practice analysis, it is shown that a majority of the facial cream advertisements contain adjectives related to youth and plumpness. For instance, *rejuvenated*, *plump*, *hydrated*, *smooth*, *tightened* and *radiant* are some of the most frequently adopted adjectives in the data collected. The manufacturers use such adjectives to advertise the functions of the facial creams and convince the recipients to purchase the products. What's more, the manufacturers identify the natural signs of aging, e.g. eye bags, fine lines and dull skins, as serious problems with the use of

verbs such as *correct*, *reverse*, *reduce* and *fight*. It distributes the idea that the process of aging is an unfavorable feature for the ideology of beauty. According to Susanti (2019), the words in beauty product advertisements have social significance to the public as people's way of thinking would be affected after watching/ hearing the advertisements for several times. The women are misled by the advertisements which contain bias and myths about beauty standards in believing what is advertised is true (Kuar et al., 2013). In this study, the manufacturers spread the concept of beauty when they present an ideal image of a beautiful woman, whose skin should be smooth, shiny, hydrated with no aging phenomena. This proves that the companies evoke their power towards the public by affecting the perception of beauty among women in the society.

**Social identity of women.** The phenomenon of in-group-versus-out-group, which construct identities of women, are produced in the course of facial cream advertisements. Lestari (2020) argues that beauty is related to social acceptance. The advertisement discourse produces the notion that women who look attractive with good skin quality is more likely to be accepted in the society (Lestari, 2020). In this study, the facial cream advertisements have separated recipients into in-group and out-group with members of in-group being more socially accepted. In-group is a social group where individuals identify themselves as part of the group whereas out-group refer to the social group to which individuals do not identify. Van Dijk (1993) has proposed a paradigm called 'ideological square' describing the overall discursive strategies and their relations with different social groups based on four maxims (see Figure 18 below.) The discursive strategies of positive self-representation and negative other-representation employed by the manufacturers in facial cream advertisements have divided recipients into in-group and out-group. In this study,

advertisers positively represent themselves when they use first person pronouns/ determiners (We, our) and positive adjectives together to emphasize the benefits of the products. By doing so, the manufacturers create an in-group whose members fit into the ideal standards of beauty. It asserts that only the women who purchase the products and look ideally pretty belong to the in-group. On the other hand, the manufacturers depreciate the women who have signs of aging on their faces and associate them with out-group, as opposed to in-group. The facial cream advertisements in this study make the women feel that they should purchase the items in order to be part of the in-group where members are highly appreciated and accepted, rather than the out-group in which members are discriminated.

Emphasize good things about us (in-group)	Emphasize bad things about them (out-group)
De-emphasize good things about them (out-group)	De-emphasize bad things about us (in-group)

Figure 18. Van Dijk's *Ideological square* (1993)

In addition, the results show that the facial cream advertisements have a control over women's mind by lowering women's self-esteem and confidence. The beauty product advertisements work by arousing feelings of dissatisfaction among the audience as a strategy to stimulate them to buy the advertised items (Kuar et al., 2013). In the facial cream advertisements, the women who do not have perfect skin are negatively represented and considered as out-group. The advertisers spread the prejudice that the signs of aging are unacceptable flaws, which make the women more anxious about their outlook. The women will thus become less confident and stressed when their appearance do not match with the standards of beauty created by the advertisers.

## **V. Conclusion**

This study uses Critical Discourse Analysis as an approach to examine 20 pieces of facial cream advertisements from various brands selected on Facebook. With the use of Fairclough's three-dimensional model, the researcher explores the linguistic choices in the posts, the persuasive strategies in beauty product advertising, and the underlying problems of such advertisements. Based on the data analysis of the collected facial cream advertisements, it can be concluded that the manufacturers use a variety of linguistic devices to advertise their products. In the discourse of facial cream advertisements, the use of direct address (person pronouns/ determiners) and rhetorical questions help establish a closer and casual relationship between the customers and the advertisers. However, some manufacturers exert pressure on the customers when they use imperatives to persuade the recipients. In terms of describing the functions of the facial creams, the manufacturers tend to adopt positive adjectives, conjunctions and to-infinitives serve to attract the female customers. These linguistics features are sometimes accompanied by several rhetoric techniques, in order to make the advertisements more eye-catching.

Regarding the discursive strategies, most of the beauty product brands manipulate the recipients by invoking inadequacies (negative other-representation). They describe several skin conditions such as eye bags and wrinkles as serious problems which need to be solved by their products. On the other hand, the manufacturers positively representing themselves with the use of 1<sup>st</sup> person pronouns and positive adjectives. It creates a clear boundary between the recipients who have certain skin problems and the advertisers. In order to give convincing evidence for the facial creams, a lot of brands include scientific evidence and social proof such as user reviews in their advertisements. Some brands, on the other hand, uses puffery



(exaggerating the product functions without evidence) to increase the attractiveness of the products. Furthermore, emotional appeal and exotic words in facial cream advertisements can evoke different emotions, such as pride and loyalty, of the recipients.

The words and phrases in the advertisements have a strong social significance to the public. In this study, the manufacturers exercise control over people's perception of beauty by presenting the standards of perfect beauty, which are having shiny, smooth, moisturized and young skins with no obvious signs of aging. These types of images of beauty have been normalized in today's society by the media discourse. Regarding the social issues arisen from the discourse of beauty product advertising, the findings demonstrate that the manufacturers set up the dichotomy of in-group and out-group in the discourse. People who can fulfill the requirements of ideal beauty are identified as in-group, whereas people with less desirable skin conditions are classified as the out-group. The companies attract customers by depreciating the out-group and accentuating the positives of the in-group, which lowers the self-esteem of certain customers.

Language is a powerful tool that shapes people's thoughts. Words in facial cream advertisements have a strong significance to the public. In the era of information explosion, consumers are deluged with excessive advertisements on the internet and will easily be affected by them. Although the beauty product companies have included many fanciful and persuasive words in their commercials, women should be aware of how such words control their perception of beauty, as well as the bias and discrimination embedded in the text.

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## Appendix A: The Facial Cream Advertisements

(1)



SHISEIDO

February 1 · 🌐

...

Outsmart gravity and offset the effects of aging in record time with our advanced lifting formulas - created with your skin type in mind. The Vital Perfection Cream line is available at Macy's - shop now at: <https://mcys.co/32hpmn5>

You have: Normal To Dry Skin  
Use Vital Perfection Uplifting and Firming Cream  
Enriched to moisturize deeply and visibly lift skin in just 1 week.

You have: Combination to Oily Skin  
Use Vital Perfection Uplifting and Firming Cream to renew fullness and visibly lift skin in just 1 week.

You have: Normal Skin  
Use Vital Perfection Uplifting and Firming Day Cream SPF 30 to protect skin from UV rays and visibly lift skin in just 1 week. **See less**

(2)



SHISEIDO

January 19 · 🌐

...

Introducing NEW Essential Energy Hydrating Cream.

The final ingredient of our all-new formula? Your skin's inner hydration power. Using our Hyaluronic Acid RED, this hydrating cream activates your skin's natural ability to produce moisture. Now, discover powerful hydration that comes from deep within. For a healthy, continuous glow.

<https://bit.ly/3Fp5wUC>

(3)



SHISEIDO

January 3 · 🌐

...

Does your skin need a wake-up call?

Give your beauty routine a powerful boost with our newly remastered Essential Energy formulas. Now featuring our proprietary Hyaluronic Acid RED, an innovative technology comprised of Red Ginseng and Purified Hyaluronic Acid that work together to deliver intense hydration, encourage skin's internal natural production of Hyaluronic Acid, and strengthen its moisture barrier. The lightweight and luxurious texture has also been enhanced with... **See more**

(4)



SHISEIDO

January 26 · 🌐

...

Get to know our Future Solution LX Anti-Aging Eye and Lip Cream with over 354 5-Star reviews at Macy's.

This powerful restorative treatment is formulated to visibly renew and prolong skin's beauty around the delicate eye and lip areas. Dark circles, puffiness and wrinkles appear reduced while skin looks tightened and dramatically smooth, thanks to rich, 24-hour moisture. Skin around eyes and lips appears youthful and luminous.

Shop now: <https://mcys.co/31YYGHO>

S

(5)



L'Oréal Paris

September 19 at 1:00 AM · 🌐

...

Plump up your beauty routine with Hyaluronic Acid! 💧 Hydrate with our face & eye serums as well as our NEW Hyaluronic Acid water cream to fight the key signs of aging!

Available at Walmart! <https://bit.ly/HACREAM>

(6)



L'Oréal Paris

February 18 · 🌐

...

! BACK IN STOCK !

💧 Hyaluronic Acid Eye Serum to replump & brighten

💧 Pressed Night Cream to visibly reduce wrinkles & moisturize

See why these top loved products are flying off the shelves! Available NOW at Walmart:

<https://bit.ly/lorealpariswalmart>

(7)



**Guerlain** ✓  
January 8 · 🌐



## GUERLAIN | Orchidée Impériale: The Cream

Combining High Regeneration, High Naturalness\* and High Sensoriality, Orchidée Impériale's groundbreaking formula encapsulates the Guerlain spirit of excellence.

\*96 % naturally-derived ingredients. Calculation based on the international ISO standard 16128, including water. The remaining 4% help to optimise the formula's integrity over time and its sensory qualities.

Discover Orchidée Impériale: [bit.ly/3JMceY1](http://bit.ly/3JMceY1)

[See less](#)

(8)



**Lancôme**  
September 22 at 6:00 AM · 🌐



Strengthen your skin's moisture barrier with Advanced Génifique. Start with massaging the face serum onto your skin and apply a layer of our new Génifique night cream to restore hydration and plumpness while you sleep. Finish with our eye cream to smooth fine lines.  
**#lancome #AdvancedGenifique**

♥ Shop our Advanced Génifique collection here:  
<http://spr.ly/6180MVwrC>

(9)



**Lancôme** ✓  
July 5 · 🌐



Glowing! ✨ Jasmine Tookes using our Absolué The Serum and Soft Cream. Apply our Absolué The Serum day and night for plump, hydrated skin. Finish with our Soft Cream for radiant glow and 24-hour hydration. Let us know below if you added this collection to your skincare routine!

Find it here: <https://bit.ly/3yeygxF>

[See less](#)

(10)



**Lancôme**  
September 3 at 4:00 AM · 🌐



Dreaming of hydrated, healthier looking skin? 🌊 Meet Lancôme's new Advanced Génifique Repairing Night Cream! This night cream is formulated with 10% Bifidus Prebiotic and Triple Ceramide Complex to repair the skin's moisture barrier overnight and overtime reveals stronger skin in just 4 weeks. Let us know below if you're excited to try it! **#Genifique #GenifiqueNightCream #Lancome**

♥ Shop Here: <http://spr.ly/6187MKXJZ>

(11)



**Estée Lauder**  
April 11 · 🌐



Creating the future of beauty together, we're doing our part with **#RevitalizingSupreme** Moisturizer! It's the same formula you love, now with 99% naturally-derived\*\* Hibiscus extract, responsibly sourced Moringa extract and in upgraded recyclable glass jar which helps reduce up to 375,000 pounds of plastic\*. **#EarthMonth**  
✨ Shop now: <https://estee.cm/3LB06cM>

(12)



**Estée Lauder** ✓  
February 22 · 🌐



Have you met NEW Revitalizing Supreme Youth Power Creme? Skin feels firmer, is deeply nourished, looks radiant—and now, more LIFTED! Featuring powerful ingredients including Hibiscus Morning Bloom Extract that reveals your skin's youth potential. Revitalizing Supreme+ had 89% of women looking more lifted in four weeks with 84% reporting a more lifted, toned and defined looking jawline. Shop now:

<https://estee.cm/35Otahn>

\*\*Consumer testing on 110 women after using product for 4 weeks. ✨

[See less](#)



(13)



**La Mer** ✓  
September 22 at 11:00 PM · 🌐



Plenty sumptuous and just smooth enough, The Moisturizing Soft Cream is fast becoming a fan favorite. Maybe it's the cell-renewing Miracle Broth™...or the barrier-boosting benefits...or even the Moisturizing Sphere technology. But we venture to guess it's all about that moment when someone says, "you're glowing."  
[See less](#)

(14)



**La Mer** ✓  
May 7 · 🌐



Any guesses as to which mesmerizing moisturizer this is?

That satiny gelée texture is none other than The Moisturizing Cool Gel Cream. With a lightweight, calming touch, it's a perfect update to your warm weather skincare routine – nearly as refreshing as spring itself.  
[See less](#)

(15)



**La Mer** tagged a product from their shop.

January 25 · 🌐

...

Once you've tried Genaissance de la Mer The Eye & Expression Cream, there's no going back. For those wondering what's inside this little pot with the long name, here are just a few areas where this extraordinary cream works its visibly renewing magic: dark circles, puffiness, even frown lines. In need of a little skin plumping? Check. Looking for a more lifted look? We've got that too. All in all, your ideal La Mer eye cream and then some.

(16)



**Dior** ✓

September 4 at 8:00 PM · 🌐

...

Dior has pushed the limits on anti-aging to help you reverse the visible signs of aging. Dior Prestige La Crème works on three levels for smoother, denser and lifted skin. In 8 weeks, skin looks 6 years younger.

This is more than a cream. This is La Crème.

(17)



**Kiehl's** ✓

August 22 · 🌐



The eyes 👁️ have it. Our Super Multi-Corrective Anti-Aging Eye Cream is clinically shown to visibly lift, smooth, de-puff and brighten the eye area to correct visible signs of aging around the brow bone, eyelid, crow's feet and under-eye!

Shop it here, <https://bit.ly/2UAgV2j>  
See less

(18)



**Kiehl's** ✓

May 6 · 🌐



Meet your ✨NEW✨ dream cream! Packed with botanicals and cloud soft to the touch, Midnight Recovery Omega-Rich Cloud Cream floats onto skin to smooth and plump up skin overnight while you sleep zzz. Apply before bed to see a rejuvenated appearance in the morning!

(19)



**Kiehl's**

May 13 · 🌐

...

Wake up to youthful skin thanks to these two magical formulas. Formulated with natural botanicals rich in Omegas 3 and 6 our brand new Midnight Recovery Omega-Rich Cloud Cream is clinically demonstrated to help you wake up with plump and supple skin by morning. Plus, our fan-favorite Midnight Recovery Concentrate now has Passionflower to help support skin's natural collagen, to smooth fine lines, replenish and rejuvenate skin overnight ✨🌙  
#KiehlsMidnightRecovery

(20)



**Kiehl's**

May 9 · 🌐

...

Now this is what dreams are made of! Apply our NEW Midnight Recovery Omega-Rich Cloud Cream to lock in moisture while you catch up on zzz's. And in the morning, wake up to skin that is plumper, softer and more rejuvenated! ✨

Shop it here, <https://bit.ly/2UAgV2j> 💙

## Appendix B: Tables

**Table 1: Pronouns and determiners in facial cream advertisements**

Linguistic features	Examples
Person pronouns	<i><b>You</b> have: Combination to oily skin (Shiseido)</i> <i><b>We</b> are doing our part with</i> <i>#RevitalizingSupremeMoisturizer ! (Estee Lauder)</i> <i>Looking for a more lifted look? <b>We</b>'ve got that too! (La Mer)</i>
Possessive adjectives/ determiners	<i><b>Our</b> newly remastered Essential Energy formulas ...(Shiseido)</i> <i><b>Our</b> Absolute The serum...(Lancôme)</i> <i><b>Your</b> skin's inner hydration power (Shiseido)</i> <i><b>Your</b> skin's youth potential (Estee Lauder)</i>

**Table 2: To-infinitives in facial cream advertisements**

Linguistic features	Examples
To-infinitive	<i><b>to re-plump</b> and brighten, <b>to reduce</b> wrinkles (L'Oréal Paris)</i> <i><b>to restore</b> hydration and plumpness, <b>to smooth</b> fine lines (Lancôme)</i> <i><b>to correct</b> visible signs of aging (Kiehl's)</i> <i><b>to replenish</b> and <b>rejuvenate</b> skin overnight, <b>to help support</b> skin's natural collagen (Kiehl's)</i>

**Table 3: Adjectives in facial cream advertisements**

Linguistic feature	Examples
Positive adjectives	<i>purified, luxurious (Shiseido)</i> <i>tightened, youthful, smooth, luminous (Shiseido)</i> <i>groundbreaking (Guerlain)</i> <i>radiant (Lancôme)</i> <i>ideal (La Mer)</i> <i>rejuvenated (Kiehl's)</i> <i>plump, hydrated (Kiehl's)</i>



**Table 4: Conjunctions in facial cream advertisements**

Linguistic features	Examples
Coordinating (additive) conjunctions	<i>To moisturize deeply <b>and</b> visibly lift skin (Shiseido)</i> <i>Hydrate with our face &amp; eye serums <b>as well as</b> our NEW Hyaluronic Acid water cream (L'Oréal Paris)</i>
Subordinating conjunctions	<i>To restore hydration and plumpness <b>while</b> you sleep (Lancôme)</i> <i>Dark circles, puffiness and wrinkles appear reduced <b>while</b> skin looks tightened and dramatically smooth ... (Shiseido)</i>

**Table 5: Questions in facial cream advertisements**

Linguistic feature	Examples
Rhetorical questions	<i>Does your skin need a wake-up call? (Shiseido)</i> <i>Dreaming of hydrated, healthier looking skin? (Lancôme)</i> <i>In need of a little skin plumping? Looking for a more lifted look? (La Mer)</i>

**Table 6: Imperatives in facial cream advertisements**

Linguistic feature	Examples
Imperatives	<i><b>Give</b> your beauty routine a powerful boost ... (Shiseido)</i> <i><b>Discover</b> powerful hydration that comes from deep within. (Shiseido)</i> <i><b>Finish</b> with our eye cream to smooth fine lines. (Lancôme)</i>

**Table 7: Rhetorical techniques in facial cream advertisements**

Linguistic features	Examples
Simile	<i>It's a perfect update to your warm weather skincare routine - nearly <b>as refreshing as spring itself</b> (La Mer)</i>
Alliteration	<i>the <b>barrier-boosting benefits</b> (La Mer)</i>
Parallelism	<i><b>High</b> regeneration, <b>high</b> naturalness and <b>high</b> sensorially (Guerlain)</i> <i>wake up to skin that is <b>plumper, softer and more rejuvenated!</b> (Kiehl's)</i> <i>Maybe it's the cell-renewing Miracle Broth ... <b>or</b> the barrier-boosting benefits ... <b>or</b> even the Moisturizing Sphere technology. (La Mer)</i>

**Table 8: Discursive strategies in facial cream advertisements**

Discursive strategies	Examples
Scientific evidence	<i><b>96%</b> naturally-derived ingredients (Guerlain)</i> <i>reveals stronger skin in just <b>4 weeks</b> (Lancôme)</i> <i>in <b>8 weeks</b>, skin looks <b>6 years</b> younger (Dior)</i>
Invoking inadequacies (negative other-representation)	<i><b>Dark circles, puffiness and wrinkles</b> appear reduced ... (Shiseido)</i> <i>To <b>fight the key signs of aging!</b> (L'Oréal Paris)</i> <i>To visibly reduce <b>wrinkles</b> (L'Oréal Paris)</i> <i>to smooth <b>fine lines</b> (Lancôme)</i> <i>reverse the <b>visible signs of aging</b> (Dior)</i> <i>to correct <b>visible signs of aging</b> around the brow bone, eyelid, crow's feet and under-eye! (Kiehl's)</i>
Positive self-representation	<i>Using <b>our Hyaluronic Acid RED</b>, this hydrating cream activates your skin natural ability to...</i> <i>(Shiseido)</i> <i>Apply <b>our Absolute The Serum</b> day and night for plump, hydrated skin (Lancôme)</i>



Puffery (Exaggeration)	<i>outsmart gravity and offset the effects of aging ... (Shiseido)</i>
Emotional appeal	<i>Once you've tried Genaissance de la Mer The Eye &amp; Expression Cream, there's no going back. (La Mer)</i> (belonging/ unity) <i>when someone says, "you're glowing." (La Mer)</i> (pride) <i>Now this is what dreams are made of! (Kiehl's)</i> (potential) <i>This is more than a cream. This is La Crème. (Dior)</i> (pride)
Social proof	<i>Get to know our Future Solution LX Anti-Aging Eye and Lip Cream with <b>over 354 5-star reviews</b> at Macy's. (Shiseido)</i> <i><b>89%</b> of women looking more lifted in four weeks with <b>84%</b> reporting a more lifted, toned and defined looking jawline. (Estee Lauder)</i>
Exotic words	<i><b>Génifique</b> (Lancôme)</i> <i><b>Orchidée Impériale</b> (Guerlain)</i> <i>The satiny <b>gelée</b> texture (La Mer)</i> <i>Dior Prestige <b>La Crème</b> (Dior)</i>

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# **The Effectiveness of Vocabulary Teaching Strategies Used by Teachers for Young ESL Learners in Hong Kong**

Kosain Sardar

Supervisor: Prof. Jette Hansen Edwards

## **Abstract**

As English proficiency is often correlated with higher income, social prestige, and educational level (Hyland, 1997), having good English language skills has become paramount for landing opportunities and career advancement for Hong Kongers. This study aims to find out what strategies are used by ESL teachers of young learners in Hong Kong to build up the students' vocabulary and make them competitive communicators so that they can grow up to reach their full potential. A literature review of five Hong Kong based ESL teaching research papers and interviews with six Hong Kong ESL teachers were carried out. It was found that due to Hong Kong's exam-oriented curriculum, limited instruction time, and parents' need to see evidence of learning, teachers relied more heavily on recognition and memorization-based strategies instead of strategies that would allow deep processing of the words. However, there is a need for emphasis on the application of the words so that students can retain and use them outside of the classroom context.

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Background

Hong Kong may no longer be a British colony, but the 156 years long rule has definitely cemented the importance of English, making it one of the city's two official languages, according to the Hong Kong Basic Law (article 9) and the Official Languages Ordinance (chapter 5). English is widely used in legal, professional, and business-related matters. Yet, 88.2% of the population mostly speak Cantonese in their daily lives which means that English is often taught to most Hong Kong people as a second language in schools, with reference to the Hong Kong Census and Statistics Department (2021).

Considering the fact that English is the functional lingua franca for most professional matters and the medium of instruction employed by Hong Kong tertiary institutions, English proficiency is often correlated with higher income, social prestige, and educational level (Hyland, 1997). Having good English language skills has become paramount for landing opportunities and career advancement for Hong Kongers. It is essential for young Hong Kongers to strive for high competency in English, which they are mostly exposed to at schools. Hence, much of the responsibility falls on the schools and their teachers, how do Hong Kong teachers ensure that they can effectively influence and transmit knowledge to their students so that they can grasp the language better and adapt to Hong Kong's bilingual and highly competitive culture?

Young children that start learning a second language from early on tend to ultimately achieve higher levels of proficiency when compared to adults who only make progress during the early stages of acquisition (Krashen et al., 1982), which makes it vital to start teaching ESL as early as possible. In fact, the Hong Kong Government even acknowledges that 'early exposure to a second language could benefit subsequent language development of young

children' (Education and Manpower Bureau, 2003). According to the linguist Norbert Schmitt (2000), lexical knowledge is central to communicative competence in second language acquisition. In 2006, the Hong Kong Government included recognizing and making use of "vocabulary related to their everyday life" as one of the key learning objectives for young learners in the Guide to the pre-primary curriculum (Curriculum Development Council, 2006, p30). While vocabulary teaching has often been associated with reading as a source of input (Krashen, 1989), very young children are usually not as well equipped to recognize the words and their sounds on their own. Thus, they rely on their teachers to help them retain such lexical knowledge through various memorization and comprehension strategies to be able to both say and understand the word properly. This shows that it is important for teachers to use various strategies to help students build a strong foundation of vocabulary from a young age so that they learn to express their ideas and communicate with confidence.

Hong Kong is known to have an exam-oriented curriculum which often results in rote learning and grammar drilling, leaving little room for free interaction and the chance for students to communicate in English on their own (Chan & Yuen, 2014). Furthermore, most young children speak Cantonese at home and are only exposed to English during the lessons. Young students may easily end up remaining mostly passive in class and may find learning English a tedious task. They may also not have the motivation to actively want to build their lexical knowledge. Often, it falls on to the teachers to include strategies in their lessons that can peak and maintain young students' interest and help them retain lexical knowledge which also includes phonological awareness and orthographic knowledge. Teachers need to prepare students for the exams while also giving them a chance to practice and build their foundation in English. Therefore, more attention should be given to vocabulary teaching strategies perceived as effective by teachers that may help Young English as second language (ESL) who

are just starting to learn to read, write and speak English to retain vocabulary for longer and even outside of the classroom context while also fulfilling curriculum requirements.

While there are plenty of studies focusing on the effectiveness of teaching strategies by measuring the students' results, this paper will be focusing on vocabulary teaching strategies and beliefs that teachers have for employing those strategies, this is because teachers have experience in what methods can raise students' interest and allow them to make the most out of their lessons in general without letting things like individual difference, socio-economic background and existing knowledge of the students affect the results. The aim of this study is to investigate what types of teaching strategies are used to aid in the teaching of vocabulary to second language learners, how effective they are, and how they may enhance students' learning experience.

## 1.2 Research Questions

1. What teaching strategies do Hong Kong teachers use for English vocabulary retention in young second-language learners?
2. How do these strategies provide an effective learning experience for young second-language learners in Hong Kong?
3. How do teachers encourage their students to use learned vocabulary outside of the classroom context?

### 1.3 Limitations

There are a limited number of studies that have examined general vocabulary teaching approaches in English language learning in Hong Kong. Furthermore, the effectiveness of the strategies is based solely on the participating teacher's opinion as no tests were conducted for the students to gauge how much their vocabulary had improved after the use of a particular strategy. The teachers are also non-native Cantonese speakers and are appointed as Native English Teachers. It is possible that the opinions of native Cantonese-speaking teachers may vary from the opinions NETs. Finally, teaching methods may vary from school to school, especially between private and public schools.

### 1.4 Methodology

To identify different vocabulary instruction strategies used within a classroom and which ones are the most effective in terms of enhancing the students' long-term retention and learning experience. A 2-step methodology will be carried out.

1. An in-depth literature review where 5 Hong Kong-based vocabulary teaching research papers will be analyzed and different strategies will be extracted and categorized for easy retrieval. The criteria for selecting studies for the literature review are threefold: (1) the topics must be related to young learners in Kindergarten on junior Primary (Primary 1-3); (2) there must be at least some empirical data for analyses in those papers; articles merely containing arguments, discussions or reviews will be excluded; (3) only those relevant studies published locally in the past decade will be included.

2. An in-depth interview with 6 Hong Kong ESL School teachers will be carried out. The

interview aims to identify different strategies the interviewees use within their classroom setting and how effective they find them. (See appendix)

## 2 Literature Review

### 2.1 Teaching Strategies Used by Hong Kong teachers of Young ESL learners English vocabulary retention in students

There are many strategies that are commonly used across primary schools and kindergarten to teach vocabulary items to children who are just starting to learn English within the local context. The use of visuals such as flashcards or objects is one of the most commonly used strategies in a classroom setting (Rogers & Cheung, 2018). Below is a table identifying 13 vocabulary teaching strategies used in teaching young ESL learners in Hong Kong. These strategies were extracted from 5 Hong Kong-based vocabulary teaching research papers concerning young learners that involved observation of classes, interviews with teachers, or studies involving students.

*Table 1*

	Strategy	Explanation	Example(s)	Source
a)	Use of Visuals	Teachers prepare visuals to illustrate the vocabulary and to jog students' memory of previously taught words by connecting the visual to its sound. Often used with strategy b).	Flashcards/photographs containing both the word and the pictures. Typically used to teach vocabulary items that fall under a certain category like 'animals' or belong to the same word family such as '_at'. Can also include real-life objects.	Lau & Rau (2013)
b)	Labelling and	Pointing at the word and/or	Teacher may point at the	Lau &

	Pointing	its corresponding picture when introducing unfamiliar words and naming them.	picture and elicit labels from students by asking ‘What is this? This is a ...’ or simply name the item they are pointing at. This can also involve a variety of games, e.g tapping the flashcard that the teacher calls out.	Rau (2013)
c)	Story-telling	Introducing the target vocabulary being used in context through a story and reading it aloud with attention being given to specific words and extended activities being designed in relation to the target words	Teacher may ask the students to read aloud after her in a chorus so that they could learn to pronounce the target words and also point at the illustrations in the story to enhance students’ understanding of said words.	Lau & Rau (2013)
d)	Choral Repetition	Asking students to say the word out loud multiple times so that they can learn to pronounce the word	Teacher may ask students to repeat words and phrases in a chorus after her. Teacher may emphasise the sounds of the word by breaking down the syllables and ask students to repeat multiple times.	Lau & Rau (2013)
e)	Emphasis on the Written Form	Calling attention to the spelling of the words.	Teacher may ask students to spell out the words on a worksheet. Teacher may also use activities such as matching where students match the word cards to its corresponding picture. Or locate the word in a word search or story.	Lau & Rau (2013)
f)	Explicit instructions	Stressing the target vocabulary and explicitly making clear the learning outcome of the lesson	Teacher may introduce the words and let the students know the expectations of the lesson. The teacher may design activities with clear objective and exercises that can support students' retention of the word.	Ng, Qiao and Tsang (2019)
g)	Word Clues	Try to prompt students to use their existing knowledge by providing contextual clues.	Teacher may give clues and prompt students to guess the word. For instance, teacher may say “It is served cold, sweet, and comes in many flavours” to elicit the word	Lau & Rau (2013)



			'ice cream' from the students, especially when reviewing previously introduced words.	
h)	Verbal Explanation	Directly provide a brief explanation of what the word means.	Teacher may give a brief description of the word and even compare it to other similar words that students may confuse it with. The teacher may even use it in a sentence so that the students know what context the word may be used in.	Lau & Rau (2013)
i)	Word Discussion	Asking questions and starting conversation in relation to the words.	Teacher may ask students about their personal experiences. For instance, if the theme is 'transport' the teacher may ask what transport students use to get to school.	Lau & Rau (2013)
j)	Mother Tongue	Utilising the mother tongue of students (Cantonese) to provide explanation of the words.	Teacher may translate the vocabulary to Cantonese so that students can understand the word, the teacher may also ask the students if they know the Chinese equivalent of the word.  Teacher may also make use of translation tools such as Google translate class to make use of students' proficiency in Cantonese to teach English.	Lau & Rau (2013) Stapleton (2021)
k)	Interaction/Dialogic Teaching	Teachers and students collaborate and build on each others ideas to learn through interaction.	Teacher and students may take turns in acting as the inquirer during dialogic exchanges. The teacher may use the PEER strategy (prompt, evaluate, expand, repeat) with the help of CROWD question design (completion, recall, open-ended, wh- and distancing)	Chow, Hui, Li & Dong (2021)
l)	Input-spacing	The amount of time between learning episodes over a period of time.	The teacher may plan out whether to teach certain items over a longer period of time or by concentrating it into a single session for better	Rogers & Cheung (2018)

			retention. The teacher may also plan when to review previously taught items.	
m )	Semantic-clustering	When semantically related words are introduced together through theme-based vocabulary lists and exercises	Body parts: eyes, nose, head, mouth, ears	Rogers & Cheung (2018)

From *Table 1*, it can be seen that ESL teachers in Hong Kong use a variety of strategies in teaching vocabulary to young children. While using visuals and labeling them might be one of the most popular forms of instruction (Lau & Rao, 2013), they mostly focus on the recognition of the words by developing a strong link between language and image which helps students recall and retrieve the vocabulary when they encounter such visuals. In fact, Strategies a) to c) are all concerning methods that enhance the recognition of words upon seeing the visual item. While some teachers may use c) story-telling to contextualize the target words, teachers of young learners in the above study mostly focused on labeling and pointing, and choral repetition during the story to enhance students' ability to recognize and link the words to their visual form.

On the other hand, strategies d) to f) are designed to enhance the memorization of the target words as it involves drilling exercises such as repeating multiple times after the teacher. It also involves providing students a clear goal of what they are expected to learn through vocabulary lists (strategy f) which the students are encouraged to memorize as they may get tested on them and includes activities like word search which emphasizes the written form of the word.

The following strategies g) to k) are implemented in the classroom to enhance students' understanding and allow them to apply the vocabulary properly in their language, these

strategies include explanation of the vocabulary and discussion which allows the students to gain contextual knowledge of the target vocabulary. Strategy c) may also provide students with some contextual knowledge regarding the vocabulary but it depends on the structure of the story-telling session. For instance, if much of the attention is given to choral repetition during the story-telling session, then it may take students' focus away from the plot which contextualizes those vocabulary items and make them pay more attention to the vocabulary and its' visual in isolation. According to Rao and Lau's study (2013), most teachers only made use of strategies a), b) and d) during the storytelling session even though one of the main functions of story-telling is to introduce the vocabulary to students in context and prompt students' interaction with the material in class. It may be possible that such young students may not have the language skills to openly discuss the plot of the story and that explicitly pointing out the target words and illustrations may serve as a more suitable method in teaching its students. Strategies that involved deep processing of words (g-k) are present in Hong Kong ESL classrooms but scarcely used, especially when compared to strategies that enhance memorization and recognition which dominated most of the observed sessions (Rao & Lau, 2013).

Finally, strategies l) and m) involve teachers' or schools' planning of the sessions. The strategies concern the optimal way of structuring the teaching sessions such as teaching vocabulary that is semantically similar/theme-based, and spacing out the teaching and revising of the vocabulary items over several sessions so that students can retain, recall and build their vocabulary over time.

## 2.2 How the strategies provide an effective learning experience for second language learners in Hong Kong

### *2.2.1 Recognition and memorization*

In 2013, Carrie Lau and Nirmala Rao conducted a study investigating English vocabulary instruction in six early childhood classrooms in Hong Kong by observing the classrooms for one week in 3 Kindergartens from 2 districts. They also interviewed the participating teachers on their teaching beliefs and practices. From the study, it was found that teachers mainly used strategies that enhanced the recognition and memorization of the words rather than the actual meaning and application of them. For instance, much of the lessons that were observed spent considerable amounts of time using visuals, pointing and labeling, and choral repetition so that students could recognize and link the word to its visual form. This may be because the main focus in vocabulary teaching is on the phonetic instructions and kids that young may not have enough language knowledge to apply those words in daily conversations just yet. Most of the teachers interviewed in this study identified phonics as the most important skill in vocabulary acquisition which is reflected in the types of vocabulary teaching instructions they relied on, such as choral repetition, flashcards, and pointing and labeling which all supported memorization of the word form and its pronunciation

Providing students with multiple contexts in which the vocabulary could be used was minimal, as far as understanding the word goes, teachers relied on visual aids such as flashcards or videos that portrayed the meaning of the word but not necessarily how that word can be used. There were instances in which story-telling was adopted as vocabulary instruction but the focus was again on pointing and labeling the target words throughout the story. According to the

study, this may be due to schools' or parents' needs to see evidence of what the students have learned. Thus, more focus is given to children's ability to label images with words and complete exercises rather than use them in conversation. (Lau & Rao, 2013) While teachers may have the freedom to design activities that expose students to various contexts in which the vocabulary may be used, the instructional time is usually not long enough to go in-depth into the vocabulary, especially with the coursework that is required for the students to complete within the lesson time.

Another strategy that can aid memorization and recognition of the target words is explicit instructions, through which the students can have a clear idea of the objective of the lesson and know their role as a student. According to a study on the effects of explicit L2 vocabulary instruction on developing kindergarten childrens' target and general vocabulary and phonological awareness, explicit instruction can lead to greater gains in receptive and expressive vocabulary in younger Hong Kong ESL students as compared to implicit instruction. While explicit instruction can sometimes be repetitive and resort to drilling, it is still more beneficial for younger students as it allows them to master the vocabulary through repetitive exposure, encouraging them to pay attention to the word and drill it into their memory. For implicit instructions, very young students may not be able to pick up new vocabulary items on their own due to their limited existing vocabulary knowledge (Yeung et al., 2019). They may not understand what is going on and may just be present in the classroom without processing any new knowledge. As the famous linguist, Stephen Krashen's theories suggest, the input must be comprehensible in order for the acquisition to happen from the notion 'i + 1' in which 'i' refers to the students' existing knowledge (Krashen, 1982). However, young students, especially K1-K3 students, are being exposed to English for the first time ever in the classrooms and simply may not have the 'i' to comprehend the '+1' in implicit instruction.

Therefore, it is important to have a clear focus on what the students are supposed to learn. Teachers can actively call attention to target words and design activities that aid in the memorization of the words so that young students can build up their vocabulary banks.

It can be said that these learning strategies used by these teachers assist the students with remembering and recognizing the word to build their vocabulary bank and let students and parents have a clear sense of what the learning outcome is. However, in terms of teaching how to successfully apply these words in real-life contexts, other strategies also need to be incorporated such as interaction and word discussions. For younger students, even simple word discussions can allow them to use the target word in a natural conversation rather than simply knowing the word in isolation.

### *2.2.2 Interactive, In-depth, and Contextual*

So how effective is incorporating more interaction-based activities to teach vocabulary? According to a study on dialogic teaching in Hong Kong first-grade ESL classrooms, it was found that dialogic teaching, which is essentially the ongoing talk between teacher and students rather than the one-way teacher only presentation, is an effective teaching approach that allows for interactive collaboration by engaging in meaningful discussion surrounding the teaching material. It can enhance students' English language development regardless of the level of their existing vocabulary knowledge (Chow et al., 2021). For a long time, the traditional pedagogical approach in Hong Kong has been drilling, rote learning, and various other exercises that promote memorization. These are all fitting approaches for Hong Kong's exam-oriented curriculum as one of the main priorities for the school, parents and students are to achieve

greater results in examination. However, this kind of approach results in teachers disseminating the information while students mostly stayed passive in class, limiting their opportunity to freely use English outside of the academic context.

In dialogic teaching, teachers can use the ‘PEER’ sequence which refers to ‘prompt’, ‘evaluate’, ‘expand’ and ‘repeat’ to engage students in a meaningful discussion. For instance, the teacher can prompt the students to engage in a discussion by showing some kind of visuals such as images or video, or even by simply asking a question. Next, the teacher can evaluate their response and correct them as necessary, then expand by asking further questions and encouraging them to repeat the correct or new utterances. This way, the students can get the chance to practice their existing knowledge in combination with the new knowledge and repeat the correct form of their utterances, all while engaging in a meaningful back-and-forth natural interaction. Teachers can also design creative activities to encourage students to use English to express ideas that are not simply bound to the learning of rules of the language, such as designing and describing their dream house so that students can get the chance to make new utterances and be creative with their language use rather than sticking to pre-learned sentences and phrases (Chow et al., 2021). By integrating a dialogic teaching approach, students can freely and actively use English in class to express their ideas and get feedback on their utterances which can improve their language development. Furthermore, students can gain deeper processing of the target vocabulary items through discussion as they get exposed to the context and usage of the word and varied perspectives on the topic of discussion.

The effectiveness of dialogic teaching is especially remarkable as it proves to be effective for students across the spectrum by benefitting both stronger and weaker students, which is not always the case with other teaching strategies. The teachers may use the CROWD question

design ('completion', 'recall', 'open-ended', 'wh-' and 'distancing') to guide the conversation according to the students' ability to answer and encourage them to engage more (Chow et al., 2021). Thus, dialogic teaching is an approach that can cater to the diverse needs of students in a classroom.

In addition to dialogic teaching to increase students' knowledge depth in vocabulary using the second language, the mother tongue of the students, Cantonese, can also be used to enhance students' understanding of the word by providing or asking for the equivalent in the language that they already have a decent command of. Instances of this include teachers using Cantonese to label images first, followed by their English counterparts, or they may simply ask the students if they know the Chinese equivalent of a word to see if they understand it (Lau & Rau, 2013). Another study on the use of Google Translate as a tool to improve primary-level students' command of English showed that students in junior primary who may generally have a better command of Cantonese as compared to kindergarten students may also be allowed to use translation tools as a means to use their advanced knowledge in English. This is because they may have a richer vocabulary and have the ability to construct more complex and interesting sentences in Cantonese which they may not be able to do in English, however, through translation tools, they can use their language skills in Cantonese to learn and construct better sentences that they could not have done due to their existing limitations in the English language (Stapleton, 2021). Google translate can then be used as an instructional tool that the teachers can introduce to students so that they can make use of their rich vocabulary in their mother tongue to find and build equivalent vocabulary in English and teachers can also provide Chinese translation to increase students understanding as they already understand the concept of that word in their mother tongue.



### *2.2.3 Teaching Structure*

On the other hand, the learning schedule in a classroom over a single term can have different impacts on students, attenuated by factors such as the goal and method of teaching. In Rogers and Cheung's study on input spacing and learning of L2 vocabulary in a classroom context (2018), third-grade Hong Kong students were exposed to spaced-short and spaced-long learning of English vocabulary. In the experiment, 1 session of spaced-short intervals included the introduction of the vocabulary followed by a review the next day before moving on to the second session of the spaced-short interval with the same approach. For the spaced-long interval, a different set of vocabulary items were reviewed after 8 days before moving on to the second list. All the vocabulary taught in the two conditions were tested in a 28-day post-test to examine how well the students retained the respective vocabulary items.

In contrast to other studies on input-spacing, it was found that the students had better retention of the vocabulary learned in spaced-short intervals whereas in other studies spaced-long intervals were deemed better for retention. This difference could be a result of the selected teaching methodology chosen by the participating teachers. In this particular study, the instructors adopted a presentation-practice-production approach, with a much stronger emphasis on form such as spelling or pronunciation over meaning. As the focus was on the memorization of these vocabulary items, the students benefitted more from a short-spaced interval as they only had to recall the form of the word, not know the word in depth. They did not need a longer time to process the items before moving on to the next topic as the teaching of the vocabulary was only on the surface level. It can be speculated that such memorization-based strategies spaced over a longer interval would make the acquisition of the vocabulary

items a more tedious task as it is solely relying on repetitive practice and memorization. However, if the focus was on the meaning of the vocabulary items, perhaps a spaced-long interval would have benefitted the students as suggested in prior studies since various interactive activities could be designed to introduce the vocabulary in-depth and the students could make use of the longer interval to process what they had learned. In this regard, the results of Roger and Cheung's study (2018), bring light to how instructional approach and input-spacing are linked when it comes to designing the curriculum plan over the term to achieve long-term vocabulary retention in students.

Another commonly used teaching structure found and used in various studies is semantic-clustering, it can also be found in textbooks and other commercial teaching materials. Semantic-clustering is when vocabularies that are semantically related are introduced together (Nation & Webb, 2011). Instances of semantic clustering include topic-based lesson plans in which the teacher introduces different vocabulary that fall under the chosen topic. For example, in Lau and Rao's (2013) observation of early ESL classrooms in Hong Kong, a teacher made use of the theme of transportation to introduce different types of transport to the students in one session and encouraged discussion around that topic and target words by asking them about their favorite transport, what transport they use and so on. This way, the task of learning for the student is easier as they can encounter all the different types of items under the topic and make use of the vocabulary to engage in a discussion which can help cement that knowledge and allow students the opportunity to apply it in meaningful discussion. Teachers can also point out the distinction between the words to avoid confusion that the students may have. It is much easier to plan activities or discussions around semantically related words for young students. Despite the popularity of semantic clustering, some researchers have argued in light of the distinctiveness hypothesis that presenting students with new vocabulary grouped together in

sets of semantically similar words might impede rather than facilitate their learning (Tinkham,1993). However, more recent research has concluded that there are no significant differences between the teaching of semantically related and unrelated vocabulary sets and that teaching semantically related words with spacing can still enhance long-term retention (Nakata & Suzuki, 2019). Thus, semantic clustering can allow the teachers to design activities and ease the learning of young students by introducing vocabulary in an organized manner and the teachers can help students differentiate the related words and use discussions and spacing to cement the knowledge.

### **3. Interview Findings**

In order to further understand the commonly used vocabulary teaching practices, the rationale, and the perceived effectiveness by the teachers, in-depth interviews were arranged with six English teachers in Hong Kong who had experience in teaching young ESL learners. Five of the teachers had teaching experience ranging between 3-5 years while one of them had been teaching for less than a year. Four of the teachers generally taught classrooms with 20-30 students on average, one teacher had 10-20 students and one had less than 10 as they taught specialized classes such as story-telling in which students were taught in separate groups by different teachers.

The participating teachers were first asked a variety of questions regarding the teaching strategies they use, the reason they use them, and how they change their strategies per the students' needs. All six teachers said that use of visuals, whether in the form of pictures, flashcards or videos, was always incorporated into the lesson. Furthermore, five of the teachers mentioned games in order to keep the students engaged and active in class. The teachers were also asked to rank the strategies from the most effective to the least in which both the use of

visuals and games/miming were rated as either the most or the second most effective strategy by the teachers.

*“Students are observing very quickly at that age. And with .. flashcards it’s not just about showing them the pictures, it’s also that you can use flashcards to play a lot of different games that can consolidate their memories. Like one game I really like playing with them is this paper cup and tennis ball game where they need to find the cup with the ball but students need to say the word on the flashcard next to the cup in order to score. This is a really great way to give them stimulation and associate good memories with learning.” - Interviewee 3*

From the above answer, we can see how one of the reasons why visuals such as flashcards are so popular amongst teachers in Hong Kong is because they can easily incorporate them into fun games for the students to play. In addition to the use of flashcards, choral repetition and labeling, and pointing are also used throughout games to cement the vocabulary into the students’ memories. In the above example, the students have to recognize the visual and label it verbally in order to score a point. The teachers are keen on getting the students to participate in the class through games as it makes the students more willing to learn and remember the target items in order to play such games.

While there were mixed views on the ranking of other strategies, there was one strategy that was ranked as the least effective by all six teachers, the use of the mother tongue. All 6 interviewed teachers did not use any Cantonese to aid in the teaching of vocabulary.

*“For students that young, they are not really that good at Chinese as well. And I am not supposed to use Cantonese in class as a NET teacher.” - interviewee 3*

*“I try not to use Cantonese in class because students will not use English once they realize they can use Cantonese to communicate with me.” - interviewee 2*

The sentiments expressed above were mentioned by the majority of the teachers. Most were simply told by the institutions they worked for to not speak any Cantonese. The reason for this is that the students may not use English as much to communicate if they knew they could get by with Cantonese. If the teacher only spoke English, the students have no choice but to speak English in order to participate and respond to the teacher in class, allowing them to practice their speaking skills.

The interviewees were also asked if they used different approaches when it came to weaker and stronger students. In order to aid weaker students, all the teachers mentioned strategies that involved some kind of interaction. Three of the teachers said that they would ask simple and direct questions to the students so that they can get a chance to participate, and one teacher said she would converse with the student so that the student would feel more comfortable in the classroom environment. In addition, two teachers said that they would place the weaker students next to stronger students and incorporate some pair work so that the weaker student could pick up by interacting with a stronger student. It seems that all the teachers used some kind of interaction-based strategies such as asking direct questions so that the student would understand what the target word meant, get a chance to participate, and feel more comfortable in class.

As for the stronger students, the teachers mostly relied on giving extra exercises. Four of the teachers said that they would prepare extra materials that would go deeper into the topic for the students that seemed to perform better than others in the class. Such material usually included writing exercises where the students are encouraged to use the vocabulary they learned to form sentences. Two of the teachers said that they liked to appoint the stronger students in the role of little teachers in which they can help other students and have their knowledge further consolidated as they have to explain the ideas to the students in their own words. The teachers seem to use strategies that allow the stronger students to further apply their knowledge in different contexts, may it be through writing or teaching other students.

Next, the teachers were also asked questions on how they ensure the students can retain the vocabulary longer and use it outside of the classroom context. The teachers had various different ideas but the strategies that were mentioned the most were drilling/review and assessments. All six teachers said they would review the words before each lesson and also throughout the term. Four of the teachers said they had weekly and monthly assessments for which the students were required to dedicate some time to review the previously learned items. The two teachers who did not use assessments taught kindergarten students where they are not required to have exams, as they usually start once the students enter primary school. The four teachers who used assessments said they would also revisit the items before the assessments to prepare the students and help them consolidate everything they had learned before. This way, the students did not just learn the words and forgot them the next lesson, but rather had to commit them to their memory in order to pass the tests. Three teachers also mentioned telling the parents or helpers what the students had learned and asking them to help the students review or ask them questions related to the topic. Through communication with the parents and helpers,

the students could be encouraged to practice the target items even when they were not in the classroom by the members of their families.

When asked about teaching some ‘learning’ strategies to students, four of the teachers mentioned strategies that helped with the memorization of spellings. All four of the teacher used such strategies to aid primary school students as they had weekly dictation. The learning strategies included breaking longer words and memorizing them in sections such as “badminton” which becomes “bad / min / ton” and teaching students how to divide them by syllables by clapping between each one. Two teachers also encouraged students to teach other students or even their parents what they learned in order to understand the concept more deeply. One of the teachers specifically mentioned the “Feynman Technique” in which the students have to study the topic, teach it to someone, see where they have gaps, and simplify what they learned. It seemed that most of the teachers used learning techniques for primary level and above students as they tend to have assessments and have the responsibility to self-study, whereas younger students are not expected to dedicate hours at home for revision.

The teachers were also asked how they gauge the effectiveness of their teaching strategies. Four of the teachers, who taught at the primary level, said they used assessment scores to see how much the students had retained from their lessons. If the scores were decent, then the methods would be deemed as being effective. On the other hand, one teacher said that she has very proactive students who would tell her if they enjoyed the lesson. If the students gave her good feedback, she would consider her lesson as being effective as it piqued the students’ interest. Another method that almost all the teachers mentioned was elicitation in the following lesson.

*“Basically if the student can answer what the object in the picture is called, then I’ll consider my teaching to be successful.” - Interviewee 4*

From this, we can see that the ability of the students to recall what they learned, whether through the means of assessments or their ability to elicit the target words in class, was how teachers tend to measure the effectiveness of their teaching methods. This means that one of the main goals of their teaching strategies is vocabulary retention in students.

Subsequently, teachers were also asked if they changed their strategies to keep the students’ interest. While the teachers did have a few different activities that they would use in rotation, they were mostly activities that the students were familiar with. Four of the teachers said that they could only incorporate a few activities as they had limited time and had to get the students to complete compulsory classwork as well. In order to complete the classwork, the teachers stuck with recognition and memorization-based strategies as the classwork usually had exercises that included matching or labeling of words and tested students' ability to recognize the words. Furthermore, the activities could not be too innovative as some lessons for the young Kindergarten students would be as short as 20 minutes, which did not allow the teachers to introduce activities that the students were not familiar with. However, all teachers said that they were willing to try more innovative and interactive approaches if given the time.

#### **4. Discussion**

As expected, the most popular strategies were recognition and memorization-based strategies such as the use of visuals, labeling and pointing, and repetition. Most of these strategies were incorporated into games to keep young students engaged and to equip them



with skills to complete classwork which includes exercises like labeling and matching, such exercises require the students to recognize the words in order to complete the tasks. Most of the teachers said that they were required by the schools or the learning institutions to get the students to complete the task within the lesson time. This is supported by the findings in the study by Lau and Rao (2013) where they observed 6 early childhood ESL classrooms. In their study, they found that deep-processing of words was rare and teachers mostly elicited one-word answers from the students. Instead, teachers relied on memorization and recognition-based strategies due to the parents' and schools' need for evidence of learning which could be seen from the students' ability to complete classwork and homework. More visible evidence of learning such as "children's abilities to label, pronounce and read words" is also given more focus, thus the emphasis on related strategies.

Furthermore, Lau and Rao also noted the limited instructional time which may not allow for the in-depth learning of words. This explains why memorization and recognition-based strategies are preferred as not only are they easier for young children to process and move on to the next topic, but also time-friendly and allow for more visible evidence of learning. However, such methods may result in the students only knowing the word in isolation or in association with the visual but not how to apply the word outside of the classroom context. Unless there is deep processing of the words, the students may not know how to retrieve and use the vocabulary they learn appropriately. Especially since they rarely speak English in their daily lives, it is important to give them enough knowledge of the words and allow them to make their own utterances during the lesson so that they can learn the correct application of the word.

Rogers and Cheung (2018) also noted in their study that the teachers adopted similar methods and had a strong emphasis on the linguistic form which fit the local exam-oriented context of

Hong Kong and they pointed out that this showed that primary teachers are “reluctant to adopt innovative approaches” because of the complex procedures and requirements involved in planning and implementing the lessons. However, from the interview, all six teachers said that they actively tried to look for more innovative approaches to teach the student and would implement new methods if they could fit into their lesson framework. So, it is not that the teachers are completely avoiding new methods. Despite the limitations, teachers are still trying to find new activities and approaches to aid their students.

It is not that there is no deep processing found in ESL classrooms at all. In the interviews, some teachers did use interactive strategies and pairwork to aid weaker students. The reasoning that the interviewees gave was that it helps the struggling students better understand what is happening in the classroom or what the vocabulary means and also make the student more comfortable with participating in class. This finding is also supported by the findings from the literature review, dialogic teaching can indeed improve teacher–student communication which can make the student feel more comfortable in front of the teacher and it also allows the students to “develop their cognitive skills within their zone of proximal development” (Chow., et al, 2021). By feeling more comfortable, students can practice their language skills and take away more from the class than they would if they remained shy and passive. Furthermore, the weaker students can develop from doing tasks with the aid of the teacher to eventually getting more confident and at ease with doing them on their own as they develop these skills.

It was also found that all the interviewees reviewed previously learned items in every lesson by prompting and drilling. This means that the vocabulary was taught at short-spaced intervals of every 1 to 2 days. This supports the study by Roger and Cheung (2018) where they found that students had better retention of the vocabulary learned in spaced-short intervals as the

strategies used focused on memorization. The students only had to recall the form of the word, not know the word in depth. Therefore, they did not need a longer time to process the items before moving on to the next topic. If memorization and recognition-based strategies are taught at longer intervals, the lessons may become too tedious and the students may begin to lose interest as such strategies rely on repetitive exposure and drilling. Therefore, short intervals before moving on to a new set of vocabulary items work best in this context.

Perhaps the most interesting finding was that despite the prevalent use of Cantonese in Hong Kong and the students' daily lives, all the interviewees did not make any use of Cantonese to facilitate the learning of English. While the interviewees were not native Cantonese speakers, five of them could speak Cantonese at a near-native level. According to the interviewees, they were instructed by the school to not use Cantonese and they themselves felt like the students would use Cantonese to communicate once they heard the teacher using it. In fact, this seems to be a common practice in Hong Kong. According to Lau and Rao (2013), they only found two instances in which the English teachers provided direct translations or explanations in the mother tongue. English teachers in Hong Kong are expected to steer away from Cantonese so as to give the students the encouragement to use English in the classroom as that is the only way to communicate with the teacher.

## **5. Recommendations**

Through the interviews and the studies, it can be seen that the traditional pedagogical approach of rote learning and continuous drilling is still very apparent in Hong Kong classrooms. After all, the students' success is measured by their ability to score well in assessments and complete exercises independently which can be achieved by repetitive

exposure through recognition and memorization-based teaching strategies. However, this leads to the students remaining mostly passive in class and they may not develop the skills to use English outside of the academic context (Chow., et all, 2021). Cantonese dominates the lives of most Hong Kong students and more often than not, schools are the only place where children are exposed to English. This means that schools may be the only place where students may engage in conversations in English and get to practice their skills. According to Dickson & Tabors (2001), conversations are an effective means to expand young learners' vocabulary. Teachers' use of advanced vocabulary and sentences together with their ability to guide the contents of the conversations can allow students to deepen their understanding of concepts and words by connecting them to their personal experiences (Lau & Rao, 2013). Furthermore, it allows students to test out their hypothesis on how a word should be used and they can get immediate feedback from the teacher on whether their utterance was correct, allowing them to improve and develop their language skills. Thus, it is essential for teachers to provide more opportunities for the students to apply their knowledge of English and make their own free utterances so that they can get comfortable and confident with speaking English and actually learn how to retrieve that knowledge in a natural conversation.

While it may not be possible to change the exam-oriented system and parents' expectations to make huge changes to the teaching approach, teachers may still try to include more interactive class exercises and engage students in conversations to provide them the opportunity to actively take part in learning. For instance, the interviewees in this report did mention using interaction as a means to get weaker students to be more comfortable in class and help them better understand the vocabulary. However, research shows that dialogic teaching can also benefit stronger students as it can allow for a deeper understanding of the

vocabulary's application (Chow., et al, 2021). Thus, teachers can try to incorporate dialogic teaching in their lesson as it can benefit students of all levels.

Moreover, instead of viewing the use of Cantonese in an English class as an inferior teaching method, teachers may consider using students' first language to aid their understanding of English vocabulary. Since the time limitation and expectations of parents may not allow for more interactive activities, teachers may use Cantonese and provide the equivalent of the words as students may already have a better concept of the word in their native tongue. However, the use of Cantonese to teach English may be quite controversial amongst teachers, especially since there are a lot of differences between the two languages. More thought and research should be given to ways in which teachers can take advantage of the students' conceptual maturity in Cantonese to benefit their English learning.

## 6. Conclusion

To conclude, lacking proficiency in English may hinder young Hong Kongers from realizing their full potential since English proficiency is often correlated with higher income, social prestige, and educational level (Hyland, 1997). For most Hong Kong people, the first and sometimes the only exposure to English they have is in schools, making classroom interaction one of the primary means of acquiring early competencies to develop target language skills (Chow., et al, 2021). Therefore, it falls onto the teachers to provide their students with an effective learning environment from which they can build the foundation to become competent English speakers. Vocabulary is one of the foundations of second language acquisition that is also fundamental for reading and writing development later on (Lau & Rao, 2013). Teachers need to involve strategies that can help the students build a strong foundation in vocabulary. From the various studies on young ESL classrooms and the interviews conducted in this report, it was found that teachers adopted a limited variety of teaching strategies for vocabulary teaching. Memorization and recognition-based strategies such as the use of visuals (e.g. flashcards, pictures, videos) pointing and labeling of words, and choral repetition were the most common and popular forms of instructional practices in young ESL classrooms in Hong Kong. It is true that recognition and memorization-based strategies can enhance students' ability to connect the visuals to their orthographic form and allow them to know the existence of the word. However, students may not know how to apply those words in natural conversation outside of the academic context as long as they do not get the chance to test and use them freely in an utterance. Thus, other teaching approaches such as dialogic teaching should be adapted in the classroom so that students can have deeper processing of the word and get more comfortable with speaking English.

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## 8. Appendix

### Interview Questions

#### *Background*

1. How long have you been teaching?

☐ less than 1 year ☐ 1-5 years ☐ 6-10 years ☐ more than 10 years

2. What grades do you mainly teach?

☐ Junior Primary (P1-P4) ☐ Senior Primary (P4-6) ☐ All of the above

3. What is the average classroom size?

☐ less than 10 ☐ 10-20 students ☐ 20-30 students ☐ more than 30 students

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#### *Teaching Strategies*

1. What instruction strategies do you mainly use to teach vocabulary? Why do you prefer to use them? (flashcards, songs, videos, short stories)

2. What strategies do you use to involve weaker students in your lessons?

3. What additional support do you give to students who have a strong vocabulary?

4. How do you ensure that the students can retain the vocabulary for a longer time?

5. How do you encourage the students to use the vocabulary outside of the classroom context?

6. How effective would you rate the following teaching strategies and why?

- *Flashcards, Story-telling, Songs, Short video clips, English - Chinese translation, Using Objects, Gestures/Miming, Drawing, games, Choral*

*repetition*

7. What do you do to keep students' interest? Do you switch up the teaching strategies?
8. How do you measure the effectiveness of your teaching strategies? (elicitation, quiz results, dictation)
9. Do you teach your students any learning strategies? (breaking longer words apart, how to guess from context etc)
10. Are you willing to adopt more innovative approaches to teaching vocabulary?
11. Are there any teaching strategies that are encouraged to be used by the institute that you work in? How do you feel about them?
12. When and how often do you review previously taught vocabulary with your students?

# **Perception of Hong Kong Accent on language attitudes, language ideology, and identity:**

## **Case studies of Hong Kong ESL university students**

Lee Wing Lam, Winnie

Supervisor: Prof. Tongle Sun

### **Abstract**

Employing a multiple case study approach, this project investigated the language attitudes towards native and non-native accent varieties, native-speaker ideology, and the identity of university students who graduated from either EMI or CMI secondary schools. The analysis shows that most EMI and CMI graduates held negative perceptions towards the Hong Kong accent, and positive perceptions towards native accents, demonstrating hierarchical attitudes towards accent varieties. Native-speaker ideology in relation to ownership is evident in both EMI and CMI graduates' accounts. Additionally, EMI and CMI graduates shed light on native ideology in relation to competence and aesthetics respectively. Moreover, graduates from EMI schools constructed more fragile and vulnerable language learner and user identities. In contrast, graduates from CMI school constructed their language learner and user identities with reference to the cultural aspects. Ultimately, the study calls for the need to reconceptualize the association of competence with accent and the standard of accent variety existing in educational settings in Hong Kong.

*Keywords: Language attitudes, Language ideology, Identity*

## Introduction

Accents, as Lippi-Green (1997) defined, are “loose bundles of prosodic and segmental features distributed over geographic and/ or social space” (p. 42). As a prominent language feature, the accent is considered one of the features that learners notice in their first encounter with English. As a former British colony, Hong Kong has been said to be strongly influenced by the native accent ideology, with British English (BrE) being considered to be the prestige variety of English; Hong Kong English, in contrast, is still trying to gain a place in academic and formal discourse (e.g., Chan, 2016, 2018; Hansen Edwards, 2015; Zhang, 2013).

While the Hong Kong government has endeavored to promote the use of English in the educational setting. Since 2005, schools were classified into schools using Chinese as the medium of instruction (“CMI schools”) and schools using English as the medium of instruction (“EMI schools”) (Education Bureau, 2010). Even though the dichotomy of “CMI schools” and “EMI schools” were abolished after the Fine-tuning Medium of Instruction in 2010, secondary schools continued to be distinguished using these two terms (Education Bureau, 2010). Thus, the levels of exposure to English in the two types of schools are different, due to the distinct classroom settings.

Students from the two types of schools would acquire English differently in diverse classroom settings, contributing to the establishment of different language attitudes, language ideologies, and identities. Thus, this project targets university students who graduated from EMI and CMI secondary schools, recruiting two university students that perceived themselves as having a Hong Kong accent respectively from two groups. And the objectives are to compare their attitudes and perceptions towards native accents and Hong Kong accents by digging deep into their experience in using and learning English. Ultimately, the project seeks to offer insights into the relationship between their Hong Kong accent and their identity in acquiring

and communicating in English. Hence, to extend previous studies, the present project is guided by the following research questions:

- 1) What are their attitudes and perceptions towards the Hong Kong accent and non-native varieties? And what are the differences and similarities between speakers from EMI and CMI schools?
- 2) What are their perceptions and ideologies of native accents?
- 3) How do these two groups of students relate their accents to their identities in acquiring and using English?

## **1. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Defining language attitudes, language ideology, and identity**

According to Garret (2010), “language attitudes” are defined as the feelings that individuals hold towards their own language variety or other language varieties. Greatly affected by language, linguistic, and cultural experiences, language attitudes are learned and shaped. Individuals can hold attitudes towards a language from extremely positive to extremely negative (Baker, 1992). While complexity is inherent in the construct of language attitudes since the attitude can be compounded and non-binary. Second language learners may have both positive and negative attitudes towards a language or a feature of the language (e.g., accent) within a particular context, making matters appear to be complex (Baker, 1992). Thus, this study considers language attitudes as a construction of emotions within individuals in connection to different experiences, further differentiating the concept of attitude from ideology.

As defined by Silverstein (1979), “language ideology” is considered a “set of beliefs about language articulated by users as a rationalization or justification or perceived language structure and use” (p. 193). Infused with political and moral issues, such conceptual frameworks are referred to as ideologies as they are subjected to the social position of the

individuals who hold them (Gal & Irvine, 1995). Hence, such belief is closely connected to norms existing in society and attributes meanings to a particular language variety. In addition, associated with particular social and institutional contexts, language ideology offers an interpretation connected to social organization (Piller, 2015). And Park (2009) suggested that language ideology is the basis for “understanding how language and society intersect with and constitute each other” (p. 13). Therefore, differentiated from language attitudes, language ideology is viewed as a construction of belief and perception by the society collectively and often involves justification concerning socio-political factors and language policies in this study.

Norton (1997) defined identities as “how people understand their relationships to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and place, and how people understand their possibilities for the future” (p. 408). To simplify, “identity” is the conceptualization of oneself and the position of self in relation to others (Edwards, 2009). Hence, the concept of identity revolves around the relationships formed between individuals and society. While language attitudes and language ideology are considered influential in constructing an identity. Pavlenko (2002) suggested that language attitudes not only influence how one perceived oneself but also can be internalized into the perception of self. While Pavlenko and Blackledge (2004) noted that language ideologies direct how individuals utilize linguistic resources to indicate their identities. Offering perceptions and meanings to a particular language variety, language attitudes, and ideology constitute the relationship between speakers and the language, thus shaping the speakers’ self-perceived identities.

## **2.2 Research on language attitudes and ideology in Hong Kong**

### **2.2.1 Language attitudes and ideologies in Hong Kong**

Recent studies have revealed that non-native learners in Hong Kong tended to hold negative attitudes towards the Hong Kong accent while evaluating the native accent positively

with native speaker ideology (Chan, 2016, 2018; Hansen Edwards, 2015; Li, 2009; Sung, 2022; Zhang, 2013). In his study, Li (2009) found that most of the participants had a strong preference for an NS-based accent. He discovered the native speaker ideology with positive attributes regarding general, aesthetic, form pragmatic, and ownership. Zhang (2013) investigated Hong Kong university students' attitudes towards L1 and L2 accents of English and revealed that prestige varieties such as RP and AmE were evaluated more positively than Hong Kong broad accent (HKbr) and Hong Kong educated accent (HKed). While HKbr was ranked the lowest in terms of status and solidarity, received more negative evaluation than Mandarin-accented English unexpectedly. In another research, Hansen Edwards (2015) found that Hong Kong speakers of English encountered conflict about their feelings towards HKE, that the respondents spoke HKE but did not like speaking HKE. The result revealed that they understood that HKE represents Hong Kong, but they preferred 'native' models or varieties over HKE and often judged it negatively in comparison to native varieties such as BrE and AmE. Chan (2016) discovered that university students were more likely to perceive the Hong Kong accent negatively. In addition, L1 accents were rated with a higher score in solidarity and status, while the Hong Kong accent was rated with a lower score. And he found that in casual and interactive situations, L2 accents were rated less negatively. Later, Chan (2018) discovered that participants tended to choose NS pronunciation as the most desirable target for English learning, revealing that there was a native-speaker ideology toward English. And he concluded that their attitudes were significantly affected by the value and status, the perceived attainability, practical communication needs, and the learner's cultural identity. Recently, Sung (2022) discovered that native-speaker ideology was present with reference to its significance in academic settings.



### **1.2.2 The use and preference for an accent**

There are studies demonstrating a discrepancy between the use of the Hong Kong accent and the preference for a native accent (Groves, 2011; Zhang, 2013), while a recent study indicated a change in perception (Hansen Edwards, 2015). Groves (2011) found that most respondents in her study preferred native-speaker norms, especially for British English, while only a small number of them preferred Hong Kong English. Thus, she affirmed that “linguistic schizophrenia” occurred in the Hong Kong context, that Hongkongers held ideals of native-speaker English, but in fact, spoke their variety. Similarly, with the result that Hong Kong broad accent was rated lowest in status and solidarity, Zhang (2013) suggested that the Hong Kong informants suffered from “linguistic self-hatred”. The respondents have a strong inclination and preference toward native accents even though they speak Hong Kong accent. In contrast, Hansen Edwards (2015) found that a portion of respondents reported their acceptance and preference for speaking HKE. This showcased that not all speakers of HKE experienced “linguistic self-hatred” (Zhang, 2013) or “linguistic schizophrenia” (Groves, 2011) as suggested by previous literature. Eventually, she suggested that there is a growing population in Hong Kong who see HKE as a tool to display their local identity.

### **2.3 Research on accent and identity construction in Hong Kong**

Studies based in Hong Kong have also been devoted to investigating accent and identity construction (Li, 2009; Sung, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2020; Teng, 2019). Li (2009) revealed that most participants in the study wished to speak in NS-based standard English, with only a small amount of the participants would speak in Hong Kong English. While a tension between speaking with a Hong Kong accent in showing their Hong Kong identity and hoping to use an NS-standard accent to achieve an intelligible identity in ELF settings was also discovered. Sung (2014) found that all participants in his study would like to maintain a Hong Kong identity when using English. He discovered that some participants wished to speak a native accent to

present a positive self-image as bilingual speakers of English. Ultimately, he stressed the importance of practical or pragmatic considerations in the preference for a local accent. Based on the result, Sung (2015) conducted subsequent research and further revealed that majority of them saw themselves as legitimate and empowered speakers of English. And the respondents did not hold a negative view of their non-native speaker identity, but instead viewed themselves as multilingual, multicompetent, and translingual speakers of English. Another study by Sung (2016) found that most participants aspired to speak in an NS-standard accent to showcase their competence. Only a small number of participants chose to use a Hong Kong accent to emphasize their local identities. This highlighted the intricate identity construction among participants, which was influenced by the native-speaker ideology. While Teng (2019) found both positive identities and negative identities across various communities, demonstrating the dynamics and fluidity of identity in nature. Another study done by Sung (2020) discovered that most participants recognized the co-existence of dual identities as language users and learners. In addition, the participants negotiated their identity with reference to the interlocutors that were defined by the native and non-native dichotomy.

## **2.4 Research gap**

Yet, previous research put emphasis on tertiary education and how the learning experiences in university intervene with language attitudes, ideology, and identity. Little studies have been done to compare the language attitude, ideology, and identity construction under different secondary education backgrounds (i.e., CMI and EMI schools) in Hong Kong. To fill the gap, the present study adopted a multiple case study to explore the effect of learning experiences in secondary school and university on the construction of language attitudes, language ideology, and identity.

## **2. Methodology**

### **3.1 Research Design**

This project employed a multiple case study design in a qualitative approach, focusing on the individual stories regarding the learning experiences of the participants. A case study generally, as Yin (2003) defined it, is an empirical inquiry that “investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-world context” (p. 16). And a multiple case study develops an “in-depth description and analysis of multiple cases” (Creswell & Poth, 2007, p. 78). While in the qualitative approach, data collection is in a natural setting and the data analysis is “inductive and establishes patterns or themes” (Creswell & Poth, 2007, p. 37). Thus, a multiple case study in a qualitative approach was applicable to provide a comprehensive and in-depth understanding of the correlation between secondary school learning experiences and the constructions of language attitudes, language ideology, and identity.

### **3.2 Participants**

The project targeted four university students, two from EMI schools and two from CMI schools. There were three females and one male, who were local and Cantonese-English bilingual university students from different academic disciplines. Pseudonyms were given to protect their privacy. And they were Melody, Edward, Alice, and Janice. Profiles of the participants were included in the later section.

### **3.3 Instruments**

The instruments involved were questionnaire surveys and semi-structured interviews. The questionnaire surveys consisted of 9 items, covering aspects of language attitudes, ideology, and identity, and were created using Qualtrics (see Appendix A). Some questions were adopted and modified by Li (2009), Hansen Edwards (2015), and Chan (2018). An informed consent form was attached at the beginning of the survey. While the interview protocol consisted of three parts and 16 questions in total, focusing on language attitudes,

ideology, and identity (see Appendix B). Each question was followed by probes with respect to the survey responses to encourage detailed accounts from the participants (see Appendix C).

### **3.4 Data Collection**

The data collection procedures lasted for two months. In early February, purposeful and convenience sampling were performed. Targeting graduates from both CMI and EMI schools, invitation messages were sent to potential participants from the researcher's social circle. Later, participants were secured after receiving their confirmations. In late February, the questionnaire surveys were sent out. After finishing the questionnaire survey, the participants received the interview protocol in advance of the interviews. Individual interviews were carried out in March, either face-to-face or on Zoom. Conducted in Cantonese, each interview lasted for about 60 minutes and was recorded under the participants' consent. Notes were taken during the interviews.

### **3.5 Data Analysis**

The analytical procedure was recursive and included five stages that Creswell and Poth (2007) suggested. Data was first transcribed from Cantonese to English. Then, initial ideas and codes with the researcher's knowledge based on previous literature reviews were generated. Through re-reading notes and reviewing recordings, participants' accounts were classified into codes created. After that, a thematic analysis was performed in which recurring patterns and themes were noted and grouped. Finally, notes were re-read, and recordings were reviewed to examine outliers and omissions.

## **3. Findings**

In the subsequent discussion, the result from both the questionnaires and interviews were presented in two sections, each with sub-sections that highlight significant themes in responses. Interview excerpts were used to provide specific and insightful examples to support the

discussion. To maintain the anonymity of the participants, they were identified by pseudonyms. Melody and Edward, from EMI schools. Alice and Janice, from CMI schools.

#### **4.1 Stories of Melody and Edward**

In this section, Melody's and Edward's cases were combined and discussed as they both graduated from EMI secondary schools in Hong Kong, offering insights into how it might affect their language attitude, ideology, and identity. Melody was a 21-year-old, year 4 nursing student at University X in Hong Kong. She has been learning English since kindergarten and studied in a CMI primary school. Eventually, she scored 5 in English for the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education Examination (DSE). While Edward, a 20-year-old geography major in his third year at University Y in Hong Kong, has been learning English since he was in kindergarten as well. He attended a CMI primary school and eventually achieved a score of 3 in the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education Examination (DSE).

##### **4.1.1 Language attitude towards Hong Kong accent and other accent varieties**

###### ***4.1.1.1 Disapproval of Hong Kong accent and other non-native varieties***

In the survey, Melody and Edward indicated that they had a negative and slightly negative attitude respectively towards the statement "I have a very positive attitude towards Hong Kong accent" (Q2a). The responses to the above-mentioned question in the survey aligned with the interview data. Negative attributes of Hong Kong accent were detected during the interview, thus further unfolding their disapproval. Both Melody and Edward mentioned that the Hong Kong accent was "incompetent", "nonstandard", "unpleasant", and "unimpressive", and was a sign of "low English proficiency". While Melody stressed that the Hong Kong accent sounded "weird". Such a finding echoes the previous research (Chan, 2016; Hansen Edwards, 2015) that the Hong Kong accent was evaluated negatively with competence, intelligibility, and solidarity.

In addition, they reported experiencing embarrassing, undesirable, or unfavorable treatment due to their Hong Kong accent. Edward recalled his experience of being treated unfavorably, compared to his classmate who spoke RP: “Even though our contents were the same [...] the professor judged me but agreed with him”. While Melody observed the reactions of professors and fellows and concluded that: “my accent tends to make the presentation unimpressive, even though my content is rich”. Moreover, Melody and Edward reported a negative relationship with the Hong Kong accent due to the stigmas attached to the Hong Kong accent. Since Melody often received judgments about her accent in her EMI secondary school, the Hong Kong accent has always been a source of displeasure for her. While Edward recounted his experience in his EMI secondary school of being mocked because of his Hong Kong accent. Thus, he has always lived under the shadow of the Hong Kong accent. The causal relationship between their experiences of being evaluated negatively or stigmatized and their disfavor of Hong Kong accent appears to be aligned with previous studies (Li, 2009; Sung, 2016).

Although they revealed that they did not mind communicating with speakers who have non-native accents in the survey (Q5a), they criticized other non-native varieties during the interview. For example, Edward put forward his judgments on non-native speakers: “I often question the professionalism of those who speak Indian accent and Mainland Chinese accent”. The finding echoes the previous research (Chan, 2016; Zhang, 2013) that participants demonstrated judgments and discrimination towards other non-native accent varieties.

#### ***4.1.1.2 Linguistic self-hatred***

Other than negative attitudes towards the Hong Kong accents, a discrepancy between their English use and English preferences was prominent. In the survey, Melody and Edward revealed their desire of becoming native speakers as their preferred type of English speaker, among the choices of “a native speaker”, “a Hong Kong speaker”, and “other” (Q3a). Whilst in the interview, their aspiration towards native-like pronunciation was spelled out. Both

Melody and Edward, even though recognized their usage of the Hong Kong accent, desired to attain a native-like accent. For example, Edward revealed his experience on acquiring AmE: “I watched a lot of American dramas and I wished to sound like a native speaker [...] I practiced my accent, but it did not work out”. Similar to the findings of previous research (Groves, 2011; Hansen Edwards, 2015; Zhang, 2013), linguistic self-hatred was discovered – participants not only demonstrated negative attitudes towards their accent variety but also portrayed their desires towards a native accent.

#### **4.1.2 Language ideology**

##### ***4.1.2.1 Native speaker ideology in relation to ownership and authority***

In the survey, both Melody and Edward indicated their belief in native speakerism (Q5b). With the choices of “English teacher”, “native speaker”, and “it doesn’t matter as long as my pronunciation is understandable by the listeners”, they both chose native speakers as their learning target in secondary school (Q4). Subsequently, the interview yielded similar responses toward native ideology. A significant theme emerged and pertained to the ownership and authority of native accents. During the interview, Melody and Edward describe native accents as “authentic”, “standard”, “original”, “ideal”, and “natural”. Edward added that native accents sound “prestige” to him – revealing the native ideology they held towards native accents.

Furthermore, the authenticity of RP and AmE was emphasized by Melody and Edward. For example, Melody considered RP and AmE as the standard variety with respect to her L1 background: “People who speak RP and AmE are the native English speakers, [...] just like us, we are the native Cantonese speakers”. Melody adhered to the ownership and authority of native accents with her L1: “From my point of view, it is weird for others not pronouncing Cantonese properly, I will try to correct them [...] It is the same for English, native speakers have the right to correct me as they own the language”. The finding aligns with Li (2009),

Hansen Edwards (2015), Chan (2016), Chan (2018), and Sung (2022) that native speaker ideology is present and is highly associated with status and ownership.

#### ***4.1.2.2 Native speaker ideology in relation to advanced proficiency and competence***

Alongside ownership and authority, another theme stemmed from the association of advanced proficiency and competence with native accents. During the interview, Melody and Edward described RP and AmE as “professional”, “knowledgeable”, “competent”, and “intelligent”, thus demonstrating their positive perceptions of native accents.

Subsequently, Melody and Edward addressed the representation of high proficiency and competence with native accents. Edward mentioned that whenever he heard someone speaking with RP or AmE, he would identify him or her as a competent speaker of English. He attributed such perception to his EMI school life: “I was always told by my English teachers that having a native-like accent means being a ‘good’ English speaker [...] which means capable in fluent communication in English”. The finding is consistent with previous studies (Chan, 2018; Li, 2009; Sung, 2022) that non-native speakers held perceptions regarding advanced proficiency and competence towards native accents.

#### **4.1.3 Identity and language**

##### ***4.1.3.1 Struggles as impotent foreign learners with a Hong Kong accent***

Apart from expressing a desire to speak like native speakers (Q3a), both Melody and Edward wished to get rid of their Hong Kong accents to sound like native speakers in the survey (Q6a). Their choice in the survey was in line with the information gathered during the interviews. For example, Melody associated the Hong Kong accent with “excessive fat”: “I don’t need it [...] It is hard to lose fat, but I still want to”.

The reason behind this was that Melody and Edward often encountered anxiety and distress towards using English with a Hong Kong accent. For example, Edward reported his feelings towards his usage of English since studying in an EMI school: “I always feel panic



when I have to speak in English [...] even though I need to use English for presentations and group discussions all the time”. Their fear was raised from the fact that they positioned themselves as incompetent second language learners that might be judged. Melody showed her lack of confidence during the interview: “My English teacher used to tell me that I was so different from native speakers, and I made a lot of mistakes”. Similarly, Edward reported having trouble as he questioned himself: “What if others cannot understand my English”. Consistent with the previous research done by Teng (2019) and Sung (2020), the identity of incompetent foreign learners of English was observed. Affected by their accent, they felt insecure when using English even though they had to use the language in most of the academic settings. And ultimately, they identified themselves as impotent learners of English.

#### ***4.1.3.2 Desires to become legitimate users of English with a native-like accent***

Other than hoping to get rid of the Hong Kong accent, the interview data also accorded with their aspiration towards a native-like accent. For example, Melody described the native accent as her “ideal body shape”: “If I have a native accent, everyone will praise me”.

The portrayal of aspiring to become a native speaker indicates their desire to transform into legitimate users of English. Melody wanted to become a native speaker to appropriate English as a tool to communicate comfortably and confidently: “If I speak a native accent, I can speak more freely, and people will think I am a good speaker of English [...] but not a speaker with broken English”. While Edward, he believed that native accents, especially RP, were considered to be the most “powerful and acceptable” accent: “I feel like speaking British accent gives one more right to speak”. Similar to previous research (Li, 2009; Sung, 2014, 2016), the desire for a native accent was closely related to how the participants wished to construct an identity associated with legitimacy. Eventually, Melody and Edward believed possessing a native accent helped them to demonstrate an empowered user identity and recognition from others.

## **4.2. Stories of Alice and Janice**

This section presents the cases of Alice and Janice who both attended CMI secondary schools in Hong Kong. Alice, a 21-year-old accounting major in her fourth year at University Z, has been learning English since she was a kindergartener and attended a CMI primary school. She achieved a score of 3 in English for the HKDSE. Janice, on the other hand, is a 21-year-old economics major in her fourth year at University Y. She has also been learning English since kindergarten and attended a CMI primary school. She scored 4 in English for the HKDSE.

### **4.2.1 Language attitude towards Hong Kong accent and other accent varieties**

#### ***4.2.1.1 Hatred towards Hong Kong accent and other non-native varieties***

In the survey, Alice reported having a negative attitude towards to statement “I have a very positive attitude towards Hong Kong accent” (Q2a). Her response echoed the interview findings, which revealed negative perceptions of the Hong Kong accent. She expressed her criticism of the accent, describing it as “odd”, and “extremely unpleasant”, indicating “broken English”. This discovery is consistent with earlier studies by Hansen Edwards (2015) and Chan (2016), which found that the Hong Kong accent was assessed unfavorably in terms of competence, intelligibility, and solidarity.

Alice encountered undesirable and shameful experiences due to her Hong Kong accent and recalled her experience at the English speech festival in F.5: “I was beaten up since all participants sounded very native in the English speech festival [...] My overall mark was so low and I was ashamed”. In addition, the stigmas attached to the Hong Kong accent contributed to her negative relationship with the accent. When she was in secondary school, she found reading aloud in class or answering questions in English classes particularly “embarrassing” as she was afraid that everyone would label her with a “strong Hong Kong accent and broken English” image even though her teacher never criticized her accent. Thus, she hated her Hong Kong accent, especially in academic settings. The correlation between her negative experiences

of being stigmatized and her hatred seems to be consistent with earlier research conducted by Li (2009) and Sung (2016).

Furthermore, she suggested that she felt like non-native accents should be corrected in the survey (Q5a), her criticism of other non-native accent varieties in the interview appears to support her choice. For example, she had a hard time listening to her professor with a Mainland Chinese accent and question his intelligibility: “How could a professor talk like that [...] I cannot even understand him”. The finding is in line with the research done by Zhang (2013) and Chan (2016), which found that the participants exhibited biases and discriminatory behavior towards non-native accent varieties.

#### ***4.2.1.2 Appreciation towards Hong Kong accent and other non-native varieties***

In contrast, Janice showed her appreciation for the Hong Kong accent and other accent varieties. She reported that she has a slightly positive attitude towards the statement “I have a very positive attitude towards Hong Kong accent” (Q2a). It was consistent with the interview finding. She expressed her appreciation: “It is normal for Hongkongers to speak Hong Kong accent since we are affected by our mother tongue [...] I appreciate how one tried to communicate using English even with an accent”. She also stated that: “it is fun to speak HKE”. Such a finding aligns with previous research (Hansen Edwards, 2015) that affective reasons could contribute to the liking of the Hong Kong accent.

In addition, Janice revealed that she did not mind communicating with speakers who have non-native accents in the survey (Q5a). While in the interview, she further explained the reason behind it. She used to be afraid of the judgments from others even though she was surrounded by others who spoke Hong Kong accent as well in her CMI school. Yet, her relationship with Hong Kong accent became better after her exchange to England, where she saw how others with different accents communicate without any burdens. Her views towards non-native accents changed as she acknowledged that “English is solely for communication and accent is

just a feature of people from different cultural backgrounds”. Thus, she found accented speech fascinating, as it reflects the diversity of expression across regions and cultures. The findings echo the previous research (Chan, 2018) that the cultural capital of non-native accent varieties was recognized.

#### ***4.2.1.3 Linguistic self-hatred***

Although Alice and Janice demonstrated distinct attitudes towards the Hong Kong accent and other accent varieties, they both showcased a divergence in their English use and their preferred accent variety. In the survey, Alice and Janice expressed their preference for becoming native speakers of English when given the options of “a native speaker”, “a Hong Kong speaker”, and “other” (Q3a). They both recognized their usage of the Hong Kong accent, yet they revealed their aspiration toward a native-like accent. Alice, with strong disapproval towards non-native accent, addressed how she treated achieving a native-like accent as realizing herself: “I know I cannot, but I aspire to speak like native speakers to impress others”. Even though Janice appreciated non-native accent varieties, she still wished to get rid of the Hong Kong accent as she wrote in her response in the survey: “I personally try to avoid HKE though, purely because I love British accent”. She also treated RP as her ultimate goal as she believed: “achieving a native-like accent is my part of learning a foreign language”. Linguistic self-hatred was identified in the findings, with participants expressing their aspiration towards native accents regardless of their attitude towards non-native accents. These findings are consistent with earlier research by Groves (2011), Zhang (2013), and Hansen Edwards (2015).

#### **4.2.2 Language ideology**

##### ***4.2.2.1 Native speaker ideology in relation to aesthetics***

In the survey, both Alice and Janice stated that they believed in native speakerism (Q5b). When inquiring about their learning target in secondary school, Alice chose “English teacher” while Janice indicated that “it doesn’t matter as long as my pronunciation is understandable by

the listeners” as their learning target (Q4). Yet, the result appears to conflict with the interview data. Both of them indicated a desire to talk like native speakers in the interview. And a substantial theme was identified which was related to the aesthetics of native accents. To Alice and Janice, native accents were “pleasant”, “charming”, “attractive”, “elegant”, and “beautiful”. Janice added that RP was “charismatic” to her.

Revealing their ideology on native speakers, Alice and Janice stressed the aesthetics of native accents. For example, Janice recalled her experience of watching the drama series “Sherlock Holmes” and was fascinated by the RP: “Listening to Benedict Cumberbatch speaking RP is a pleasure [...] His accent is fancy and elegant”. She also pointed out at the beginning of the interview that: “non-native accents are just different from native accents, in terms of how they ‘sound’”. She added that the native accent always sounded appealing to her with its charm: “The way how native speakers utter a word is just beautiful”. The finding aligns with previous research (Li, 2009) that native accents were perceived with high aesthetic value than non-native accents, thus contributing to the native speaker ideology.

#### ***4.2.2.2 Native speaker ideology in relation to ownership and authority***

Aesthetic aside, another theme that emerged was the ownership and authenticity of native accents. During the interview, Alice and Janice described RP and AmE as the “standard”, “ideal”, “authentic”, and “original”, thus showcasing their native ideology in relation to ownership and authenticity.

Throughout the interview, Alice and Janice stressed the ownership of native accents. For example, Janice recognized the ownership of native accents with respect to the “origin” of the language: “English originated from England, so it is normal for people to wish to sound like speaking original English”. She also considered RP as her ultimate learning goal as she emphasized: “Learning a language should include learning the authentic accent that native people speak”. While Alice suggested that many Hongkongers, including her, believed in the

authenticity of the native accents: “Even my parents, with low education level, still think native accents are better since natives are the one who owns the language”. The finding is consistent with Li (2009), Hansen Edwards (2015), Chan (2016), and Chan (2018) that native speaker ideology is highly associated with ownership and authenticity.

### **4.2.3 Identity and language**

#### ***4.2.3.1 Acknowledging a continuous second language learner identity***

Other than desiring to speak like native speakers (Q3a), both Alice and Janice expressed a desire to eliminate their Hong Kong accents in order to sound like native speakers in the survey (Q6a). Their responses were consistent with the information obtained during the interviews. For instance, Janice associated the native accent with “exotic and expensive plants”, while the Hong Kong accent was just “local and inexpensive plants”.

Both Alice and Janice recognized themselves as a learner that was always learning. Janice felt that there was no end to acquiring a language and treated achieving a native-like accent as one of the ultimate goals she had: “If we want to achieve a native-like accent, we have to keep learning in an English-speaking environment”. While Alice realized a need for continuous learning in her daily usage of English: “I cannot use English like a native speaker [...] sometimes I lost words in English and others would help me to fill the gap in English”. They also addressed the limitation of learning English in CMI schools, which prohibited the learning of English. For example, Janice contrasted her learning experience in her CMI school with that in the university: “I only drilled exam papers in secondary school, and the teachers used Cantonese in English lesson [...] I only have a sense of learning English in the university where I use English to communicate”. Through comparing the learning experiences in the CMI school and the university, she concluded that continuous learning was only possible in the university setting. Thus, both Alice and Janice realized their continuous second language learner identities with respect to their learning goals and experience in CMI schools.

#### ***4.2.3.2 Negotiating a Hong Kong user of English identity***

In contrast, other interview data conflicted with their choice in the survey – they showed ambivalence towards using a Hong Kong accent in daily conversation. Alice reported a “love-hate relationship” with the Hong Kong accent. While hating to speak a Hong Kong accent in academic settings, she loved speaking Hong Kong accent in daily conversation: “Hong Kong accent sounds casual and not pretentious at all”. She also reported when she was with others who also spoke a Hong Kong accent, her accent helped showcase her identity: “It showed that I am one of them (the Hong Kong students)”.

In a similar vein, Janice revealed her appreciation towards the Hong Kong accent with cultural factors: “Hong Kong accent represents the distinct culture that we speak Cantonese as our mother tongue”. She stressed the uniqueness of the Hong Kong accent and its representation of a Hongkonger community: “We only have Hong Kong accent in Hong Kong [...] we can easily identify Hongkongers with the Hong Kong accent”. The finding is consistent with previous studies (Hansen Edwards, 2015; Li, 2009; Sung, 2014, 2016) that the Hong Kong accent has served as not only a representation of cultural identity but also an identification of members in the lingual-cultural community.

### **4. Discussion**

#### **5.1 Cross-case analysis**

The current study probed into three main questions: (1) What are their attitudes and perceptions towards the Hong Kong accent and non-native varieties? And what are the differences and similarities between speakers from EMI and CMI schools? (2) What are their perceptions and ideologies of native accents? (3) How do these two groups of students relate accent to their identities in acquiring and using English?

In answer to the first research question, attitudes towards the Hong Kong accent were mostly negative. Melody and Edward from EMI schools, and CMI school graduate Alice,

reported their disapproval and hatred towards the Hong Kong accent in relation to the stigma attached to the Hong Kong accent. Similar to previous research (Chan, 2016; Hansen Edwards, 2015; Li, 2009; Sung, 2016), these stigmas were closely related to the negative evaluation of competence, intelligibility, and solidarity and thus contributed to their disfavor of the Hong Kong accent. Yet, their difference lies in how the different learning environments have contributed to their attitudes. Melody and Edward revealed that they often received feedback, especially corrective feedback towards their accents, from the teachers in the classroom setting. In contrast, studying in a CMI school and surrounded by others who spoke a Hong Kong accent, Alice was never criticized by her teachers. But she gained such a negative attitude outside of school with a comparison between her accent and native-like accents, for example, in a speech festival. On the other hand, participants from both EMI and CMI schools were subjected to self-linguistic hatred. Echoing previous studies (Groves, 2011; Hansen Edwards, 2015; Zhang, 2013), they all demonstrated complicated and conflicted feelings towards the local accent variety. Recognizing their usage of the local variety, they did not want to speak it and preferred “native” varieties, mostly RP and AmE. Interestingly, even the CMI school graduate Janice, who appreciated the local variety, wished to attain a British accent and treated it as an achievement in her journey of acquiring English.

Research question (2) asked about the perceptions and ideologies participants held towards the native accents, with the finding that positive attributes and perceptions were prominent. Similar to a previous study done by Li (2009), positive attributes regarding ownership, aesthetics, and pragmatics were found in the current study in the accounts of both CMI and EMI school graduates. Furthermore, the results demonstrated that both CMI and EMI school graduates believed in native speakerism and held a native-speaker ideology. Together their stories showcased the native-speaker ideology that recognized the ownership and authority of native accents over L2 varieties, thus presenting a hierarchical attitude towards the



accent varieties (Chan, 2016; Hansen Edwards, 2015; Li, 2009; Sung, 2022). What seems noteworthy in the findings is that EMI school graduates tended to associate the level of competence with native accents, while CMI school graduates did not. In the stories of Melody and Edward, native accents were highly associated with impressions of advanced proficiency, which echoes previous studies (Chan, 2013, 2018; Li, 2009; Sung, 2022). They reported that such a hierarchical attitude towards native accents was constructed in their secondary schools, where they acknowledged that a native-like accent would help attain higher scores in DSE speaking. With its high instrumental value in academic discourses, the native accent was accorded to advanced proficiency ideologically.

While research question (3) examined how these two groups relate accents to their identities, all of them acknowledged the dual identities of language users and learners. Such a finding was consistent with research done by Sung (2020) that the co-existence of language users and learners was recognized. Comparatively, EMI school graduates have constructed more negative learner and user identities, mostly with experiences in classroom discourses. Melody and Edward have seen themselves as incompetent learners with a strong Hong Kong accent and reported distress with such an identity, which echoed previous research (Sung, 2020; Teng, 2019). In addition, they treated themselves as ineligible users when using the language with a Hong Kong accent; thus, they desired a native-like accent to gain legitimacy. This confirms previous research (Li, 2009; Sung, 2014, 2016) that L2 learners wished to use native accents to obtain an empowered user identity. Notably, graduates from CMI schools stressed more about being a Hong Kong user of English, shedding light on their cultural identity. Alice and Janice have seen the Hong Kong accent as a marker of their Hong Kong identity. Interestingly, the Hong Kong accent served as a tool to reflect their in-group identity in everyday discourses, as previous studies suggested (Hansen Edwards, 2015; Li, 2009; Sung, 2014, 2016).

## **5.2 Pedagogical implications**

With a focus on the learning experiences in secondary schools, the current study provides insights into pronunciation instruction in classroom settings, and the need for reconceptualizing the problematic association of accent and English proficiency in DSE. As illustrated in the cross-case analysis, graduates from EMI schools suffered from the native-speaker ideology in relation to competence and proficiency and the corrective feedback on their accents. In Hong Kong, native-like accents have been considered standard in academic settings. Thus, the mainstream English teaching materials adopted accents from native speakers, usually in received pronunciation (RP) or general American (AmE) (Chan, 2014). Such a standard is also evident in the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education public examinations. Candidates are penalized for exhibiting phonological features influenced by their L1 (Chan, 2016). However, the current study showcased that such an association of competence with accent is not valid and causes a tremendous burden to the students. Thus, the legitimacy of different accent varieties should be acknowledged instead of emphasizing the only “standard” in pronunciation instruction and public examination. Furthermore, teachers should provide general comments on the comprehensibility of students’ pronunciation rather than stressing the “authenticity” of accent varieties. By providing general comments instead of corrective feedback, teachers can assist learners in understanding the communicative purpose of the language and ultimately acknowledge the legitimacy of different accent varieties.

## **5.3 Limitations and suggestions**

In this section, limitations are discussed with corresponding suggestions.

To begin with, the study is not applicable to generalization due to the nature of the case study approach. The current study probed into four individuals’ accounts of their learning experiences in either CMI or EMI schools and their constructions of language attitudes, ideology, and identity. Thus, the findings cannot be generalized and figure out the overall

pattern. It is suggested that future studies can survey a larger population to observe general patterns and themes in language attitudes, ideology, and identity constructions.

Apart from that, the study only relied on data from one interview. Due to the time limit, the researcher could only conduct one interview with participants without follow-up interviews. Thus, changes in perceptions were not captured. Future researchers can consider conducting multiple interviews to capture the developmental trajectories of the participants to gain a deeper understanding of how the learning experiences might affect their perceptions and constructions of language attitudes, ideology, and identity.

Finally, due to the nature of qualitative case studies, potential bias might affect the researcher's report on the participants' accounts. As the researcher co-constructs the narratives and re-tells the stories of the participants, the researcher's personal emotions and perspectives might be involved. Thus, it is important to strike a balance between the insider and outsider perspectives and be aware of potential bias resulting from personal experiences of being an EMI school graduate on the interpretation of data.

## **6. Conclusion**

The present research – drawing upon the narratives of two graduates from EMI schools and two graduates from CMI schools' English learning experiences, revealed the intricate relationship between classroom settings, language attitudes, ideology, and identity. Eventually, the study bridged the gap by adding insights into the effect of secondary education background to the previous studies on tertiary education background. The study's insights indicated that language attitudes, ideology, and identity construction with reference to secondary education background should be focused on and further investigated.

## Appendices

### Appendix A: Questionnaire survey on Qualtrics

Research project: “Perception of Hong Kong accent on language attitude, language ideology and identity: Case studies of ESL university students”

#### Informed consent form

Thank you for participating in this project. This questionnaire is designed for ENGE4700 Independent Research Project. This project targets university students from EMI and CMI secondary schools who perceive themselves as having a Hong Kong accent specifically. The objectives are to discover their attitudes towards their Hong Kong accent and to reveal their perceptions towards ‘native’ accent and Hong Kong accent. The project seeks to offer insights into the relationship between their Hong Kong accent and the learner identity in acquiring and communicating in English.

There are 6 questions in this questionnaire to collect participants' background information and their initial thoughts on Hong Kong accent and identity. Some questionnaire questions were adopted from Li (2009), Hansen Edwards (2015), and Chan (2018). Follow-up interviews will be arranged to further understand the reasons and rationale behind the choices. The interviews will be recorded and transcribed. All data will be kept confidential and used for academic purposes only. Pseudonyms will be used to ensure anonymity. Participation is voluntary and you may withdraw from the study at any time. Thank you again for participating in this project.

Thank you again for participating in this project.

I am willing to participant in the study and understand that my identity will not be revealed.

Yes

No



Your background information (Name, age, institutional background, major, year of study)

Which type of school you studied in for secondary school?

CMI school (school that use Chinese as a medium of instruction)

EMI school (school that use English as a medium of instruction)

Which type of school you studied in for primary school?

CMI school (school that use Chinese as a medium of instruction)

EMI school (school that use English as a medium of instruction)

What is your attitude towards Hong Kong accent?

Please specify your attitude towards the following statement using a scale: "I have very positive attitude towards Hong Kong accent".

1: strongly disagree

2: disagree

3: slightly disagree

4: neutral

5: slightly agree

6: agree

7: strongly agree

What might be the reason(s) for the choice in 2a?

Why or why don't you like speaking HKE?



Which type of speaker you would like to be?

"I would like to speak English like \_\_\_\_\_"

a Hong Kong speaker

a Native speaker

Other (please specify in 3b)

What might be the reason(s) for the choice in 3b?



Which of the following choices would be the learning target of your spoken English when you were in secondary school and why?

I would like to sound like a native speaker of English (e.g. an American or a British);

I would like to sound like my English teacher;

It doesn't matter as long as my pronunciation is understandable by the listeners.



What is your attitude towards non-native accents when communicating in English?

"I feel like \_\_\_\_"

As long as I can understand the content, I don't mind communicating with speakers with non-native accents

Non-native accent should be corrected

Other (please specify in 5b)

Do you believe in native speakerism (attitudes to language that prioritize the norms and standards of native speakers)?

Yes

No





What is your identity when communicating in English?

"I want to\_\_\_\_\_"

maintain my Hong Kong accent to showcase my \*identity\*

get rid of my Hong Kong accent to showcase my \*identity\*

Other (please specify in 6b)

Other (please specify)



We thank you for your time spent taking this survey.  
Your response has been recorded.

## **Appendix B: Interview protocol**

### **Interview protocol for “Perception of Hong Kong accent on language attitude, language ideology and identity: Case studies of ESL university students”**

Welcome and thank you for your participation today. My name is Winnie Lee. Thank you for completing the survey, and this follow-up interview will take about 60 minutes. I would like to have your permission to audio record this interview, so I may accurately document the information you convey. If at any time during the interview you wish to discontinue the use of the recorder or the interview itself, please feel free to let me know. All of your responses are confidential.

Your participation in this interview is completely voluntary. If at any time you need to stop, or take a break, please let me know. You may also withdraw your participation at any time without consequence. Do you have any questions or concerns before we begin? Then with your permission we will begin the interview.

#### **Part 1. Questions relating to language attitudes**

- 1) Do you think you have a Hong Kong accent? Why do you think so? And what makes a Hong Kong accent? What are the main or key features of a Hong Kong accent?
- 2) Please tell me more about your attitude towards the Hong Kong accent. Can you think of any experience that contributes to your attitude/ make you like or dislike the Hong Kong accent?
- 3) How would you describe your relationship with Hong Kong accent? Would there be differences in different settings? (e.g., in classroom setting/ daily conversation, etc.)

- 4) Think about your attitude towards Standard American accent/ Received Pronunciation when you communicate in English with other speakers. Can you think of some reasons that prompted your attitude? (e.g., family, local friends/ international friends, internet, hobbies, teachers/ professors)
- 5) Think about your attitude towards other accents (e.g., Indian accent/ Singaporean accent, etc.) when you communicate in English with other speakers. Can you think of some reasons that prompted your attitude? (e.g., family, local friends/ international friends, internet, hobbies, teachers/ professors)
- 6) Is there anything else you would like to share?

## **Part 2. Questions relating to language ideology**

- 1) Think about the type of speaker you would like to be, would you please explain the attributes that you associate this type of speaker with?
- 2) Please tell me more about the English language learning target you had in secondary school, what could be some of the factors or experiences in life that motivated you to pursue such a learning target?
- 3) How do you feel about the native-like pronunciation that many learners strive for? Do you think it is necessary to achieve native-like pronunciation? Why or why not?
- 4) Do you believe that there are language hierarchies (i.e., any accent superior to other accents)? If so, please illustrate the hierarchy with respect to different accents (for

example, Hong Kong accent, Standard American accent, Received Pronunciation, Singaporean accent, Indian accent, etc.)

- 5) Is there anything else you would like to share?

### **Part 3. Questions relating to identity**

- 1) Think about your identity when you learn and speak English, how do you describe yourself when you are using English? Do you feel differently when you speak different languages?
- 2) Do you see yourself as more of a user, a learner of English, or both? Describe the context in which you have such sense of self.
- 3) Think about your relationship with the Hong Kong accent, can you describe your relationship with Hong Kong accent using a metaphor?
- 4) Think about your relationship with other accents (Standard American accent/ Received Pronunciation), can you describe your relationship with other accents using a metaphor?
- 5) Is there anything else you would like to share?

Thank you again for your participation. Please contact me if you have any questions.

## **Appendix C: An example of the interview transcript (transcribed from Cantonese)**

Interviewee: Edward (E)

Interviewer: Winnie (W)

Questions: Part 1 – questions 1 and 2

W: Welcome, and thank you for your participation today. If at any time you need to stop or take a break, please let me know. Do you have any questions or concerns before we begin?

E: No.

W: Okay. So, the first part deals with your language attitudes. I would like to know more about your perceptions of the Hong Kong accent. Do you think you have a Hong Kong accent? And why do you think so? And what are the main or key features of a Hong Kong accent?

E: I feel like I have a Hong Kong accent. From my understanding, the Hong Kong accent is spoken by Hongkongers. And the key features... maybe the “r” sound. I recognize that I could not articulate the “r” sound properly. And my speech, and other Hongkongers’ speeches, are very different from native speakers’ speeches.

W: I see, but why do you think you have a Hong Kong accent?

E: I was told that I have a Hong Kong accent, and I compared myself with other native speakers. And their speeches sounded very standard and authentic when compared to mine. But I do think that accented speech is normal for foreign learners from different countries. It is normal that we are influenced by our mother tongue. And we tend to have some specific phonological features influenced by our mother tongue.

W: Got it; moving on to the second question. Can you please tell me more about your attitude towards the Hong Kong accent? Can you think of any experience that contributes to your slightly negative attitude towards the Hong Kong accent, as you indicated in the survey?

E: Erm...

W: So you mentioned in the survey that you slightly disagree with the statement, “I have a very positive attitude towards the Hong Kong accent.” And interestingly, you mentioned the British accent is the most acceptable accent in the survey, so I would like to know if you had any experience causing such a perception.

E: I think...I have thought about what a “standard” variety of accents is. And the answer is obvious as the “standard” is the original variety that people speak, that is, people in England. And I have been told that the Hong Kong accent is not the standard, so I don’t like the Hong Kong accent.

W: By whom?

E: Everyone... including my family, teachers, and peers.

W: Okay, so why do you think that is the case? Everyone would think the Hong Kong accent is not desirable, but the native accent is much better.

E: I feel like Hongkongers have an imagination of native accents – that they are, for example, more competent. So, I dislike having a Hong Kong accent as people might think I am not competent.

W: As you were in EMI secondary school, have you encountered any experience that you were considered incompetent because of your Hong Kong accent?

E: My English teacher often told me that having a Hong Kong accent would make me lose marks in DSE speaking. And in examinations, my scores for speaking, paper 4, were often the lowest among the four papers. Even though I did well in maybe, reading, the speaking marks would make my average grade lower.

W: So, you think the reason why you got lower marks in speaking, paper 4, is because of your accent?

E: Yes, because I think my accent already gave a bad impression like the marker might think I am not a good speaker of English. And he or she might not listen carefully to what I say. So my marks were lower than I expected.

[End of Transcript for questions 1 and 2]

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# **A Comparative Analysis of Cultural Appropriation in *Avatar: The Way of Water* and *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever* as Reflections of Postcolonial Sentiment**

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## **1. Introduction**

Ever since the inception of cinema, films have become a platform for visual (and later auditory) storytelling, flowing with untapped potentials of entertainment. With the improvement of technology and an increase in budget, a new genre of movies has come to sweep the globe with their bombastic effects and complicated plot lines. Originally referred to “huge aerial bomb[s] capable of destroying a whole block of streets,” blockbusters have become more popularized within the film context to describe high-budget feature movies that are intended for high popularity and financial success (“blockbuster”). With the arrival of the 21<sup>st</sup> century come more structurally complex and heavily commercialized blockbuster films, if not franchises, that are built on their predecessors, such as Steven Spielberg’s *Jaws* in 1975 and George Lucas’ *Star Wars* in 1977, both of which are considered to have kickstarted the “Blockbuster Era” that continues until the present day. However, the oversaturation of and ongoing criticism on blockbusters, has forced major film studios to touch on more serious social issues in the thematic makeups of their new entertainment products in order to stay relevant.

Nonetheless, blockbuster movies manage to dominate the top seats for highest grossing movie franchises of all time, with the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) grossing over \$28 billion at the box office at the time of writing. At the same time, the spot of the highest grossing movie at the time of writing belongs to James Cameron’s *Avatar* (2009),

which amasses over \$2.9 billion. Needless to say, both brands have become huge household names ever since their boost of popularity. Amongst the MCU, Ryan Coogler's *Black Panther* (2018) is arguably the most well-known example of a blockbuster with cultural significance towards the Black community on the construction of an Afro-futuristic vision through the perspective of Wakanda, a fictional technologically advanced African nation. Meanwhile, *Avatar* is also renowned for its imaginative fictional worldbuilding of the Na'vi, an extraterrestrial sapient humanoid species likened to indigenous groups back on Earth in real life. In both blockbusters, relevant cultural elements are fused together with computer-generated visual effects and heavy action sequences so as to craft an intended cultural relevance for both critics and general moviegoers alike.

However, considering the commercial nature of blockbusters, it is not hard to imagine major film studios to simply treat the inclusion of cultural-specific implications as a gimmicky marketing strategy as an effort to garner emotional and financial support from the targeted marginalised groups, such as the African community and diaspora for *Black Panther*, and the indigenous peoples of the Americas, Australia, and other places that once were under European colonization for *Avatar*. Indeed, while both films have been praised by many for tackling on the themes of postcolonialism, concerns about the cultural appropriative nature of these blockbuster movies have been raised multiple times since their theatrical releases. For *Black Panther*, the first Black-centred superhero movie from the MCU has been criticised for endorsing Black superiority by other marginalised groups (Monji) and giving a stereotypical portrayal of African culture by many African continentals against Black diasporic people (Chutel); for *Avatar*, arguably the most recognizable 3D science fiction epic has been condemned for the display of the white saviour complex and the problematic portrayal of the Na'vi people through a colonialist lens (Lyubansky), if not that of cultural imperialism (Surujbally).

Acknowledging these limitations raised by audiences and critics alike, however, I decide to focus on their respective sequels, *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever* and *Avatar: The Way of Water*, instead, for analysis in relation to cultural appropriation and as reflections of postcolonial sentiment. The sequels are relatively unexplored for analysis compared to their predecessors because they were both released in late 2022. Also, I believe that a much fairer literary criticism can be made on the sequels with intertextual references to their predecessors on themes, characters, plots, and other story elements. As these sequels introduce new elements to expand the pre-existing worldbuilding while keeping anti-colonialism as the main theme, I wish to investigate further how the directors handled the problems of cultural appropriation and updated postcolonial sentiments in their second instalments, in specific relation to the controversial topic of cultural appropriation, in order to evaluate properly some of the contemporary postcolonial sentiments, especially in the form of American entertainment, arguably a product of Western cultural domination as well as its reflection.

Through the following literary criticism, I wish to identify cultural appropriation in both sequels, examine their effectiveness in exploring a postcolonial identity of the marginalized, challenge the salience and normalization of Western cultural dominance, and, in the end, encourage a more respectful and equitable cultural exchange worldwide. With the goals in mind, the thesis of this paper argues that *Avatar: The Way of Water* perpetuates harmful indigenous stereotypes and contributes to cultural appropriation towards the indigenous peoples, thereby impairing postcolonial representations; whereas *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever* mitigates the effects of cultural appropriation by crafting nuanced, deferential portrayal of the marginalized communities, thereby facilitating postcolonial representations.

As an overview of this essay, Section 2 follows and operationalises the terms “Postcolonial Theory” and “Cultural Appropriation”; Section 3 compares the two sequels under four main points; Section 4 concludes this literary criticism.

## **2. Operationalisation**

### ***2.1 Postcolonial Theory***

I learned most thoroughly the term “Postcolonialism” last semester in the course *ENGE3320 Hong Kong Literature in English*, during which I completed a final essay titled “Postcolonial Sentiment of Hong Kong”. While that essay has primarily a Hong Kong focus, I see this capstone project as a loose spiritual successor of my previous work, where I extend the topic to more popularised texts on a global context. As such, for this capstone project, I shall utilise the definition employed in my previous work on the term with additions in detail.

Originating from *Orientalism*, the 1978 book authored by cultural critic Edward Said seen as the foundation of the Postcolonial Theory, the modern understanding of the term stems from the argument that “[i]deas, cultures, and histories cannot seriously be understood or studied without their force, or more precisely their configurations of power, also being studied” (Said 12), highlighting the concept of cultural hegemony, which suggests that countries with greater political and economic power have more influence in shaping the culture of other societies, oftentimes under the pretense of cultural superiority, since the West views itself as the only uncolonised. In other words, the “Occident” retains the power in dictating and framing the cultural concept of the “Orient,” taking away the latter’s ability of self-definition. Said further comments on the construction of a Western gaze or outlook by claiming that “[t]he imaginative examination of things oriental was based more or less exclusively upon a sovereign western consciousness out of whose unchallenged centrality an oriental world emerged” (Said 14). As a result, this “binary social relation” between the two

with an antagonistic mentality can be understood as “co-dependent social constructs, as a product of Western Europe’s arbitrary division of the world, with the West seen as the logical, cultured norm, and the East viewed in a mysterious fashion” and as driven by human passions (Gurung).

The application of a false, artificial binary opposition to portray the Eurocentric mindset as a guideline for non-European peoples has perpetuated cultural imperialism. In her 1988 essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, literary theorist and feminist critic Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak points out that the process of Western definition of “the East” has the objective to “constitute the colonial subject as Other,” facilitating Western subjugation over the East (76). Therefore, the subaltern, a term used in postcolonial studies to designate the oppressed colonial populations, is rendered voiceless in their fight for representation within dominant discourses by the very power structures that exercise oppression via colonisation and patriarchy. Additionally, cultural theorist Stuart Hall argues that the concept of “the West” should be classified as “a *historical*, not a geographical construct” which serves to establish and maintain power relations between dominant and subordinate cultures; or rather “the West” versus “the Rest” (186). The notion of “the Othering” is fortified to relegate certain people groups to a socially subordinate classification as subaltern natives. Consequently, strong reluctance is often induced in the form of postcolonial sentiments within former colonial subjects against the centralization of Western perspectives in local cultural narratives.

Four main recurring characteristics throughout postcolonial analyses have been summarised by scholar Peter Barry in his 1995 book, *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*: “an awareness of representations of the non-European as exotic or immoral ‘other’; an interest in the role of language in supporting or subverting that power dynamic; an emphasis on identity as doubled, hybrid, or unstable, [and] a stress on ‘cross-cultural’ interactions” (193-195). In other words, the first point is concerned with

whether the traditional binary system of the superior West and the subaltern Rest is reinforced or challenged in the text; the second is concerned with whether the linguistic colonial legacy is reinforced or challenged by the usage and role of language in the text; the third is concerned with whether the effects of cultural hybridity are explored and focused on within the text; the last is concerned with whether the colonial power dynamics are echoed or subverted in the creative process in a text through the lens of cultural materialism.

## ***2.2 Cultural Appropriation***

Meanwhile, cultural appropriation, a complex and controversial topic with a multifaceted nature, has recently become a popular term in general discourses when discussing the appropriateness of certain individuals or art pieces exhibit such colonial mentality, not a small part owing to the surge of political correctness in the Western cultural atmosphere. Cultural appropriation is best described as an “unacknowledged or inappropriate adoption of the customs, practices, ideas, etc. of one people or society by members of another” (“cultural appropriation”). While on technicality, the term can be used in a bidirectional sense, it refers most commonly, in negative reception, to cases where members from a dominant culture appropriate from minority cultures, such as how the “[Western] intellectual property rights system and the (mis)appropriation of Indigenous knowledge without the prior knowledge and consent of Indigenous peoples evoke feelings of anger, or being cheated” (Fourmile 268-269). Under this definition, the practice of cultural appropriation is understood by academics as a form of colonialism, which ties into a postcolonial analysis.

Before moving on, it is crucial to note that while there is little denying amongst scholarly debates that the practice garners notoriety for being exploitative by placing the borrowed elements outside of its original cultural context, the extensive usage of the term has caused the corruption of the definition on the concept of cultural appropriation, largely thanks



to its misapplication by the general public in otherwise respectful or acknowledged practises of cultural activities. This is especially troublesome when, in public discourse, people seem to simultaneously “correctly perceive something like a frat party full of blackface as wrongheaded” and “protest over sushi, perceive that it is absurd,” resorting to absolutive reading (Friedersdorf). Indeed, the popularisation of the term, however well-intentioned, has given rise to hypersensitive cultural policing, mistaking cultural “borrowing” for appropriation, thereby hindering actual cultural exchange, if not progress (Young). Gradually, the overuse of the concept causes the term to lose meaning. For instance, in the case where an American woman wore a traditional Chinese *qipao* and became subsequently accused of appropriation online, not only does this type of superficial arguments discourage sincere cultural appreciation, but it also detracts from more pressing issues of racial discrimination, especially when it has devolved into “a lazy substitute for real political power” rather than “a defence of minorities under the colonialist cosh” (Chen).

Such clarification on cultural appropriation is required not only to accurately facilitate my findings, but also to identify erroneous accusations within the textual criticisms received by *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever* and *Avatar: The Way of Water* alongside their predecessors. The following section applies Barry's four characteristics as the framework to examine how cultural appropriation, or the lack thereof, undermines or promotes meaningful postcolonial representation in the two analysed blockbuster sequels.

Four Main Recurring Characteristics	
1. awareness of non-West <b>Othering</b>	3. emphasis on dualistic/unstable <b>identity</b>
2. role of <b>language</b> against colonial legacy	4. stress on <b>cross-cultural</b> collaboration

Table 1: Summary of Peter Barry's 4 main recurring characteristics throughout postcolonial analyses

### 3. Compare and Contrast

#### 3.1 Awareness of Non-West Othering

In relation to the first main characteristic, I will examine whether the texts encourage or undermine the traditional narrative of a Western standard and a non-West Otherness.

In *The Way of Water*, it has followed its predecessor's footsteps in unintentionally reinforcing the notion of "Otherness" when it comes to depicting the Na'vi, and the indigenous peoples in general, towards a mostly American audience. The "Othering" of the fictional indigenous Na'vi people carried out in the first instalment has been criticised heavily in the 2015 book *Postcolonial Theory and Avatar*, in which it is argued that despite carrying out a superficial message of anti-colonialism, *Avatar* "reproduces a narrative of European privilege and subject-production" by "repeat[ing] a rudimentary colonial imaginary drawn from the archives of imperial fantasy," and by protagonising the colonisers in the film, Western centralism is once again promoted, thereby reducing the representation of the non-West to a simple role of Otherness (Thakur 11).

Needless to say, in spite of global financial success, its capability to represent postcolonial sentiment of the indigenous peoples in real life on the silver screen has been questioned tremendously over the years. How effectively, then, did director James Cameron respond to these critiques with the production of *The Way of Water*? Unfortunately, while the movie is received generally well, as evidenced by 76% of 434 critics' positive reviews and an average rating of 7.1/10 on Rotten Tomatoes ("Avatar: The Way of Water"), commentaries and criticisms regarding the hot topics of cultural appropriation remain split amongst critics and general moviegoers alike, including Native American influencer Yuè Begay's invitation to "Natives & other Indigenous groups around the world in boycotting this horrible & racist film" due to the depiction of the white man's "saviour complex" by harmfully appropriating

indigenous cultures (Hobbs). However, how valid and fair are the accusations regarding the perpetuation of the white man saviour trope and misrepresentation of the cultural minority?

*The Way of Water* continues the narrative choice of following Jake Sully, a white American ex-Marine whose consciousness is placed inside an artificial human/Na'vi hybrid body, better known as an Avatar driver. After a few minutes of montage showing his domestic bliss with Neytiri, his Na'vi wife alongside five kids, three biological and two adopted, the film jumps to sixteen years later where Jake Sully takes command of the whole Omatikaya clan to fight against human colonisers in a guerrilla campaign. Before touching on the guerrilla campaign, Jake Sully has become a well-respected chief amongst his clan, receiving two prominent titles, namely *Olo'eyktan*, meaning clan leader, and *Toruk Makto*, translated as "Rider of the Last Shadow." While the former title implies Sully's political significance, the latter indicates his spiritual prominence, since *Toruk Makto* is revered with great honour and respect, since there have been only five before Jake Sully's assumption of the title. Even after the events of the first film, Sully is continually referred to as *Toruk Makto* as a symbol of elderly, if not legendary, status, underlying his undisputable influence within the local population. The presence of Jake Sully is almost comparable to that of Jesus Christ in the New Testament, being viewed by contemporaries as an otherworldly being from up above with a mission to save the people from suffering and oppression. Indeed, Sully's becoming *Toruk Makto* is referred to as the Sixth Coming, a linguistic cue of Christian imagery referencing the Second Coming of Jesus Christ in the Book of Revelation. Therefore, it is arguable that *The Way of Water* starts off by reinforcing the white saviour narrative with the assignment of a larger-than-life archetype to a white protagonist amongst non-human natives.

Besides, Jake Sully is seen to lead the Omatikaya clan in a counterinsurgency against the human colonisers based on Planet Pandora. Due to his previous professional military

experiences, Sully utilises the physical strength of the Na'vi people and combines it with a human strategy of waging a guerrilla campaign using weapons of Earth-based technology such as guns. The sequence has the desired effect of empowering the indigenous peoples in their ability to fight back the more technologically superior invaders on the surface; however, the leadership of Jake Sully and his introduction of advanced technology to the native Na'vi tribe once again tell the story of the fight of the marginalised through the lens of the dominant culture group. The action of Jake Sully can be seen as a Western gaze on the scriptwriters' part, since it has the subtle implication that the only fighting chance that indigenous peoples have is from Terran enlightenment and assistance, unintentionally fortifying the colonial mindset that white people are necessary for the liberation of the oppressed community.

After realising the potential danger to his family and to the clan, Jake Sully decides to leave the Omatikaya clan with his family and refuge elsewhere. This leads to the introduction to the Metkayina clan, a Na'vi people group of the reef, who have evolved a lighter skin tone and fin-like limbs to better adapt to the semi-aquatic lifestyle. When compared to the Omatikaya clan, described in-universe as people of the jungle, a dangerous precedent is set by the film to distinguish and identify people groups largely based on simple monolithic characteristics. Native rights advocate Crystal Echo-Hawk has accused the film of cultural appropriation for this precise reason, suggesting that the invention of fictional Na'vi people groups with trivial depictions is "based on what James Cameron's notion is of what he thinks Indigenous history is, what he thinks Indigenous culture is" (Kaur). This, in turn, creates a misunderstanding that all indigenous groups in the world are homogenous or with select characteristics, diminishing the individual identities of each of these marginalised groups through an artificial categorisation.

The misuse of cultural elements in *The Way of Water* amounts to cultural appropriation, as it takes aspects of these cultures out of context and uses them for the benefit

of a white, Western audience. This dynamic perpetuates a power imbalance between white Westerners and indigenous cultures, in which the latter are reduced to exotic stereotypes that exist only to be saved by the former. As such, the white saviour trope in the film is a manifestation of broader issues related to the appropriation and commodification of non-Western cultures. But what about *Wakanda Forever*?

In comparison, *Wakanda Forever* appears to be facing fewer issues of this kind. After all, acclaiming global critical success, its predecessor has remained culturally significant to Black audiences, be they diasporic like African Americans or continental. However, the outward appeal to one marginalised group does not necessarily grant immunity from critiques of cultural appropriation in the realm of proper reflection of postcolonial sentiment.

Introducing one of the first Black superhero protagonist on the silver screen, 2018's *Black Panther* adopts an anti-colonialism and Pan-Africanism narrative through the journey of Wakandan King T'Challa, who faces challenges from both the dominant isolationist faction in Wakanda and a globalist revolutionary ideology raised by villain Erik Killmonger. However, the postcolonial framework of the predecessor lies best at the worldbuilding of Wakanda. Its technological superiority "presents us with a glimpse of where Africa could have been had it not been for colonialism," thereby subverting the real-world colonial dynamic controlled by the West (Wong (Omowale)). In addition, by shining light upon Wakandan tribal politics in the film's ideological confrontation, it decentres traditional Western hegemony. The Afro-futuristic take on the worldbuilding further shatters the myth of African intrinsic inability to self-develop oftentimes propagated by Western misconceptions, since the film explores an alternative future where African nations rise to greatness without European interference or guidance.

However, the first instalment still received criticism regarding cultural appropriation, such as the accusation of cultural appropriation by some native Africans for fictionalising an

African nation as a caricature of Pan-African ideals (Chutel), the “Westernization of Wakanda” in T’Challa’s journey to eventually modernise the country by opening up to the West (Slaats), the advocacy of Black superiority and anti-White sentiment, as well as cultural appropriation due to a “lack of proper acknowledgement for Asian influences” such as the inclusion of Asian martial arts and the setting in South Korea (Monji). How effectively, then, did director Ryan Coogler respond to these critiques with the production of *Wakanda Forever*? After the sequel’s release, it has been praised by critics for taking on a new direction in exploring “the ongoing forces of colonialist exploitation” as the thematic centre (Hutchinson), notably by the inclusion of Talokan, a pre-Columbian inspired underwater civilisation, as a celebration of “Brown Power” (Albarrán-Torres & Burke).

In *Wakanda Forever*, the sudden passing of King T’Challa has left Wakanda weakened and prime target for exploitation, especially for the Vibranium resources, by the Western states such as the United States and France. Queen Ramonda, mother of T’Challa, resumes power for the time being. As a one-year time jump is introduced, Ramonda is shown to enter the United Nations security council with a more isolationist stance on the trade of Vibranium “not because of the dangerous potential of vibranium... but because of the dangerous potential of” the other powers. Afterwards, the Dora Milaje, Wakandan all-female elite force, is shown escorting some French mercenaries in chains for previously attacking a Wakandan outreach facility for extra Vibranium resources, thus securing a diplomatic victory against France and subtly warning the United States of the consequences of going after Wakanda. This scene effectively communicates with the audience that, despite a weakened internal political state due to continuous unforeseen loss of regents starting from the previous film, Wakanda proves to the world that the West is not allowed, nor is it able, to exploit its countrymen because of their technological and military advantages, as well as solidarity against Western transgression. This subversion of power dynamic is built on that of the last

film; however, whereas the evidence of such is passive in the last film, the sequence in question for *Wakanda Forever* propels Ramonda and her nation in an agent role, whether it is the lecturing given or the revelation of their attackers on a world stage, highlighting its unwillingness to easily cooperate with the Western tone of condescension.

While it is indeed true that *Wakanda Forever* resumes the tradition of few White characters, let alone friendly ones with Wakanda, with the notable exception of Everett Ross, who sides with Wakanda in the CIA's plot against the African nation, the idea of Black superiority is not as prominent largely thanks to the introduction of Talokan and its ruler Namor in the First Act. Talokan occupies the same niche in Wakanda's point of view as Wakanda does in the West's point of view as the mysterious unknown superpower with a superhuman leader or mythical hero. As the film carries on focusing on the tension between Wakanda and Talokan on the decision of pre-emptively striking the (Western) world for exploiting their Vibranium resources, it successfully deviates from traditional Eurocentric narrative by antagonising Namor's warmongering position with Ramonda's peaceful, isolationist desire with minimal Western influence. The myth of Black superiority is further shattered by Talokan's successful attack on Wakanda, which results in the death of Ramonda. This proves that not even the Black protagonists are invincible from death and destruction brought about by non-Black power that has equal footing in military prowess.

The anti-hero attribute of Namor also a sign not of cultural appropriation, but embracement. Throughout the movie, from his proposal of alliance with Wakanda against the West, to his retaliation of attack to Wakanda, as well as his eventual reconciliation with Shuri, the temporary new Black Panther, Namor acts on behalf of his countrymen's interests in order to secure a strong and safe Talokan. Not only does this mentality decentre Western hegemony, but it also introduces moral ambiguity to the character, not necessarily rendering Namor and his Yucatan race simply villainous or heroic, more akin to real life characters with

nuanced thoughts, moral values, and characteristics. The backstory of the origin of Talokan is also told by Namor, who escapes from the prosecution of the Spanish conquistadors before finding heart-shaped herbs that grant underwater superhuman ability to his race. The re-imagining of existing and thriving pre-Columbian civilisation provides an alternative possibility for the indigenous Mesoamerican population, shattering the myth of Eurocentric inevitability in dominating the Americas due to their moral, religious, technological, and military superiority. The film, therefore, reflects the postcolonial sentiments of not only the African community, but also that of the indigenous peoples of the Americas.

In summary, *Wakanda Forever* cannot be definitively considered an instance of cultural appropriation as it seeks to celebrate and respect African culture, as well as Mesoamerican indigenous culture as a major step-up. Instead, it is a product of proper postcolonial critique and reflection, seeking to represent an alternative, empowering portrayal of the identity and culture of the oppressed minority through actively challenging the colonialist dynamic laid out by the Western powers. In comparison, despite its well intentions, *The Way of Water* remains shallow in its depiction of a minority culture by re-introducing the White Saviour trope and misusing cultural elements of indigenous peoples outside of their contexts, serving as an epitome of cultural appropriation and colonial power dynamics.

<u>1. Awareness of Non-West Othering</u>	<i>The Way of Water</i>	<i>Wakanda Forever</i>
addresses <b>predecessors' flaws</b>	✗ (continuation)	✗ (exploration)
enriches a <b>postcolonial identity</b>	✗ (trivial depictions)	☑ (Talokan)
exercises cultural <b>appreciation</b>	✗ (Western gaze)	☑ (Namor as antihero)
→ <b>subverts</b> colonial power dynamic	✗ (White savior)	☑ (Wakanda-centric)

Table 2: Summary of Section 3.1 comparing *Avatar: The Way of Water* with *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever*



### 3.2 Role of Language against Colonial Legacy

In relation to the second main characteristic, I will examine whether the language use within the texts bolsters or weakens the presupposed linguistic colonial legacy of the West.

Both films are conducted primarily in English, arguably the most recognised *lingua franca* of the present, especially in cinema where blockbusters are predominantly produced by Anglophone filmmakers and movie studios. However, at least one additional language is present in both films for a considerable amount of screen time as part of the storytelling.

One of the marketing gimmicks of the Avatar franchise is the employment of the Na'vi language, constructed artificially by linguistics professor Paul Frommer. Cameron hired Frommer to make a complete, consistent phonology, morphology, syntax, and lexicon with the requirements of sounding alien while humanly pronounceable by the actors. After presented with three sets of possible non-English variations (contrasting tones, varying vowel lengths, and ejective consonants), Cameron picked the latter. Within the next half year, the basics of the language were formed. The ability to produce the sounds in the Na'vi language became a prerequisite for the actors to pass the casting, especially if they were to be cast as the native Na'vi people (Milani). While the Na'vi language does not feature a writing script in-universe, it is expressed in the Latin script in real life for the actors. After the release of the first instalment, the Na'vi language reached a level of popularity similar to that of Klingon, another constructed language for entertainment assigned to be a native language of an alien sapient species, with more people wishing to learn it. In the film, English is used primarily by the human colonisers, as well as a few Na'vi natives who have acquired it in previous human-held schools that provide English education; while the Na'vi language is heavily featured in the dialogues between the Na'vi natives, as well as several Avatar drivers like Jake Sully, albeit to a less proficient extent.

Understanding the history of the Na'vi language, one has more context in analysing any change in the role of the Na'vi language in *The Way of Water* as a means to challenge or reinforce the power dynamic introduced by the Earth-based colonisers. Unfortunately, it is not featured as much in the sequel as it is on the original. According to the lore established by the movies, only the Omatikaya clan has direct contact and linguistic exchange with the “sky people,” or the humans, while others like the Metkayina clan have few ways of understanding the English language, let alone speaking it. However, for the majority of the time, the Metkayina people, from the chief to commoners, use English to communicate with one another, whether it is towards the Sully family or within themselves. In fact, despite the increasing prevalence of the Na'vi appearance compared to humans, the Na'vi language has been featured sparingly across three hours of runtime, with the notable exception of the group of Colonel Miles Quaritch, the human military leader whose consciousness has been uploaded to a human/Na'vi hybrid body, who have diegetic English dialogue with infrequent Na'vi speech in low proficiency. In fact, there are only 64 lines spoken in Na'vi (“Spoken Na'vi”) amongst 862 spoken lines (Cameron et al.), which means that there is less than 7.5% of the Na'vi language present in the script. This leads to criticism on the Na'vi language reduction in the sequel, asking for “the Na'vi language dub of 'Avatar: The Way of Water',” sharing their wishes of “more Na'vi dialogues... instead of English autotranslations” (Conolly).

The in-universe explanation for the lack of the Na'vi language can be explained by a blink-and-you'll-miss-it line by Jake Sully in the opening monologue: “[Na'vi] might as well be English” after being so used to hearing it (Cameron, 2022). After this point, the Na'vi language that the Sully family speaks transitions into English for the rest of the screentime. Such a decision “mask[s] the alien Na'vi into plain, conversational English that's easier to digest” as a move to cater to causal filmgoers (Francisco). However, this realist shift from

adopting a fully constructed language in the first instalment to ditching it in favour of the *lingua franca* of the dominant culture seems suspicious. Cameron and his team decided to sacrifice the nuanced approach to an indigenous representation for technical convenience. As much as the predecessor film's self-promotion of anti-colonialist message, it becomes all the more problematic to push aside the Na'vi language for English (Connolly). It is almost as if the constructed language was meant to be a prop, similar to indigenous fashion garments and other cultural elements, to highlight the exotic nature of the indigenous people, without devoting much energy nor effort for in-depth exploration of a non-West centralist narrative.

Even with the English substitution, there is an inconsistency of accents within the Sully family, who should either have the General American influence from Jake or the Na'vi accent from Neytiri. Instead, there is a variation in dialectal continuum despite being raised under the same roof: Neytiri sounds more Slavic; the brothers Neteyam and Lo'ak carry a more West African accent with inconsistency; the daughters Kiri and Tuk exhibit the General American accent (Clouse). The language replacement, therefore, marks an "imposition of the colonizer's language on the colonized is responsible for redacting all pre-existing cultural identities" (Thakur 34). In other words, the abundance of English rather than Na'vi supports Eurocentric colonial dynamics in *The Way of Water* even more strongly than its predecessor.

In comparison, the language use in the Black Panther franchise has been more consistent and nuanced. Despite the existence of a fictional national language named Wakandan in the Comics alongside two real-life languages Yoruba and Hausa as official languages (Hoskin et al.), the MCU version ditches the route of constructing an artificial language and adopts the use of isiXhosa, language of the Xhosa people (Breznican). This linguistic choice makes the film's subtext "very much associated with the South African fight against white colonizers" by referencing the Xhosa people's fight against European colonialism on physical wars and ideological ones, the latter of which are best represented by

the anti-Apartheid movements of Nelson Mandela, member of the Xhosa (Eligon). *Wakanda Forever*'s continued usage of isiXhosa is a sign of passing the torch of colonial resistance to the audience, a luxury that *The Way of Water* does not enjoy. Nevertheless, a fictional Wakandan writing system was constructed by African linguist Hannah Beachler, who based it on "the ancient Nigerian language of Nsibidi" and updated the traditional pictography to "a more modern version" (Desowitz).

That being said, there is a risk of cultural appropriation in *Wakanda Forever*, however, in showcasing these unique linguistic features in a minimum. While it is understandable for Ramonda, Shuri, Okoye, and other Wakandan nationals to employ English as an effective mode of communication outside of their country with non-Wakandans like Namor, the situation is complicated by a lack of in-universe explanation of the extensive use of English amongst Wakandan nationals, barring few dialogues with emotional outbursts, especially Mother Ramonda and daughter Shuri, when isiXhosa is their native tongue. Although Wakanda supposedly shares the proud status of uncolonised with Ethiopia and Liberia in Africa, English still manages to creep in and serve, at least, as the prestige language amongst elite members of Wakandan society. It goes also unexplained as to why Queen Ramonda chooses to speak in English while addressing every UN member state on behalf of Wakanda, since its adoption of a Western language in speech in isiXhosa's stead can be viewed as a sign of weakness and submission to the Western culture and, thus, harm national prestige. As for the writing system, it is present mainly in title cards of place names and time skips during transition of scenes as an exotic feature before itself quickly transitioning into its English equivalence. The clues above point at the film's struggle between fully immersive linguistic experience and realistic concerns of the English-speaking target audience, risking its postcolonial critique with remarks of hypocrisy and appropriation.

That is, unless one considers the balance struck by the accent approach. During Black Panther's first appearance in the MCU, actor Chadwick Boseman stood firmly to bring a unique accent to his English. He based his idiolect on "where Wakanda would be" after having done "great research on the very cultural aspects of the [Black Panther]" as an effort to "tether it into real African culture" (Russell). As the superhero gained his titular movie, dialect coach Beth McGuire was tasked to design a uniform Wakandan accent based on Boseman's idiolect from previous outing, which was then adopted by all Wakandan characters (Pulliam-Moore). This practice remains consistent even in *Wakanda Forever* with all nationals even after the passing of Chadwick Boseman. Not only is the personal legacy of Boseman carried on, but the treatment of Wakandan English as the norm throughout the movie is also a subversion of the promotion of the standardised Received Pronunciation and/or the General American English as the only credible and respectable accent.

Other than isiXhosa, however, *Wakanda Forever* is also known for including Haitian French and Yucatec Mayan languages, spoken by Nakia, a Wakandan spy and ex-lover of T'Challa, and all Talokanil inhabitants, respectively (Dickinson). The inclusion of the Mayan language, specifically, becomes an important representation of the Mayan culture and serves as an inspiration for Mayan descendants, who, due to Spanish colonial legacy, have mostly ditched their native Mayan languages in favour of Mexican Spanish for job opportunities and social recognition, especially children who are more commonly intrigued by fantasy and action films. *Wakanda Forever* recognises the continued usage of the Yucatec Mayan language, thereby encouraging children to "learn and practice it with native speakers." The incorporation of the Mayan lore and terms within the MCU context, such as describing Namor as *K'uk'ulkan*, the ancient serpent feather god, facilitates a Mayan narrative that is clear of Spanish colonial influence. Therefore, the natural flow of dialogue in Yucatec Mayan

within the Talokanil in the film greatly demolishes the presupposed norm that is the colonial languages represented by English and Spanish, challenging Eurocentric linguistic standards.

The analysis above of the language use in *The Way of Water* and *Wakanda Forever* reveals a stark contrast in the handling of indigenous languages and their role in challenging or reinforcing linguistic colonial legacies. *The Way of Water* uses sparingly an artificially constructed language for a fictional indigenous people, who are, instead, shown to mostly speak in English, reinforcing Eurocentric colonial dynamics. In contrast, *Wakanda Forever* gives more importance to the native language, as well the new linguistic additions, and employs them relatively consistently, giving voice to indigenous cultural identities and challenging the West's linguistic hegemony.

<u>2. Role of Language against Colonial Legacy</u>	<i>The Way of Water</i>	<i>Wakanda Forever</i>
persists with minority <b>native tongues</b>	✗ (great reduction)	✗ (fewer showcases)
expands <b>linguistic diversity</b>	✗ (mostly English)	✓ (+Yucatec Mayan)
showcases English <b>accents/variations</b>	✗ (inconsistency)	✓ (accent approach)
→ <b>subverts</b> colonial power dynamic	✗ (Na'vi → gimmick)	✓ (focus on other lang)

Table 3: Summary of Section 3.2 comparing *Avatar: The Way of Water* with *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever*

### ***3.3 Emphasis on Dualistic/Unstable Identity***

In relation to the third main characteristic, I will examine how the texts explore the effects of cultural hybridity on individual and communal identities amongst the colonised or marginalised people groups.

This emphasis on the duality of identity originated from critical theorist Homi K. Bhabha's notion of "hybridity," which is described as "a strategy of the suppressed against their suppressors" (Hallward 25). Inspired by the works of Said, "hybridisation," one of Bhabha's central ideas, "describes the emergence of new cultural forms from multiculturalism. Instead of seeing colonialism as something locked in the past, Bhabha shows how its histories and cultures constantly intrude on the present, demanding that we transform our understanding of cross-cultural relations" (Parsons & Harding). Reckoning Barry's observation on the emphasis on the dualistic, unstable attributes of identity in postcolonial analyses, the complex notion of multiculturalism is best to be central to thematic conversations, if not arguments, in the texts of the two blockbuster sequels.

In *The Way of Water*, the discussion surrounding cultural hybridity brings up a central thematic message about intercultural understanding. Back in the 2009 film, Jake Sully is presented back and forth in both the human form and the Na'vi Avatar form, originally acting as a bridge of communication with the indigenous Na'vi through a less alien form in their perspective. In essence, "Jake is leading a double life" (Lyubanksy). However, throughout the film, Sully falls in love with Neytiri and connects deeper with the Na'vi culture, one evidence of which is Sully's spiritual connection with the Tree of Souls. It is depicted to allow the closest connection with Eywa, the sentient force of life in Pandora, as well as the ancestors of the Na'vi individuals. By the end of the film, Sully switches his allegiance to the Na'vi in their fight against the "sky people," identifying as a Na'vi and enter into the Na'vi commune, manifesting multiculturalism.

By focusing on his emotional journey, the original film demonstrates Jake Sully's resolution between Na'vi and human identifications, thereby hinting towards a true possibility of peaceful integration of individuals into culture groups. If one neglects the fundamentally supremacist nature of a white, Western gaze, the white outsider point of view can be neutralised by the alternative reading of a "biracial" protagonist navigating through two sides of his cultural identity. While human scientists describe the action of transferring consciousness into a human/Na'vi hybrid as "driving," carrying a colonialist undertone; Sully refers to the process as a "rebirth," showing a sign of respect towards the indigenous culture. Hence, it can be argued that the characterisation of Sully tells "a quintessential immigration story" (Lyubanksy). In this case, how can *The Way of Water* go from Sully's cultural transformation?

Unlike its predecessor, *The Way of Water* exclusively presents Jake Sully in his Na'vi form, only referencing his human elements through the usage of English and occasional encounters with other humans. However, it is obvious how Jake Sully is treated and respected as a fellow Na'vi, as evidenced by his chief title *Olo'eyktan* and Christ-like honour of *Toruk Makto*, that even the chief leader of the Metkayina clan holds him in high esteem. It proves that after sixteen years of living among the Na'vi, Jake Sully is indisputably Na'vi. Therefore, an interesting creative choice was made by Cameron in the sequel where the exploration of cultural identity and hybridisation focuses less on the adult Jake, but more on his adolescent children, both biological and adopted ones. The situation for the Sully kids differs from that for Jake in two main ways: the children do not enjoy the privilege of living as a "normal" monocultural individual like their father, and that the children were born and raised in Pandora, causing them to fall into the Third Space, another central idea of Bhabha's. The Third Space Theory is a postcolonial theory that illustrates "the uniqueness of each person,



actor or context as a ‘hybrid’” (Bhabha 55). The intrinsic hybridity showcased in the Sully kids is a major step-up in the evolution of *Avatar*’s exploration of cultural identity.

Throughout the movie, the Sully kids stand out for two reasons: within the overall Na’vi society and within the Metkayina clan. The strongest visual clue of their fusion identity is an extra finger on each hand. While Na’vi natives only have four fingers in each hand, the Avatars have five to better accommodate the human drivers. All the kids borne from Avatars retain the genetic information of growing five fingers. This, in turn, makes them atypical among their four-fingered peers. As for the Metkayina clan, they have a more greenish skin tone compared to the bluer one for people of the Omatikaya clan, and they have adapted to swim more efficiently than their jungle-dwelling cousins. Therefore, the kids face intraspecific and interspecific discrimination from the younglings in the Metkayina clan, resorting to name-calling. As such, “the colonizer’s children are targeted for (admittedly mild) prejudice. They’re presented as underdogs and as relatable because they are outsiders” (Berlatsky). I applaud for the film’s sincere portrayal of the subtle struggles faced by the Third Space children because of their confusion in their identity. It is distinct from Jake’s white saviour narrative because the kids are thrown into the mix by simply being born in an out-of-the-norm family, which makes the representation of cultural hybridity more natural and apparent than in the first one.

Other than the character-driven narrative of the Sully family, the very introduction of another Na’vi clan is also an indication that Cameron wishes to bring diversity in the depictions of the Na’vi as more than simply an indigenous people with a monolithic culture. “Rather than invaders exploring the land they’ve invaded, the second ‘Avatar’ film is about the encounter of two different indigenous societies” (Berlatsky). The effects of colonialist approach are minimised because Jake Sully approach the clan not as a saviour but as a refugee. In addition, the loose political structure within the Metkayina clan is also perceived

as separate of that within the Omatikaya clan, which has a central leader figure. Nonetheless, the Tree of Life underwater for the Metkayina clan highlights the shared ancestral culture between the jungle dwelling and seafaring clans, heading towards a healthier portrayal of various indigenous cultures as related with and distinct from one another.

In *Wakanda Forever*, the discussion surrounding cultural hybridity brings up a central thematic message about global solidarity. Back in the 2018 film, T'Challa adheres strictly to the tradition of self-isolation towards foreign affairs, prioritising the well-being of Wakandans more than the outside world. However, the arrival of the villain Killmonger challenges that very notion, arguing that T'Challa and his technologically superior nation are morally obligated to assist African-descended oppressed people groups, namely the Black diaspora, by equipping them with Vibranium-charged weapons in their fight against the immoral West. Killmonger essentially represents a worldview stemming from a Pan-Africanist ideology, one that advocates for an international solidarity between people with African ancestry. By the end of that film, T'Challa becomes a supporter of the Pan-Africanist worldview by opening up to the outside world.

While this theme resonates strongly with Black audiences worldwide, it becomes much more difficult to one-up the previous hero journey in regard to postcolonial critique in the sequel. Moreover, Pan-Africanism has its fair share of disapproval. On one hand, the Black diaspora, when compared with the marginalised African culture groups back at the ancestral lands, enjoy “relative privilege within the global sphere of Black Atlantic and Black Diasporic politics” and get accused of culturally appropriating the continental culture without thorough understanding; on the other hand, such restrictive viewpoints presented by some native African people on “the cultural involvement of others based on their Diasporic location... implicitly perpetuate the same colonialism that separated Africans from Africa” (Hobson). Regardless, the diasporic consciousness has become a hot topic for heated debates

amongst scholars and the Black community about where they stand in the discussion of postcolonial critique, relegating the African diaspora to the Third Space. In this case, how can *Wakanda Forever* go from Pan-Africanism?

Due to sudden real-life passing of Chadwick Boseman, the mantle of the Black Panther was sealed as Disney promised not to recast T'Challa. With the continued production of the sequel, however, the side characters of the series were instead given the chance to shine. An interesting scenario arises to Wakanda's diplomatic history, therefore, when the strongest advocate for Pan-Africanism is no longer present, since neither Queen Ramonda nor the tribal council have the desire to share Vibranium-based technology with the West, denying the latter a chance of influence and remaining a nationalistic standpoint.

The argument of appropriation between African Americans and the African continentals can be found through the introduction of Riri Williams, whose ingenious invention to detect Vibranium metal invites assassination attempts from the Talokanil. As an African American without the Vibranium-boosted technology nor a wealthy royal family, Williams matches her level of genius with Shuri, another well-known prodigy in the MCU. Coogler's intention is clear: to explore their relationship of the "diversity of the Black experience," both from a continental and diasporic standpoint (Coggan, "Forever changed").

The isolationist policy also escalates a cordial international relation to an aggressive standoff between Wakanda and Talokan when Namor offers a dichotomy of choices between alliance and opposition to Ramonda and Shuri. While Ramonda's indecision leads to her eventual fatal downfall, Shuri, after her ascension as regent, changes from extreme xenophobia in the Third Act battle with Namor to a new kind of worldview akin to her late brother. However, instead of Pan-Africanism, the type of outlook Shuri adopts is best described as Third-Worldism. Produced during the height of the Cold War, this political concept used to refer to countries that reject neither the Capitalist nor Communist Bloc. In the

present day, the term refers to an ideology which calls for unity and cooperation among the countries of the Global South, which once were the subject of exploitation by Western colonial powers. The Third-Worldist non-aligned movement encourages countries to pursue their own path towards development and social justice. The ideology emphasizes the shared experiences and struggles of colonized and oppressed peoples, as well as the importance of collective action in resisting Western imperialism. In fact, it serves as an umbrella term for unity movements for various races, including Pan-Africanism (Berger). The fight between the two uncolonised non-West superpowers, in this sense, can be understood as an unstable ideological confrontation in finding their own identities in the world.

By empathising with Namor and his struggle in securing Talokan as an uncolonised and unexploited nation, *Wakanda Forever* manages to one-up its predecessor by having multicultural inclusivity. If the first Black Panther film reminds the Black audience worldwide that identity can be dualistic, such as the possibility of living in America and retaining elements of one's African identity; then the sequel extends the notion of a shared struggle to audiences from all marginalised groups that it is of the utmost importance to recognise the possibility of multicultural hybridisation, especially in the modern world where rapid globalisation takes place. There can be found a nuanced approach of both keeping one's unique individual cultural identity and accepting the shared non-Occident communal identity. Cooperation between non-West nations and peoples, therefore, promotes the destruction of the superiority complex stemming from a monocultural Western identity.

The analysis above of the two sequels regarding the exploration on cultural hybridity in both communal and individual identities, unlike in Section 3.2, displays similarity in their step-up approaches from respective predecessors. While *The Way of Water* dives deep into both the Third Space Sully children as unstable and the various Na'vi tribes like the Metkayina as diverse, *Wakanda Forever* likewise demonstrates the Black experience through

both diasporic and continental perspectives as hybrid, as well as the Third-Worldist self-identification between various communities and/or races as unstable.

<u>3. Emphasis on Dualistic/Unstable Identity</u>	<i>The Way of Water</i>	<i>Wakanda Forever</i>
builds on previous <b>cultural transformation</b>	✓ (immigrant Jake Sully → biracial kids)	✓ (all Black groups → all non-West groups)
explores <b>individual</b> identity	✓ (Sully children)	✓ (Riri Williams)
explores <b>communal</b> identity	✓ (Na'vi hybridisation)	✓ (Wakanda vs Talokan)
presents <b>instability &amp;/ duality</b>	✓ (Third Space)	✓ (Third-Worldism)
→ <b>subverts</b> colonial power dynamic	✓ (human x Na'vi)	✓ (focus on non-West)

Table 4: Summary of Section 3.3 comparing *Avatar: The Way of Water* with *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever*

### ***3.4 Stress on Cross-Cultural Collaboration***

In relation to the final main characteristic, I will examine how, through a cultural materialist lens, the creative process of the texts itself can be considered to echo or subvert the colonial power dynamics.

As mentioned in Introduction, most successful blockbusters are Hollywood productions based in the United States. Since the US is seen as the sole geopolitical superpower in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, there is little doubt that these two blockbuster sequels, as well as their predecessors, were made by members of arguably the most dominant culture sphere. The very fact that American corporations are responsible for representing cultural fragments from other marginalised people groups reveals the problematic side of cultural representation in entertainment media, especially when non-Hollywood films have a harder time appealing to a global audience and succeed commercially. Yet, cultural appropriation is oftentimes present in Western media products, especially in those that the creators put little effort into acknowledging or respecting the cultural significance behind the depiction of certain culture groups or the borrowing of some of their cultural elements with no recognition of said culture. It is precisely because of these complicated reasons that cross-cultural collaboration is the most balanced, realistic approach for a nuanced indigenous representation with a guarantee of significant worldwide exposure.

Taking a look at the production of *The Way of Water*, it does not look seem to actively pursue a thorough cross-cultural collaboration with the minority culture groups, despite Cameron, his team, and his film's intention to do their best in representing these marginalised people. The most obvious evidence comes from a predominantly White cast for portraying Na'vi, with two notable exceptions: Zoe Saldana, a Black Latina actress who portrays Neytiri; and Cliff Curtis, a Māori descended actor who portrays Metkayina chief Tonowari (Hobbs). The accusation of cultural appropriation regarding the depiction of the Metkayina people

stems from a lack of collaboration in the creative process with the Māori people, who serve as inspiration for the fictional seafaring clan, including the tattoos and their culturally intimate relationship with whales.

As previously mentioned in Section 3.2, the creative decision made by Cameron and his team to turn the Na'vi language into non-diegetic English language in order to cater to casual moviegoers, as well as to remove subtitles from the screen and re-shift the audience's focus to the visual effects. The neglectful attitude towards the Na'vi language, inspired by numerous real-life indigenous languages, especially from the Polynesian ones according to Frommer (Milani), implies their unwillingness or non-confidence in presenting the Na'vi language as a normal language of cinema.

Indeed, even the very inception of this series came from Cameron's previous visit to the Brazilian Xingu tribe in the Amazons since it was the "driving force" for him to write a story about the indigenous struggle (Phillips). During the defense for the movie's originality in court, Cameron commented on how *Avatar* is a "science fiction retelling of the history of North and South America in the early colonial period, [which] very pointedly made reference to the colonial period in the Americas, with all its conflict and bloodshed between the military aggressors from Europe and the indigenous peoples. Europe equals Earth. The native Americans are the Na'vi. It's not meant to be subtle" (Acuna). It is safe to argue, therefore, that Cameron's line of thinking exhibits the characteristic of White filmmakers' tendencies in "projecting their own ideas of Indigeneity onscreen, rather than involving Indigenous people themselves" (Kaur). The creative process of *The Way of Water*, if not the whole series, seems to echo the Western-imposed colonial power dynamics more than it challenges them.

Examining the production of *Wakanda Forever*, it does encourage cross-cultural collaboration with the minority culture groups more than the *Avatar* sequel. Just as how its predecessor features "a range of Africans" which "blur[s] the idea of what it means to be

African” (Sanginga), thereby becoming an accepting platform for African talents in the Black diaspora, instead of relying solely on cultural fragments; the sequel also stars many Black and Latinx actors to play Wakandans and Talokanil respectively, including “the casting of Tenoch Huerta, a Mexican actor who has faced discrimination in the Mexican screen industry, and the social media campaign #PoderPrieto (“Brown Power”) fighting against the whitewashing of the Mexican screen industry” (Albarrán-Torres & Burke). According to UCLA's annual Hollywood Diversity Report, all minority groups were underrepresented with the exception of Black people in film leads (Green).

During the pre-production stage, the place of origin for Namor changes from the mythical yet fiction Atlantean prince to the ruler of Talokan, one based on the real-life pre-Colombian indigenous way of life and serving as an inspiration (Coggan, “Ryan Coogler”). This minor change, for example, incorporates real-life Mayan struggle with the fictional worldbuilding, instead of reinforcing the centuries-old trend trope of a white Atlantis, *Wakanda Forever*.

Nevertheless, the sequel has still received criticism regarding cultural appropriation, mainly commenting on the misrepresentation of the Mayan culture. Instead of showcasing the modern Mayan people “as thoroughly contemporary people who are contributing to the world today,” the film decides to prioritise “their ancestors of bygone eras” in order to reach a great appeal in the form of a tourist gaze (Nevaer). This negligence of the modern state of the marginalised people groups becomes problematic when their “highly advanced” ancient civilisations become revitalised in talks “have a negative impact on how millions of Latin Americans and Latinx individuals are represented onscreen and perceived in everyday life” (Albarrán-Torres & Burke). This depiction, therefore, can be argued as demonstration of the American neo-colonialist mindset in which these marginalised groups are denied the modernisation in the minds of the Western viewers.



Another controversial subject regarding cross-cultural collaboration is concerned with on the issue of casting someone of one ethnicity to play another ethnic role. On one hand, some argue that the miscasting counts as cultural appropriation that perpetuates harmful stereotypes and deprives marginalised communities of actual representation and opportunities in the entertainment industry, such as casting mainly the African diaspora as continental roles and casting Tenoch Huerta, who is of Nahua and Purépecha descent, as a Yucatec Mayan (Nevaer); on the other hand, some argue that actors should be allowed to portray any character regardless of ethnicity, as long as the acting process is done convincingly and respectfully. I believe that in casual discourse, the technicality of miscasting is prioritised over the aspects of respect in the portrayal. While it is no doubt that miscasting leads to a denial of the original Indigenous actors for the acting opportunities, an absolute statement on whether it counts as cultural appropriation cannot be derived because of the complexity and nuances of various factors, such as the historical and cultural contexts of the film. The term “blueface” was coined by some after “allegations of appropriation followed the release of the first *Avatar*, and its use is similar to using the terms ‘blackface’ or ‘yellow face’,” which historically contain a racist undertone (Jackson). As for the depiction of Namor, both Huerta and Coogler realised the importance of humanising the character even as, if not especially because of, serving an antagonist role in order to be understood (Laudenbach). This shows a refusal for *Wakanda Forever*’s crew to resort back to dichotomous characterisation where the marginalised are either always good or always bad. By allowing such a complexity of a character, I believe that the Yucatec Mayan culture is very much respected throughout the making of the film in order not to be considered as appropriating. There is also more of an involvement of the indigenous Mayan people in the making of the film, as evidenced by Maya-Mexican actor Josué Maychi, who coached Huerta and others into speaking the language properly, instead of minimising its screentime (Barbeito).

As much flaws as there might be during the production of *Wakanda Forever*, its approach to this question with sensitivity and respect and consideration to centre the voices and perspectives of marginalized communities in any discussions or decisions related to representation in the entertainment industry make it not culturally appropriative, because of the effort seen throughout, unlike in *The Way of Water*, where a less collaborative attitude can be found throughout the making of the film, so that indigeneity is formed largely through non-indigenous means. Consequently, the Western power dynamics are somewhat subverted in *Wakanda Forever* but unfortunately largely echoed in *The Way of Water*.

<u>4. Stress on cross-cultural collaboration</u>	<i>The Way of Water</i>	<i>Wakanda Forever</i>
works with <b>non-Eurocentric corporations</b>	✗ (cross-cultural Hollywood productions)	
collaborates with <b>minority culture groups</b>	✗ (neglectful)	☑ (encouraged)
presents <b>all-rounded</b> cultural portrayal	✗ (retelling of past)	✗ (focus on antiquity)
balances <b>racial makeup</b> of cast	✗ (mostly White cast)	✗ (ethnicity swap)
→ <b>subverts</b> colonial power dynamic	✗ (self-projection)	✗ (respectful handling)

Table 5: Summary of Section 3.4 comparing *Avatar: The Way of Water* with *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever*

#### 4. Conclusion

In a nutshell, I have analysed how culturally appropriative *Avatar: The Way of Water* and *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever* are in their expression of postcolonial sentiments throughout their texts. While both blockbuster sequels have their flaws in relation with the four main characteristics framed by Peter Barry, the Avatar sequel is arguably more prone to criticism due to its relatively weak responses to similar critiques directed at its predecessor, while the Black Panther sequel exceeds expectations in postcolonial critiques in a more culturally appreciative manner in comparison to its predecessor. In other words, *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever* manages to put forth some postcolonial ideas within the cultural text; *Avatar: The Way of Water* manages to reinforce Western colonial legacy within the cultural text.

<u>Comparative Analysis</u>	<i>The Way of Water</i>	<i>Wakanda Forever</i>
1. awareness of non-West <b>Othering</b>	✗	✓
2. role of <b>language</b> against colonial legacy	✗	✓
3. emphasis on dualistic/unstable <b>identity</b>	✓	✓
4. Stress on <b>cross-cultural</b> collaboration	✗	✗
<b>Final Verdict</b>	<b>FAILED</b>	<b>PASSED</b>

Table 6: Summary of all the comparisons of *Avatar: The Way of Water* and *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever*

Nevertheless, as both series continue to gross profits internationally and meet positive comments on various aspects of the films, talks of third instalments unquestionably find their way in. In fact, *Avatar 3* will be set to release in late 2024, while *Black Panther 3* is being considered in the meantime as well. With Cameron's promise on delivering a Na'vi antagonist, there can only be hope that the franchise can grow to avoid previous missteps. There is also room of improvement for the third Black Panther instalment, especially in the

casting issues. For the time being, I can only wish for the best for these blockbuster threequels in subverting more of colonial power dynamics, so as to bring about meaningful cultural exchange from the cultural texts on equal footing.

The topics of cultural appropriation and postcolonialism do not stray far away from me. As an ethnic Nepalese born and raised in a Chinese-dominated city, I am grateful that I can take this capstone project as an opportunity to raise an awareness of respectful portrayal of all cultures around the globe, because each of them is just as important and precious as the Western one. I am grateful for this capstone project, not only because it aligns with my interests of postcolonial discussion, but also because I believe that this capstone project serves a major steppingstone for me to start a post-graduation path towards fighting for equitable cultural exchange, whether through more literary criticisms or other means like creative writing, as my small way to contribute to society at large.

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**Are English Language Proficiency Tests valid indicators of one's language skills, and  
can these tests improve one's English spoken and written skills.**

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**Abstract**

Many people claim that language proficiency tests can accurately measure and determine one's ability in the language, where a satisfactory language proficiency test result serves as one of compulsory requirements for many university and job applications. That said, there is a certain level of expectation that, by preparing for and completing these tests, one's language ability not only can be measured, but also improved to a certain extent. Existing research claimed that IELTS, a world recognized English proficiency test, serves as a valid indicator of one's academic success. However, there has not been in-depth studies on the relationships between preparing for language proficiency tests and any significant improvements in one's proficiency in the language. Thus, this research aims to investigate if English Language Proficiency Tests can be valid indicators of one's language skills, and further to examine if these tests can improve one's English spoken and written skills. The result of this research showed that, regardless of the intentions and language background of the test-takers, they saw limited impact from taking IELTS to benefitting their academic studies, based on the different testing natures between language proficiency tests and academic examinations. Consequently, this posed questions regarding the purpose for academic institutions and corporations to require applicants to take language proficiency tests, and the applicability of these language tests. One implication from this study is the possible reexamination of the essence of language proficiency tests amongst universities for their requirement of obtaining satisfactory language proficiency test scores to apply to their academic programmes.

Keywords: language proficiency test, IELTS, improvement, applicability

## **Introduction**

For many university students, taking English language proficiency tests might be very common and useful, as many jobs and further studies require applicants to present qualifications to demonstrate their English ability. Especially in this day and age where English is widely used in societies and in the working environment, English language proficiency tests serve as unbiased indicators and systems to indicate one's proficiency level. In Hong Kong, aside from the compulsory HKDSE English examinations for local students, they are also suggested and encouraged to take the IELTS test and use the results to apply to universities. In this way, it seems that for many stakeholders, especially universities, language proficiency test results hold more validity and credibility than normal public English examinations results. However, the language proficiency test materials are not embedded into the high school syllabus in many countries, especially the education curriculum in Hong Kong. Often, students are expected to self-study or take extra tutorial classes outside of classrooms to study for the test, and to pay additional fees for taking the tests.

There are many widely recognized and published English language proficiency tests that are available for different purposes, and in this study, the test chosen was the IELTS test. According to IELTS (n.d.), short for International English Language Testing System, is an assessment testing the four aspects of the English language, including listening, reading, speaking, and writing. The scores are graded from a scale of 1 to 9, in which 9 is the highest, and 1 is the lowest. The general and average score for applications to universities and jobs is between 6.0 to 6.5, and some people may look for scores above 7.0 depending on certain circumstances. Language proficiency tests are created with purposes, and for IELTS, it is commonly recognized in countries such as Australia, Canada, New Zealand, U.K., and the U.S. Most people take the IELTS test because of work, study, or migration reasons. IELTS claims that the examination system creates questions based on real-life situations and aims to be just and unbiased towards all test-takers.

## **Literature Review**

Taking IELTS tests to indicate a second language learners' English ability is a hotly debated topic that often divides researchers' opinion on its effectiveness and justification. As such, this research paper is inspired by Cooper T's paper (2013) on the predictability of IELTS writing scores on individuals' academic accomplishment in university. In her theoretical study, Cooper noted the significant difference between IELTS writing and academic writing style, in which academic writing often expects the ideas students express on specific questions or topics, whereas IELTS writing focuses on how these ideas are represented by the English learners. This was proven by the variations in types of lexical bundles found in university essays and IELTS writing tasks in the study; the lexical bundles found in academic writings were aimed to summarize and use published sources to support students' viewpoints, whilst the features found in IELTS writing tasks focused more on how learners express their "experientially based opinions without any reference to acknowledge sources". The study was based on South African students who applied to universities using their IELTS scores, and the comparison made between their academic writings versus IELTS writings concluded insignificant contribution from taking IELTS test to predicting their English ability. The article explained in detail on the concept of lexical bundles; therefore, the absence of lexical bundles in these learners' writings may demonstrate the difficulties in expressions as newcomers to the community in South Africa but fails to serve as direct evidence in confirming IELTS results as a meaningful indicator to measure one's English ability for university admission purposes.

Reinforcing the claim that IELTS score cannot be the only indicator to measure one's English ability, an empirical study (2002) conducted by Dooley and Oliver examines the relationships between native speakers' IELTS scores and their respective academic achievements. Drawing on their findings, it was found that native speakers who did not achieve high academic achievements scored high marks for IELTS before admission into the universities, in which this result further supports previous claims and their hypothesis that language proficiency has minimal contributions to academic success in tertiary education. Their research data showed that 15 out of 23 native speakers did not get a pass in university, but they were admitted into university using exceptional results scores from IELTS. Therefore, the researchers claimed that the IELTS test provides an indication towards learners' English ability, and it may be used to predict academic results. However, it is not the

only indicator university should use for admission and prediction of academic results, thus other individual and environment factors should be taken into consideration.

Whilst some research findings justified that other evidence should be taken into consideration with IELTS when investigating a second language learners' English ability, Schoepp (2018) acknowledged and verified the success and validation of IELTS as a predictor of academic success in the UAE region, where many schools adopted to English-medium-teaching for non-native speakers. The study compared their correlations between IELTS scores and the recognized indicator for university success, GPA, specifically in the general education for English language. Results showed a positive correlation between the two variables, and further justified the English ability proven by IELTS can be replicated in their university grades through adopting a similar approach in teaching and testing. Similarly, Feast (2002) investigated the effects of taking the IELTS test to improve the overall university performance. This theoretical study supports the positive correlations between IELTS score and university success through the application of a regression analysis; however, the study concluded a "significant and positive, but weak, relationship" between language proficiency as proven by IELTS and students' academic success in university. As such, it can be assumed that this study, again, suggests that IELTS can be one of the many, but not the only, indicators when determining one's language proficiency. The study features a section discussing external factors that may affect individual student's academic performance in universities, which include personal background, academic background, teaching and support factors, cultural factors, and language proficiency factors. This consideration of external factors acknowledged the significance of individual differences, where the study result may not entirely valid to explain the relationships between IELTS score and academic success. On the basis of Feast's study (2002), some suggestions were made regarding the scoring system and cut-off line of IELTS score, and that this could affect the admission rate of international students and their respective academic success measured by GPA.

Much of the existing research focused on validity issues and the use of IELTS as a predictor of academic success, in which IELTS, as a language proficiency test, serves as an indicator of how one performs academically. However, there has not been much published studies on the effectiveness of IELTS test in improving learner's language ability, where this aspect is the most fundamental aspect a language proficiency test should achieve. Language learners taking IELTS expected not only to gain proficiency results, but also a certain level of expectation to learn new skills in the language to improve their English language ability. Thus, this research gap prompts the focus of the study, to examine whether English Language

Proficiency Tests are valid indicators of one's language skills, and can these tests improve one's English spoken and written skills. Specifically, this study will focus on one of the most common language proficiency tests, IELTS, for research and investigations.



## **Methodology**

The data collection for this study was separated into two sections; the first section aimed at collecting data to understand participants' IELTS test results, and the subsequent section to examine academic performance in relation to IELTS results. Hence, the first section adopted both quantitative and qualitative research methods to understand brief background of the participants, and in-depth qualitative study was practised to make connections between test results and academic performances.

### **Data type for comparison**

As mentioned, there will be two types of data collected for the study: the first type aimed at IELTS and the second type aimed at academic performance.

First, data related to the language proficiency test required participants to provide their IELTS test score, that includes their overall score and the scores of the other four areas (reading, writing, listening, speaking). The numerical score, as mentioned in the introduction, is graded according to the scale of 1 to 9, where 9 is the highest achievement, and scores with decimal places are used to indicate proficiency in the specific area. Specifically, the study primarily focuses on IELTS overall, writing, and speaking scores. Apart from numerical data, some qualitative data regarding the IELTS test was also collected; to understand deeper about participants' experience in taking the test, their reasons for taking IELTS and their general thoughts on the test were also collected. In order to construct the link between preparing for the test and their language improvement, participants were required to provide the duration of their preparations, for instance how long and through what revision methods they prepared for taking the IELTS test. Additionally, they were asked about any visible or general improvements on speaking and writing skills upon preparing for the test. Thus, this part of the data collection was done in the hopes of understanding the background of participants in taking the IELTS test.

Second, data related to academic performance was collected, where participants responded to general questions about education background and major-specific questions in university. The education background indicated whether participants' previous schooling were in Chinese-mediated schools or English-mediated schools. To facilitate the analysis of the study, participants were asked to provide their most recent cumulative GPA in university; although this academic indicator was sensitive and some student might not want to provide this type of information, the participants of this study acknowledged and provided their

consent to use their academic result as a mean for only academic analysis and purposes. Other data in this type included the medium used in their major courses, which directs to whether their major courses adopt English or Chinese as the language used in classrooms, and their English language course grades if they have taken compulsory English classes in university as a required course.

### **First section - IELTS test results**

In the first part of the study, an online questionnaire was created to collect data surrounding background information for quantitative analysis and most importantly, to screen for potential interviewees for the second part of the study (See Appendix A). In the questionnaire, general questions regarding participants' language learning were included; they were asked about their intentions, preparations, experiences, and any improvements in the whole process of preparing and taking the IELTS test.

From the data generated from the online questionnaire, some brief data and diagrams were generated. 42 participants were invited in this study, with 30 females, 10 males, 1 non-binary, and 1 transgender in this population. All participants were undergraduate students studying a bachelor degree in university, and all had experience taking the IELTS test in the past. Only 1 participant studied a Cantonese-mediated major course, and 24 participants took compulsory English courses in university as a required course. Table 1 below shows the statistics regarding IELTS test score collected from these 42 participants:

Average IELTS overall score	Average IELTS writing score	Average IELTS speaking score
7.7 / 9.0	6.8 / 9.0	7.2 / 9.0

Table 1. IELTS Test Scores

As shown by Table 1, the average overall score collected was distinctly higher than the required score for university admission, which is 6.5 out of 9.0. However, the average writing score was significantly lower than that of the average speaking score, and more discussions regarding this phenomenon would be expanded in later sections.

From the online questionnaire, several developments were generated. First, numerous graphs showing language and education background were generated, which helped to

visualise possible trends and numerical analysis of the study. The regression analysis method, as mentioned in the literature review section, was implemented to show possible correlations between participants' IELTS test scores and their individual academic performances. The higher the probability between the two factors meant a stronger correlation could be established between the two factors, in which the change of one factor would subsequently cause the change of the other factor. A general qualitative analysis was also implemented to compare responses from all participants, specifically to discover some trends on aspects such as revision methods and their thoughts on IELTS revision and test-taking experiences. From the qualitative analysis, the screening for interviewees was carried to select participants who indicated their consent for further interviews and expressed unique and uncommon thoughts on the test.

### **Second section - Academic performances in relation to IELTS test results**

In the second part of the study, in-depth qualitative interviews were carried out, in the aim of understanding participants' possible development and improvement in English ability after taking IELTS, and their individual thoughts on the language proficiency test.

The three participants chosen were from different educational backgrounds and academic results, and their responses to the questionnaire in the first section were notable and could be compared on a spectrum, hence they were invited to the individual interviews in this section. Participant A was a local Hong Kong student majoring in a Cantonese-mediated subject in university, and she participated in IELTS test due to the requirement for job applications, where through taking IELTS test she thought the test was not useful in improving her English language ability. Noted that Participant A was the only participant in this study who majored in a Cantonese-mediated programme, thus her thoughts were considered as valuable in this comparative study. Participant B was a Thai student majoring in an English-mediated subject in university, and he participated in IELTS test due to the requirement for joining an exchange programme; he thought that IELTS was moderately helpful in improving his language skills. Last, participant C was an Indonesian student majoring in an English-mediated subject in university, and he participated in IELTS for university applications, where he found IELTS very helpful in improving his language skills. Table 2 is a summary of the major data collected before the individual interviews:

		Participant A	Participant B	Participant C
IELTS Score	Overall	6.0	8.0	7.5
	Writing	6.0	9.0	9.0
	Speaking	6.0	7.0	7.0
Cumulative GPA		2.5 - 3.0	3.5 - 4.0	3.0 - 3.5
University English course grades		B range	A range	A range

Table 2. Participants' data

The individual interview questions were created based on the responses collected from the first section, which highlighted and focused on the following aspects: (See Appendix B for full individual interview questions)

1. Individual self-rating on one's English competency
2. How, by preparing for IELTS test, had or had not any impacts on their English language ability
3. Notable difficulties or struggles when preparing for taking the IELTS test
4. Significant benefits or impact on their undergraduate studies (mainly major courses and compulsory English courses respectively)
5. If the IELTS test results showcased or proven anything of the individual, and
6. General feelings and thoughts regarding IELTS

## **Quantitative Result and Discussion**

This quantitative analysis will be solely based on the online questionnaire collected from the first section of the methodology. Visual representations were created based on the data collected which can be referenced from the Appendix. The quantitative data collected will be analysed in this section, as well as discussed with the qualitative data provided by the participants in relation to their quantitative responses in this online questionnaire.

### **Background**

42 participants took part in this study; 30 females, 10 males, 1 non-binary, and 1 transgender. More than half of the participants were local Hong Kong residents, other nationalities included Indonesians, Bangladeshi, Thai and more. From this, it was gathered that more than half of the participants had Cantonese as their mother tongue, and other mother tongues included Indonesian, Bangla, Thai and more. Thus, most participants considered English as their second language, mainly because of their bilingual or trilingual background and mandatory English language classes in schools, where most participants studied English for more than 10 years. See Appendix C for diagrams generated on participants educational backgrounds.

Among the pool of participants, 24 of them enrolled in mandatory English language courses in universities, and more than 75% of these participants received A range grades for these courses. The Cumulative Grade Point Average, also called Cumulative GPA, of the participants varied, ranging from below 2.5 to the highest 4.0. In terms of their IELTS scores, the average overall score was 7.7 out of 9.0, whilst the average writing and speaking scores were 6.8 and 7.2 out of 9.0 respectively. These scores were significantly higher than the usual required score of 6.5 from universities and corporates, still the average writing score was relatively lower than the speaking score and was closer to the required 6.5 score. See Appendix D for diagrams generated upon participants' IELTS scores.

### **Reasons for taking IELTS and preparations for IELTS test**

Many universities require students to take the IELTS test to demonstrate their English language ability, and this was directly reflected by the responses of our participants, where more than half of the participants took IELTS for the purpose of applying to universities (See Appendix E). During some follow-up questions, some participants expressed that they would not have taken the IELTS test if it was not for the purpose of university applications, as the

fees to take the test were relatively high, and they did not see any other strong reasons to take the test outside of academic purposes. Some took IELTS for university exchange programmes, internship, or graduate job applications. Only a few recalled that the IELTS test was needed for family immigration to another country, for instance immigrating to the UK.

As many students took IELTS before enrolling into universities, presumably they studied and prepared for IELTS on their own during their study in high school. More than half of the participants revealed that they prepared for IELTS through practising questions on past IELTS test papers online and offline, making use of online existing resources and videos. Some participants, notably those who completed the IELTS test outside of Hong Kong, joined IELTS prep courses in their hometowns, which are tutoring courses specifically made for students who wish to prepare for the IELTS test. Some even noted that they did not prepare for the IELTS test at all, as they did not think it was necessary for them to practise when the test skills were similar to the syllabus of their school syllabuses. Additionally, more than half of the participants claimed that they prepared for the IELTS test for less than 2 weeks. Overall, most participants did not think they needed much practice for the IELTS test as they needed the test result not for personal use but for academic purposes. See Appendix F for diagrams summarising the duration of participants preparing for the IELTS test and their methods of preparations.

### **Improvements on language skills upon preparing for IELTS test**

From the follow-up questions in the online questionnaire, many of the participants' general thoughts on IELTS were collected, in which they were asked about whether, by preparing and taking IELTS test, has or has not helped them in improving English. The analysis can be summarised into the following three parts:

#### **(a) Writing skills (See Appendix G)**

More participants expressed that preparing for the IELTS test did not improve their writing skills. This was due to the conceptual thoughts on the IELTS test that prior knowledge of participants' English ability would be capable of completing the writing test, and that they only needed to fit their writing style into the specific "IELTS style of writing". Some did not find any useful methods of preparing for writing tests, and due to procrastination issues and personal dislike of writing argumentative essays, some participants did not prepare for the writing tests. To expand on the "IELTS style of writing", throughout the study many participants reflected that the IELTS system has its own marking standards

and style, which, especially for writing tasks, do not accurately reflect one's writing skills that are used in university or in daily life. For instance, IELTS style of writing requires test-takers to summarise long articles and to make their writings short and narrow, and that some formats were not common and not useful for daily applications. One participant also mentioned an interesting aspect, where words, such as "increase" and "decrease", should not be repeated when describing charts in writing tasks, as test-takers are seemingly encouraged to use rare and sophisticated synonyms in these writing tasks.

Whilst some expressed the impractical aspect, some suggested that preparing for IELTS did improve their writing skills by providing opportunities for them to practise clear and concise writing style, which focuses on cohesiveness, logicity, practicality, and professional manner of writing. Test-takers are encouraged to build up the ability to summarise the information given in a passage, and to utilise and accurately use advanced vocabulary and grammar.

### **(b) Speaking skills (See Appendix H)**

Similar to the above analysis, the majority of participants expressed that preparing for IELTS did not improve their English speaking skills. Many believed that, speaking as a practical skill set, requires long-term training for improvements. According to the above data, over half of the participants used less than 2 weeks to prepare for the IELTS test, and therefore this short period of preparation was not able to function as a quality time for significant improvement. Some participants stressed that, regardless of the type of test they were participating in, when it comes to speaking, the key to succeed and to get high scores is always be natural and confident, and this aspect requires time and constant practice opportunities. Minor personal reasons also contribute to this discussion, including some participants expressing the viewpoints that they already felt like their speaking skills were on a native-speaker level, and they have been constantly involved in communications with native English speakers, thus they did not see any positive impact in preparing for the IELTS test.

Again, a minor proportion of participants did find preparing for the IELTS test useful in terms of improving their speaking skills, mainly through the aspect of using formal and professional spoken English, and that the preparation stage provided circumstances for them to explore and practise English words with difficult pronunciations. Some recalled that they were able to practise adopting a natural flow for speaking, and that this helped them with improving their fluency in communications for daily practises. Also, many did reflect that

this part of the test forced them to think and answer with speed under pressure, as the face-to-face speaking test mode requires participants and the examiner to hold a fluent and fast-paced conversation, which also helped particular participants to practise for future job or internship interviews.

### **(c) Overall language skills (See Appendix I)**

When asked about whether preparing for IELTS has generally improved their English ability, more than half of the participants firmly responded the ineffectiveness of IELTS preparations in improving their English skills. Many stressed their only effort paid for preparing for IELTS was the minor adjustment to the IELTS style of answering the questions, in order to fit into IELTS requirements and marking criteria. Although they specifically mentioned this aspect, no further explanations were made. Thus, many participants doubted the effectiveness of taking IELTS when their seemingly knowledge of IELTS focuses more on gradings than genuinely utilising the language to its fullest ability. This is supported by the fact that the IELTS score needed for universities and jobs is 6.5 out of 9.0, which is considered a relatively easy score for students with decent academic background to achieve without any preparations.

As IELTS is a separate language qualification which is not included in high school syllabus, the format of exam is different to what has been previously taught in school. For local Hong Kong participants, some figured that IELTS tests were relatively easier than HKDSE English exams, which is the compulsory Hong Kong qualification for secondary school students. Therefore, local participants explicitly voiced that IELTS, as a language proficiency test, looks for specific skills sets that do not generally define English proficiency; they considered that IELTS test was very generic, where it only requires participants to rigorously and strategically train to score high marks in the tests, and they are specific patterns to follow for reading and listening to score high marks, which are published online by previous test-takers. Therefore, many thought that IELTS test preparations did not benefit them in terms of improving general English ability as the skill set needed for the test cannot be replicated and used in other settings.

Some individuals saw some general improvements whilst preparing for IELTS, including improving their exam-taking skills, acquiring new vocabulary, phrases and expressions that can be replicated in certain settings using the English language. Also, their organisational and summarisation skills were improved in writing tasks and speed of reading



was immensely enhanced. Nonetheless, the majority of participants did not see any general improvements in their English language ability.

#### **Correlations between IELTS overall score and Cumulative GPA (See Appendix J)**

Using the regression analysis, two distinctive correlations were detected.

First, a positive correlation between IELTS overall score and Cumulative GPA was found in the study, which significantly confirmed existing research results on predictability of IELTS score on academic success. To further illustrate, as the regression analysis showed the  $p$  value was less than 0.01, participants with a higher overall IELTS score generally obtained higher Cumulative GPA. Therefore, IELTS scores could possibly serve as an indicator in future studies or as a measure to predict one's academic results.

#### **Correlations between IELTS overall score and MOI in university major courses (See Appendix K)**

Similar to the above discussion, a positive correlation between IELTS overall score and the medium of instruction used in university major courses was found in the study; this correlation was a new finding as currently there were no published studies researching on IELTS scores amongst university students. To explain further, the  $p$  value recorded was lower than 0.041, and it was found that participants who achieved higher IELTS overall score were studying in English-mediated majors. Thus, higher IELTS overall score meant a higher likelihood to engage in English-mediated majors. Contrastively, participants who were engaged in Cantonese-mediated majors may have relatively lower IELTS overall scores. Therefore, IELTS overall scores may serve as a future indicator for university students to choose the medium-of-instruction for their major courses for academic success.

## **Qualitative Result and Discussion**

Three IELTS takers were chosen from the participants who filled in the questionnaire. They were invited to an offline individual interview, where the aim of the interviews was to understand their preparations for IELTS. In this section, their preparations for and feelings towards IELTS will be illustrated and compared.

### **Background**

Participant A is a year 4 local female student, majoring in Creative Media taught in Cantonese in Hong Kong. Her mother tongue is Cantonese, and she has been learning English since kindergarten. Her average grading for compulsory English courses in university falls within B range, whilst her cumulative GPA is between 2.5 to 3.0. She took IELTS for job applications after graduation. Her general impression on preparing for IELTS was that it was not helpful in improving her English language ability.

Participant B is a year 2 Thai male student, majoring in Computer Science taught in English in Hong Kong. His mother tongue is Thai, and he has been learning English since the first year of primary school. His average grading for compulsory English courses in university falls within A range, whilst his cumulative GPA is between 3.5 to 4.0. He had three attempts in taking IELTS, and the latest attempt to take IELTS was for his application to exchange program to visit Toronto. Unlike the other two participants, he completed the test online using computer and internet access, thus his discussions will be based on his examination of online resources. His general impression on preparing for IELTS was moderately helpful in specific aspects of the language, specifically on expanding his vocabulary bank.

Participant C is a year 4 Indonesian male student, majoring in Computer Science taught in English in Hong Kong. His mother tongue is Indonesian, and he has been learning English since the first year of primary school. His average grading for compulsory English courses in university falls within A range, whilst his cumulative GPA is between 3.0 to 3.5. He had two attempts in taking IELTS, and the latest attempt to take IELTS was for university undergraduate applications. His general impression on preparing for IELTS was very helpful in terms of improving all aspects of the language.

### **Preparations**

When it comes to preparations for IELTS, various study and training methods were recorded from our participants. Participant B listed the methods he adopted whilst he prepared for IELTS: online practice questions, YouTube tutorials, published articles written by the examination board on how to answer different question types, and IELTS textbooks published by the examination board. Whilst all participants prepared through completing past paper practices online and offline, participant C additionally paid for private tutorial classes that focus specifically on preparing for IELTS. Participant C's tutor was an experienced English teacher in Indonesia, and each tutorial class is approximately on a ratio of 1:10. In comparison, participants A and B both relied on self-study revision methods when preparing for the test.

Participant A spent two months preparing for IELTS, and she expressed her struggle to manage her time properly for IELTS preparations amidst her final year coursework in university. Participant B spent less than two weeks when preparing for his recent IELTS, whilst participant C spent one month preparing and attending tutorial classes.

### **Self-evaluation on English competence**

Notably, participant A was the only participant in the study whose major studies are mediated in Cantonese. It was expected that she would not be highly confident when using the English language. Indeed, she did not consider herself as a competent L2 English user. Despite of studying in an EMI school before university, she did not find the desirable method to learn English. She revealed the inadequacy of the learning environment in school, where it was not suitable to learn and cultivate immense improvement in the language. She often found herself comparing her English ability to fluent speakers in her class, thus her confidence level in using the language was never improved.

In comparison, both participants B and C studied high schools outside of Hong Kong and came here for undergraduate studies. Based on their high school experience studying English, they considered themselves as rather competent L2 English users. In particular, participant B mentioned his improvement in the language from junior high school to senior high school, where he was motivated because of the division of students into different language classes based on their English ability. The classes were divided into nine levels in which level 1 is considered is the elite class; he progressed from level 7 in junior high school to level 3 before graduating from senior high school. Thus, it is clear that he showed progression to reach high competency in using English language throughout his high school education.

### **Improvements in English language ability upon preparing for IELTS**

The responses to whether preparing for IELTS improved or not improved English language ability were in accordance with their self-rating on English competence. Participant A claimed no improvement was made to her English ability after preparing for IELTS, as she strongly believed that IELTS is a check for an individual's ability in the language and not a tool to be used to improve ability. Echoing her purpose of taking IELTS for job applications, she did not intend to utilize IELTS as a learning tool to improve her language skills.

The other two participants valued the preparation for IELTS to be rewarding in terms of improving their English abilities. They both acknowledged the broadening of their vocabulary bank through studying for the test, and that they felt more confident in using the language through practices and preparations. Participant B valued his improvement on the widening of vocabulary bank in which he could utilize both in writing and speaking in everyday context; he discovered vocabulary that is specific and targeted to particular context and he is now able to use appropriate and precise language that fits into the specific situation. Participant C found that by practicing speaking tasks, he was able to speed up the production of utterances in terms of translating his thoughts mentally from his L1, Indonesian, to English. The practices provided him opportunities to interpret complex concepts and ideas in English, thus he now feels more comfortable when using English to express his ideas.

### **Struggles whilst preparing for IELTS**

All participants encountered difficulties when preparing for the test which is essentially “IELTS-structured”. The question types were notably very different to typical high school examinations, which IELTS takers must prepare for these question types in order to score accurately in the test. There were specific requirement and expectation that IELTS cultivate its test takers to follow and adhere to, and when responses are not answered according to the structure expected, test takers may not be scored highly for their responses. As such, the question types and expectation towards responses are often discussed amongst IELTS takers who are not used to this specific approach to answering questions. As noted in previous sections, participant B did a computer based IELTS, which is not a common approach when taking IELTS. He expressed the frustration of searching for computer based IELTS practice questions, as there are limited resources available for this particular form of test. Notably, the question types on a computer based IELTS are different to the written version, hence there should be different preparation approaches to the two ways

to taking the test. As a result, participant B prepared by practicing written based IELTS practice questions and found some difficulty when doing the computer based test.

### **Facilitation of preparing for IELTS on University English courses and Major studies**

Remarkably, all three participants doubted the effectiveness of preparing for IELTS on facilitating their compulsory English courses and Major studies. As the three participants come from different universities, the syllabus of their compulsory English courses is different. Participant A recalled her English courses demanding much of the workload on reading novels and writing book reports. As IELTS does not include report-style writing tasks, she found no association between preparing for IELTS writing tasks and completing her compulsory English writing tasks in university. Further, her Major studies adopts Cantonese as the medium of instruction, thus IELTS does not facilitate her Major studies. Both participants B and C are majoring in Computer Science, and they illustrated the differences between IELTS focus and University English courses focus. In terms of the aim of their University English courses, it is major-based in which students majoring in different subjects will be administered into the same class for the English course, thus classes are specifically tailored to major-based writing and presentation skills. To illustrate, participant C expressed that his English class focused heavily on report-style writing, which computer science major students must learn when evaluating their programmes. While preparing for IELTS, they both noticed that IELTS fails to provide benefits and/or improvements to second language learners in terms of language skills and university studies, as it focuses hugely on proving one's language proficiency. Thus, all three participants agreed the benefits of studying University English courses is greater than that of preparing for IELTS.

### **Validation of oneself upon completing IELTS**

The completion of IELTS test and scores seemed to be insignificant in substantiating any qualities or aspects of the interviewed participants, as they all rejected the claim to use IELTS scores to represent themselves in terms of English ability. Participant B credited IELTS for improving his English-speaking fluency and confidence, and that whilst preparing for IELTS he acknowledged the lack of practice and the need for improvement in his English ability. Participant A and C both identified the lack of opportunities to utilize skills practiced in preparing for IELTS, and that IELTS test is not a full implication of one's language skills as it does not testify to all areas and context that the English language can be used.

## **Summary**

This paper conducted research to study the question whether English Language Proficiency Tests, specifically IELTS tests, are valid indicators of one's language skills, and can these tests improve one's English spoken and written skills.

From the online questionnaire which collected responses from 42 participants, it was concluded that the effectiveness of preparing for IELTS was seen differently by different English proficiency levels of language learners. As mentioned in the brief introduction, the minimum requirement for university applications and jobs usually ranges from 6.0 to 6.5, which, according to the average IELTS overall score of 7.7 out of 9.0 obtained from this study, seemed relatively straightforward to university students to achieve this benchmark. Hence, preparing for IELTS did not serve as a tool for participants in this study to leverage or improve their English language ability. Respondents recalled no preparations were needed to take the IELTS test, and that the test did not make an impact on their academic success in universities. Therefore, this study found limited correlations between the IELTS scores obtained by the participants and the knowledge they gained whilst preparing for and taking the IELTS tests. Undoubtedly, intention matters when it comes to the discussion of knowledge gaining; many of the participants in this study in fact took the IELTS test for university or job application purposes. In other words, their intentions were not self-motivated or for self-interest, hence it was difficult for them to recognise any improvements when the action of taking the test was enforced and mandatory for upcoming procedures.

Whilst language proficiency test result is often one of the requirements for further studies or job applications, the preparations for the test are not included in high school syllabus nor any English education syllabus. Adding on from participants' responses that English language skills require long-term training, the time constraint issues play a huge role in investigating the effectiveness of preparing for language proficiency tests. As most participants spent less than one month preparing, it did not become clear to them whether there were significant language improvements and benefits to their academic studies. Thus, this piece of evidence asserts the viewpoint that improvements in language ability requires constant effort and time, where one month of preparations may not significantly improve one's language ability in this study. Further, the above discussion prompts the debate of the credibility of traditional public examinations. For local Hong Kong participants in this study, most of them took HKDSE, the local public examination, and used this qualification to apply for further studies and jobs in society. Simultaneously, students are encouraged to submit

IELTS test results along with their university or job applications. This poses the dilemma of taking public examinations, specifically English-language-related examinations, and the reinforcement to take language proficiency tests, hence this contradicts the credibility of public examinations. Concerns may be raised regarding the reasons for universities and corporations requiring students to take either of the examinations or language tests, thus questioning the validity of public examinations of English language globally.

Finally, the discussion of applicability was also one of the focuses of the discussion in this study. There were numerous responses from participants questioning whether the IELTS test-taking skills can be applied in real-life context in terms of the presence of test-taking-like settings and circumstances. Several participants recalled, whilst preparing for or practising IELTS past papers, they acknowledged the specific “IELTS style” questions, where the IELTS system may have specific grading styles, skill set that they look for, and distinct question types. These specific style of questions and skill set may be difficult for IELTS test-takers to replicate or manipulate outside of this test-taking environment, hence the applicability issue was raised during the study of this research question. As mentioned above, no particular preparations were needed to achieve decent scores for IELTS, which suggest that high scores can be guaranteed if test-takers answer according to particular patterns or rules from previous test-takers or published materials. Minimal textbook revisions or practises may be needed to take the IELTS test, hence it becomes difficult to measure whether or not participants indeed learn new things from preparing for and taking the test.

Overall, from the regression analysis done between IELTS overall scores and Cumulative GPA, once again this certifies the idea suggested by other researchers, that IELTS result can be a valid indicator to predict academic success. Building upon individual interviews and online questionnaire results, learners may not be benefitted from preparing for language proficiency tests due to the testing nature of IELTS, where learners intended to achieve high scores instead of gaining new knowledge or to improve their own English language ability. Last, from all the data collected in the study, individualistic factors may affect the extent of improvements learners benefitted from preparing for language proficiency tests, such as their individual language and educational background, their intentions when taking the IELTS tests, and the study environment when preparing for the tests.

### **Implications**

As this study aims to fill the research gap between language proficiency tests and their effectiveness to improve one’s language ability, this paper carries a few implications for

further development in the field of education. First, the study serves as a reference for ESL teachers and universities when guiding or planning lessons for secondary school students; the education department of governments should acknowledge the importance of students gaining language proficiency test qualifications, and should implement content and preparations for these tests into the syllabus of high school English classes. In this way, students will not have to spend extra time and effort studying for a language proficiency test with limited knowledge or resources, and seeks to gain new knowledge in the English language whilst preparing for the tests. Second, this research addresses multiple viewpoints that may stimulate further research on test-takers' motivation and individualistic factors in researching academic success. Due to the limited time frame and resources, the motivational and individualistic factors were not discussed in detail in this study. More studies are to be done in the future to learn about the impact of one's desire and backgrounds on their academic success. Last, the discussion and analysis of this study will hopefully stimulate educators globally to re-examine the essence of language proficiency tests. As mentioned multiple times in this paper, many participants stressed that they did not see the point for taking language proficiency tests if it was not for university or job application purposes, leading to the questioning of the validity of traditional public examinations of the English language. Educators in all fields, such as university governing bodies, and big corporations, should reconsider whether it is necessary to require their applicants to take language proficiency tests, when they may have already completed and achieved satisfactory scores in their public English examinations during high school. Therefore, the purpose for people to take language proficiency tests should be clarified and re-examined so to encourage and persuade the effectiveness of taking these tests in order to improve one's English language ability.

### **Limitations**

Due to the sample size of carrying out the methodology, this study was relatively incomprehensive to provide a solid explanation for the research question, hence the credibility and validity of the study cannot be ensured.

One of the biggest limitations of the study was on the specific language proficiency test chosen to answer the research question; this study solely focused on IELTS, which was considered as one of the most popular and common language proficiency tests and presumed that many university students have taken the test for applying to universities or job openings. However, there are many published language proficiency tests, such as the TOFEL tests,



commonly recognised in America, and TOEIC tests, commonly recognised in Japan, were not considered in this study. Therefore, focusing only on the results for IELTS test takers was insufficient to answer the question regarding whether language proficiency tests have an impact on learner's English language ability. The absence of the above two language proficiency tests is directly linked to the result of the study, where test takers of TOFEL or TOEIC may have indifferent results to the IELTS test takers in this study, thus the conclusion and implications of the study may be affected.

Additionally, due to the nature of the study being an undergraduate final year project research, there was limited access to data available for researchers on related topics. While all participants of the study have similar educational background of attending undergraduate programmes at the time the study was carried out, IELTS tests were not limited to university students but also for people of all ages and educational backgrounds. More solid and sophisticated conclusions can be drawn if the data collected was not only limited to bachelor students but IELTS test takers in society. Further, the research methodology of the current study was limited to an online questionnaire and three individual in-depth interviews, in which several conclusions were drawn. Yet, this methodology was relatively ineffective, especially when more qualitative data has to be collected if more reliable conclusions are to be drawn from the study. The limited skill in technology advancement produced restricted illustrations for the data collected, for instance the limited knowledge on the operations of regression analysis, which may not have effectively utilised and analysed the data set collected from the questionnaire. The combination of online questionnaire and several individuals produced adequate results for analysis, thus discovering and utilising other research methodologies may enhance the quality and reliability of the whole study.

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## **Appendix A: Online Questionnaire**

Please refer to the link below for the full online questionnaire:

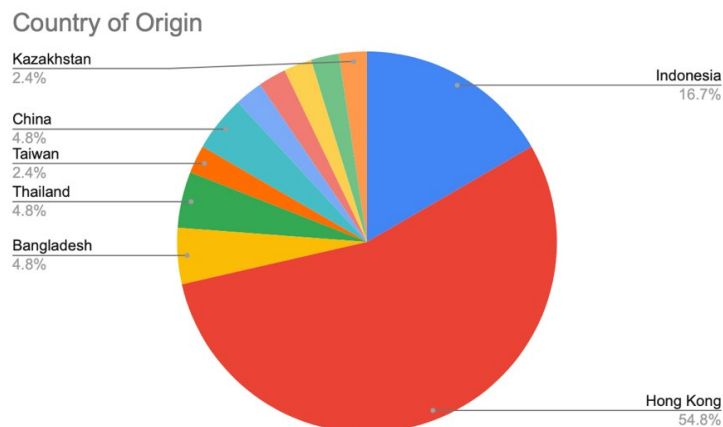
[https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSc-pzNah99GD-CKMqVaeK7UmYw7qyozbKzBzQevNhdqx1XaJQ/viewform?usp=sf\\_link](https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSc-pzNah99GD-CKMqVaeK7UmYw7qyozbKzBzQevNhdqx1XaJQ/viewform?usp=sf_link)

## **Appendix B: Individual Interview Questions**

1. Do you consider yourself as a competent English speaker? Why or why not?
2. After studying for and taking the IELTS test, in what ways do you think your English language ability has or has not been improved?
3. What did you enjoy most about preparing for / taking the IELTS test?
4. What aspects you struggled the most when preparing for / taking the IELTS test?
5. If taking the IELTS test was an involuntary task for you (i.e., only for education/job requirements), would you still have taken it if you do not need to satisfy any requirements? Why or why not.
6. What do you think taking the IELTS test and the score has proven or showcased about you?

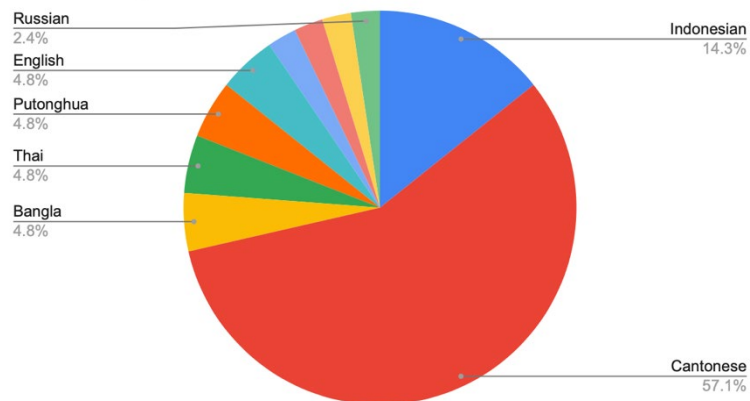
## **Appendix C: Diagrams of background of participants**

### **1. Country of Origin**



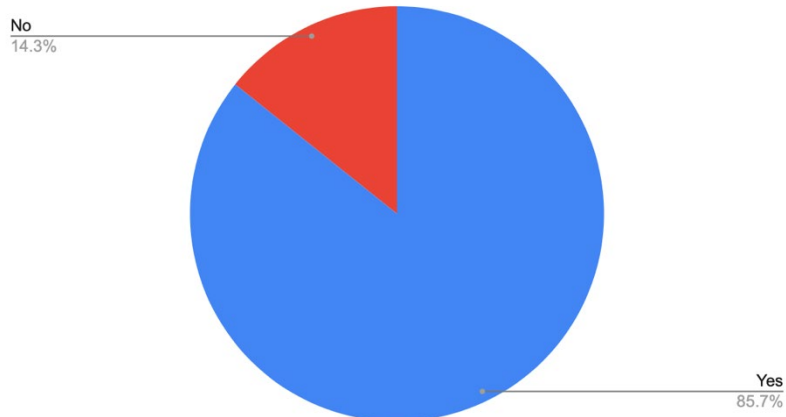
## 2. Mother tongue

Mother tongue



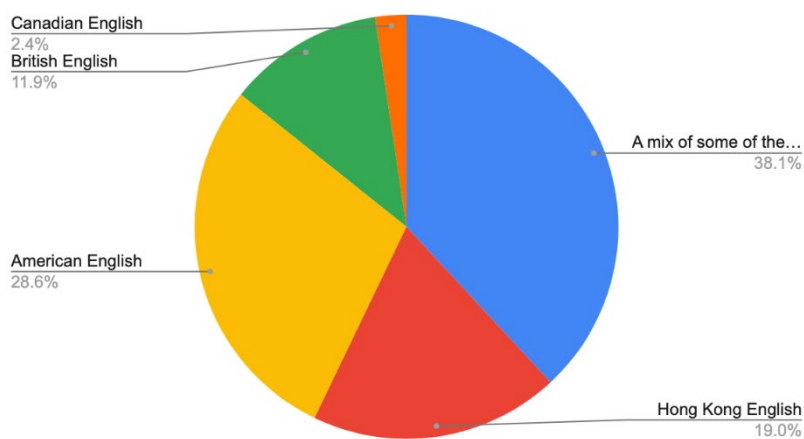
## 3. English as second language

Do you consider English as your L2?



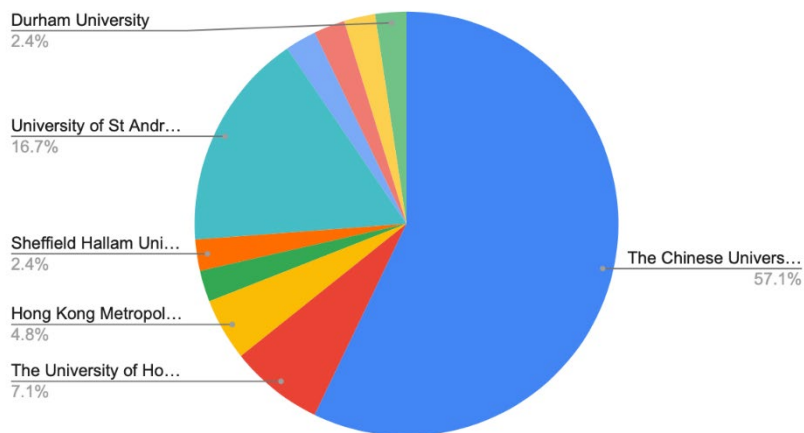
## 4. English variants

Which English variant do you think you speak?



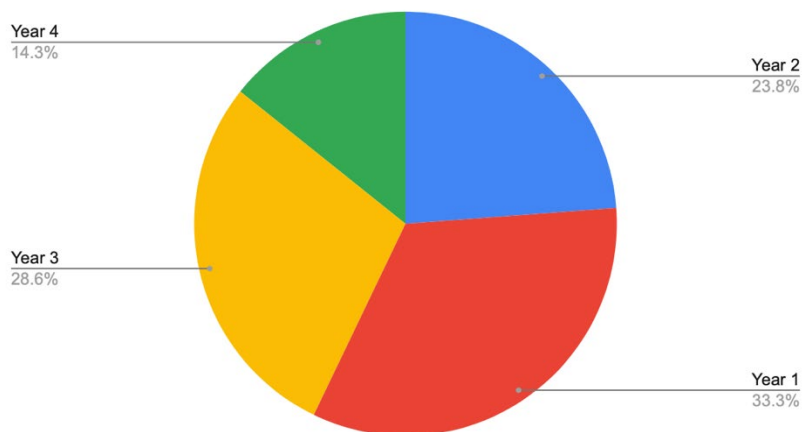
## 5. Universities

### Current University



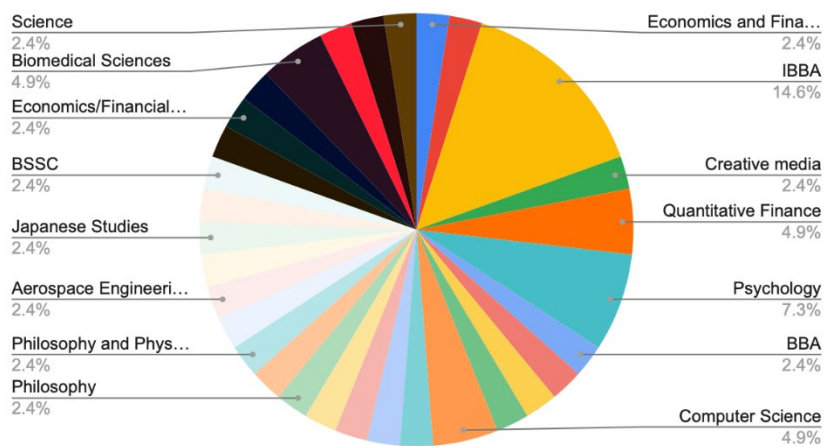
## 6. Year

### Year



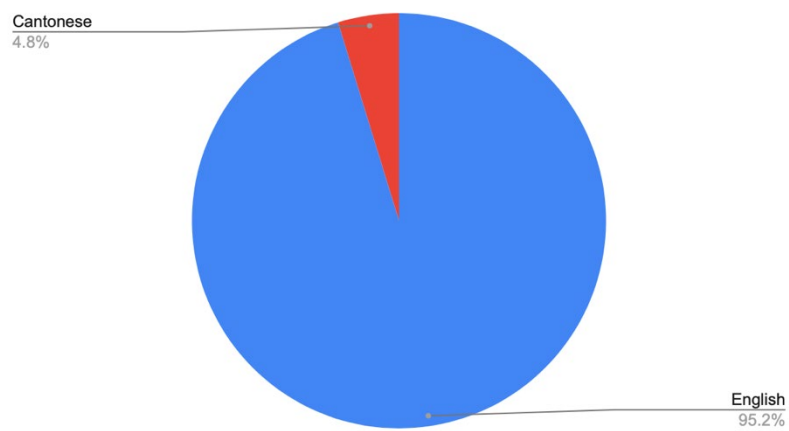
## 7. University Major

### Current Major



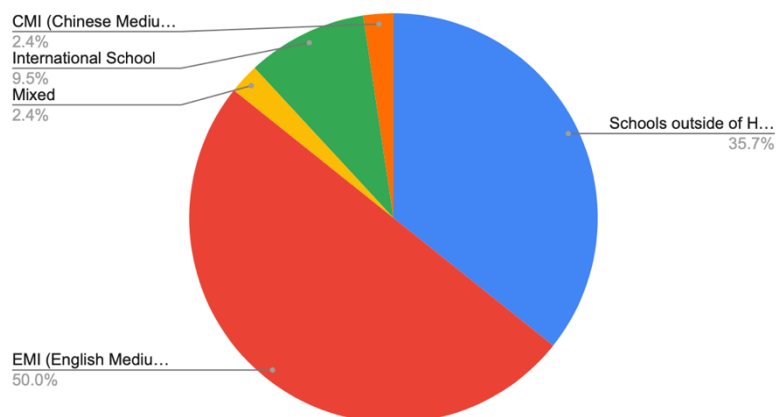
## 8. Medium of instruction in university

MOI of course



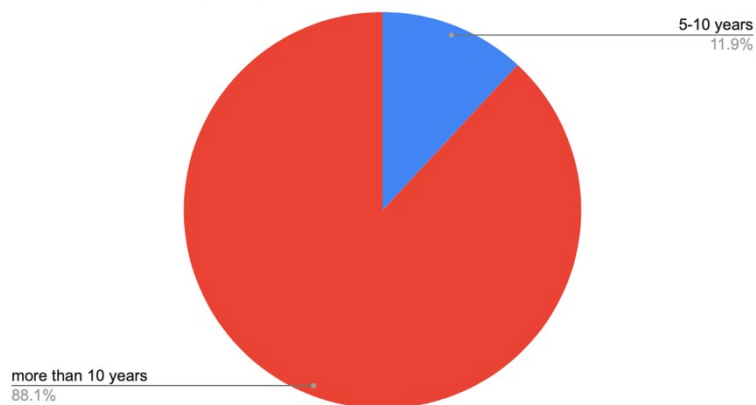
## 9. Medium of instruction in high school

MOI of high school



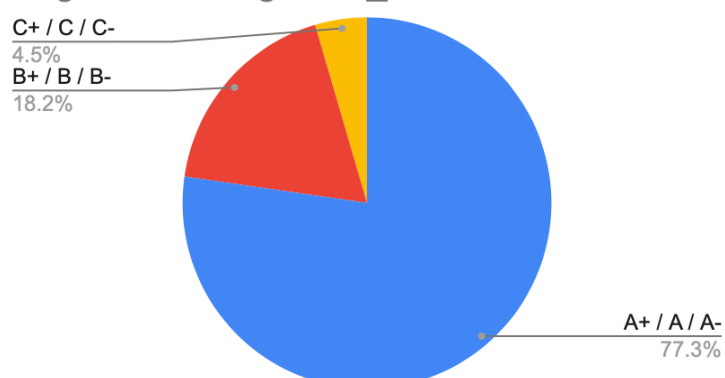
## 10. Years of studying English

Years of studying English



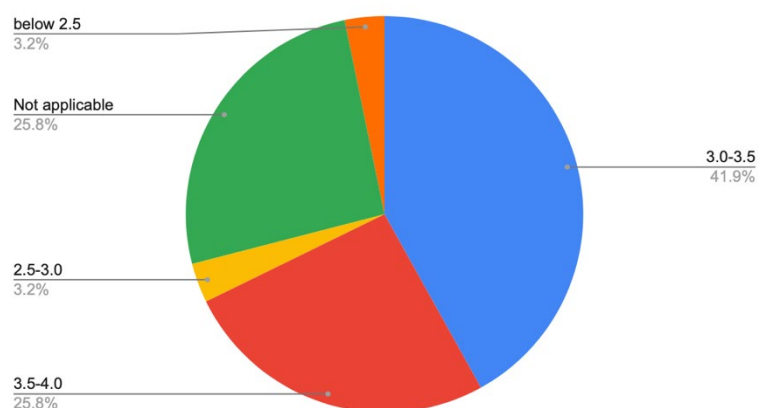
## 11. English courses grades of the 24 participants who took compulsory English courses in universities

English course grades\_2



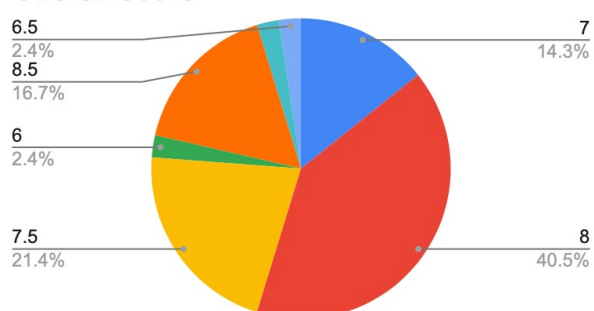
## 12. Cumulative GPA

CGPA

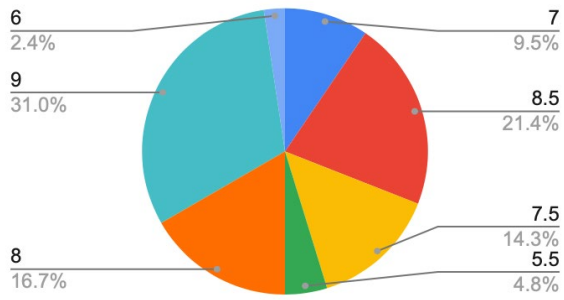


## Appendix D: Diagrams summarising IELTS Scores

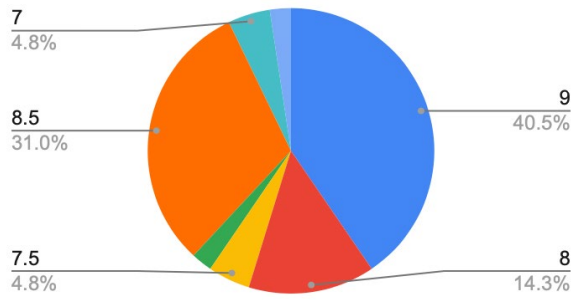
Overall score



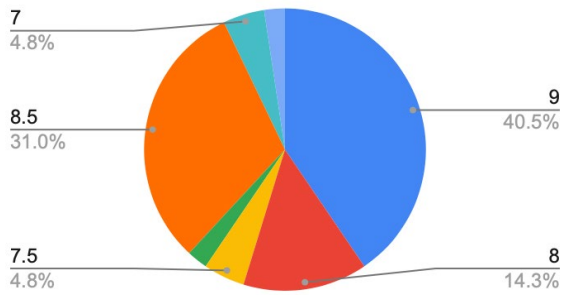
### Reading



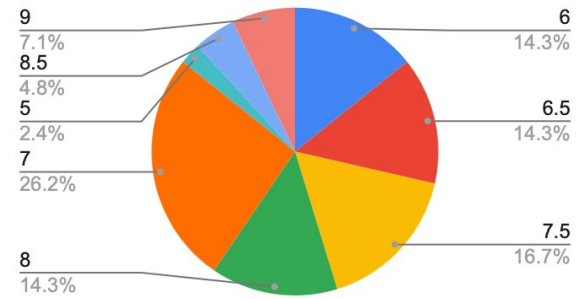
### Listening



### Listening

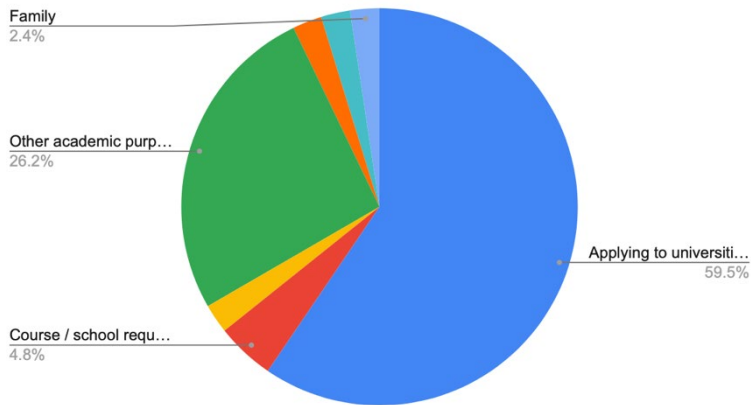


### Speaking



## Appendix E: Diagram summarising reasons for taking IELTS

### Reasons for taking IELTS

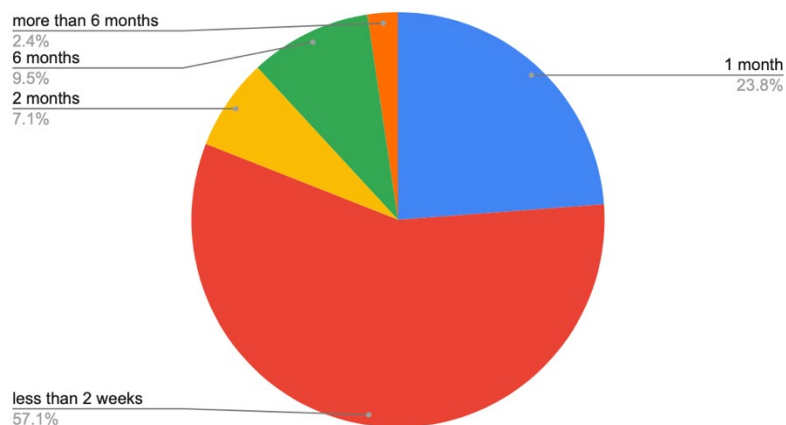




## **Appendix F: Diagrams summarising participations' preparations for the IELTS tests**

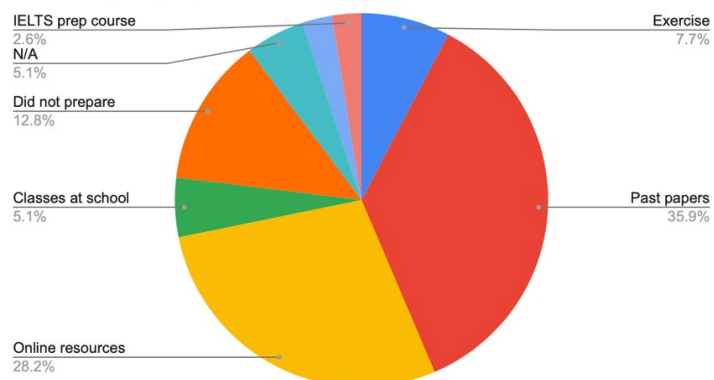
### **1. Duration of preparations**

How long you spent in preparation for IELTS?



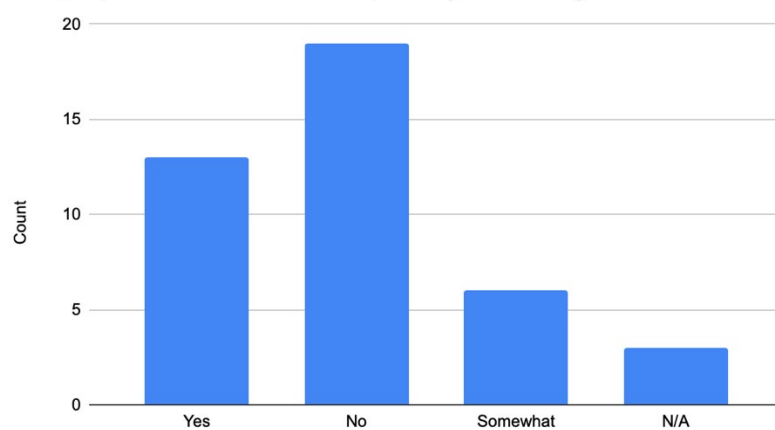
### **2. Preparations**

How did you prepare for IELTS?



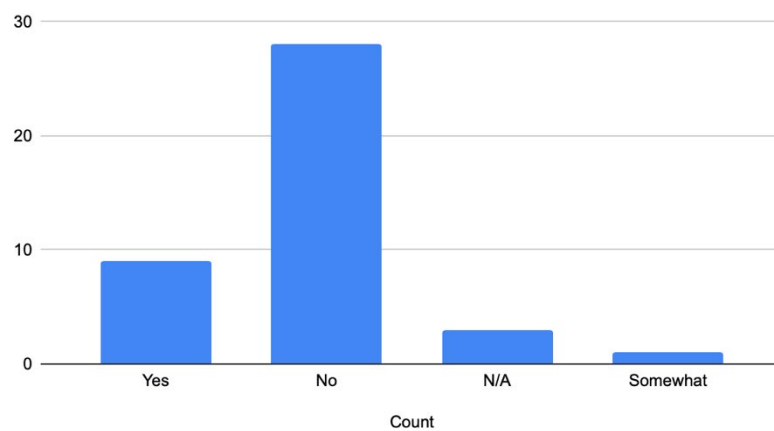
## **Appendix G: Improvement on writing skills upon preparing for IELTS**

Did preparations for IELTS improve your writing skills?



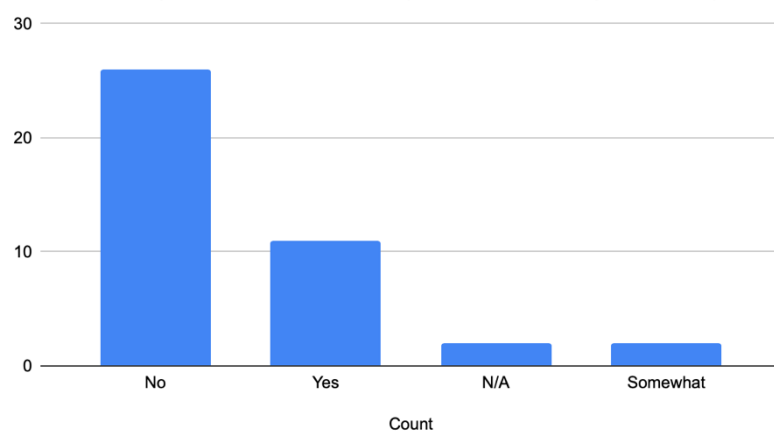
## **Appendix H: Improvement on speaking skills upon preparing for IELTS**

Did preparing for IELTS improve your speaking skills?



## **Appendix I: Improvement on overall English skills upon preparing for IELTS**

Did preparing for IELTS improve your overall English ability?



## **Appendix J: correlation between CGPA and IELTS overall score**

Model Coefficients - CGPA

Predictor	Estimate	SE	t	p
Intercept	0.424	0.4808	0.881	0.385
IELTSoverall	0.398	0.0624	6.379	<.001

### **Appendix K: correlation between MOI in university versus IELTS overall score**

Model Coefficients - IELTSoverall				
Predictor	Estimate	SE	t	p
Intercept <sup>a</sup>	7.737	0.102	75.92	< .001
MOIuni:				
Cantonese – English	-0.988	0.467	-2.11	0.041

<sup>a</sup> Represents reference level

--> If Cantonese-medium instruction, lower IELTS

# **A Sociolinguistic Analysis of Cantonese-English Code-Switching in Hong Kong WhatsApp Conversations**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Language and culture are inextricably linked and cannot be separated, since one has a substantial effect on the other. When languages interact, they influence one another, therefore variety or change in a language is a natural outcome. Code-switching is the result of linguistic interaction and a defining characteristic of a multilingual society. This study has concentrated on three primary areas. The first section is the investigation on linguistic conditions of code-switched items. The objective of the second section is to examine code-switching behavior in relation to Gender, English Major Status, and EMI/ CMI Status. In the last section, potential causes and motives for Cantonese-English code-switching in Hong Kong will be investigated. The study will be conducted by constructing a corpus of modern WhatsApp conversations, assisted with the use of a sociolinguistic survey. There are questions about the reasons, motives, and functions of code-switching, as well as the attitude toward specific opinions. According to the research, code-switching is more prevalent in nouns. And English Major Status is the most important element determining a person's propensity to use English code-switches. It is also discovered that social and socio-psychological motivations induce code-switching, and that code-switching serves a variety of roles when exploited as a language resource and strategy.

Keywords: Code-switching, Instant messaging, Linguistic Condition Analysis, Gender, English Major Status, EMI, CMI, English Code-switching Motivation

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## **1. Introduction**

### **1.1 Background and Aspiration**

In many countries, bilingualism is prevalent and the norm, rather than the exception (Appel & Muysken, 1987). And it is found that interaction across languages may result in variants and innovative linguistic occurrences (Freynet & Clément, 2019). Code-switching (CS), or switching between languages, is one common phenomenon in bilingual communities. In fact, a wide range of language combinations are found across the globe, for examples, Spanish-English in America, and Hebrew-English in Israel (Auer, 1998). In recent years, code-switching between the Chinese languages Mandarin and Taiwanese has grown widespread in Taiwan (Chen, 2004).

Due to British colonial authority, Hong Kong has had long-established linguistic interaction with English since the 17th century (Luke, 1998). Hong Kong is a global metropolis where many individuals, particularly the younger population, are multilingual in Cantonese and English. Cantonese is the native language of most Hong Kong inhabitants. Code-switching between Cantonese and English is a frequently found phenomenon in their speech and online communication. Indeed, the tendency or degree of Cantonese-English CS differs significantly. It may be regarded along a

continuum, with the monolingual mode (i.e., using Cantonese solely) at one end and the bilingual mode at the other (i.e., communicating in both Cantonese and English in the same utterance) (Grosjean & Miller, 1994). Cantonese speakers often incorporate English terms into their speech, which facilitates daily communication in Hong Kong.

Cantonese-English (C-E) Code-switching is the subject of my research because I am particularly interested in interlingual phenomena and how social circumstances of multilinguals are reflected in their cognitive skill, or language habit of switching between languages. Although numerous researchers have conducted studies on C-E CS in Hong Kong, only a small number of these studies have acknowledged its relevance in internet communication. There is a great deal of study on CM and CS in spoken conversation but very little on written discourse. Moreover, few have further examined written discourse while addressing the following social factors: gender, level of English proficiency, and English/Cantonese Medium-of-Instruction (EMI, CMI) Status. Even though there are a large number of monolingual corpora of both Cantonese and English, the code-switching database of the two languages in Hong Kong is not accessible. As a result, I am interested in developing a corpus to investigate the phenomena of C-E code-switching in online socializing contexts in terms of social dynamics.



## **1.2 Objective**

Within the context of Hong Kong's multilingual environment, the purpose of this research is to investigate the social determinants that influence the likelihood of and patterns of Cantonese-English code-switching in Hong Kong WhatsApp conversations. In addition to this, from a sociolinguistic point of view, the objective is to investigate the motives behind and implications of the C-E code-switching phenomena.

## **1.3 Research Questions**

The three primary research questions are as follows:

1. What linguistic conditions constrain code-switching?

Speakers engage in code switching (e.g., when using a preposition or an adjective)?

2. Do Gender, English-major status and EMI/ CMI status influence one's propensity to employ English codeswitches?

3. What are the possible Reasons and/or Motives for code-switching in Hong Kong?

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Definition

It is crucial to take a quick look at how the term "code-switching" has been defined by academics before diving into comprehensive corpus-based research. John Gumperz defines code-switching as "the juxtaposition within the same speech exchange of portions of speech belonging to two separate grammar systems or sub-systems" (Gumperz, 1982). More specifically, code-switching involves the use of two languages in a single speech event, while another is the use of components from both languages (Appel & Muysken, 1987). Three forms of code-switching exist: tag-switching, inter-sentential code-switching, and intra-sentential code-switching. Tag switching is the practice of incorporating a tag from one language into an utterance made in another. When a sentence in one language ends and another begins in a different language, the switching is said to have taken place "inter-sentential" (Appel & Muysken 1987:118). Intra-sentential code-switching, defined as switching inside a phrase or clause, is the most difficult of the three forms of code-switching (Jaili, 2009). Here are some examples:

Tag-switching:           你幫我處理呢件事, okay?  
                              (You help me with this issue, okay?)

Inter-sentential CS: 聽講你今日有面試? Good luck with that!  
(I heard you have an interview today? Good luck with that!)

Intra-sentential CS: 上個 project end up 成點?  
(How did the last project end up?)

The language shifts mostly occur inside sentences, and they almost never include larger linguistic units than clauses (Li, 2000). As a result, intra-sentential is the most prevalent form in Hong Kong, just as it is in every other bilingual society. Specifically, Cantonese is the matrix language (i.e., the dominant language) while English is the embedded language (i.e., the secondary language) (Halmari, 1997). Code-switching inside sentences is common in media produced in Hong Kong, including television shows, advertisements, periodicals, and social media websites.

It is also important to briefly elaborate the nature of discourse data to be analyzed in the following section. We will be collecting discourse data from WhatsApp conversations, and these utterances belong to the WhatsApp Message Genre. It's a direct product of instant messaging (IM), a kind of computer-mediated communication that occurs in real - time basis (Lee, 2007). This study looks at IM as a text-based social activity that includes a wide variety of literacy skills, with a focus on the use of many languages. Worth noting is the fact that the WhatsApp Message Genre is a writing style

intended to resemble "a spontaneous conversation" (Bach & Costa Carreras, 2020). It

has features of both written and spoken languages:

Written Cantonese:	爲何	你	這樣	討厭	他?
Spoken Cantonese:	點解	你	咁	憎	佢?
English:	Why	you	this much	hate	him?
	(Why do you hate him so much?)				

Although this genre of discourse data is in form of written texts, it is proximate to the informal oral medium, similar to colloquial conversations.

## 2.2 Historical Studies on Code-switching

Code-switching research was significantly influenced by Uriel Weinreich's 1953 book, "Languages in touch." Weinreich was the first to examine the relationship between CS and bilingualism from a number of disciplines (grammar, psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics). An important contributor to computer science, Einar Haugen is known for his groundbreaking research that highlights the significance of linguistic diversity in the area. Gumperz (1982), writing in the early 1980s, made significant contributions to the field by emphasizing the need to see CS as a discourse approach rather than a flawed behavior. Thus, it was seen as a "added resource for communicating a variety of

social and rhetorical meanings" (Milory & Muysken, 1995). The field of CS has placed an emphasis on grammatical and sociolinguistic methods (Lowi, 2004). In addition to the grammatical (micro technique) and sociolinguistic (macro approach) approaches, Ge (2007) identified a third strategy that he calls the "checklist approach." This research will adopt a sociolinguistic approach. Sociolinguistics "focuses on the social and political incentives for the use of languages in interaction with bilingual or migratory groups" (Lowi, 2004).

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1 Corpus-based Discourse Analysis**

The research is designed to examine the phenomenon of C-E code-switching with regard to social factors – Gender, English Major Status and EMI/ CMI Status. For the purpose of study, anonymized WhatsApp data will be collected to create a corpus of contemporary online communication. To explore the linguistic conditions of code-switches, quantitative analysis supported by linguistics tools will be performed. A proportional study of social factors will also be conducted.

#### Source

They should be collected from WhatsApp - a leading instant messaging app in Hong Kong, with a 85.5% penetration rate as of January 2022 (DataReportal, 2022). WhatsApp is their preferred platform for communicating and exchanging messages with others (65%), considerably outpacing Instagram (14%) and WeChat (9%) (DataReportal, 2022). WhatsApp is the dominant social media platform that Hong Kong people use for daily communications. Thus, the popularity of WhatsApp in Hong Kong enables us to collect sufficient text materials.

### Data Collection

Target Participants	Undergraduates of local universities in Hong Kong
Number of Participants	24
Total word count	308, 552
Number of utterances	56, 469

Table 3.1.1 Overview of Data Collected

Text messages of approximately 308,552 words are collected from 24 participants, thus forming the C-E code-switching database. Considering 1 text bubble as a unit, the database consisted of 56,469 utterances. Our target participants are undergraduates from local universities in Hong Kong. And we have adopted convenience sampling, which means that participants are selected from my college mates and friends. They have all accepted the consent and confidentiality agreement. All data are used under the condition of anonymity; personal information is scrubbed from the data.

### Sample Distribution

Sample population is distributed as follows:

#### English Medium-of-Instruction (EMI) Secondary Schools

	<i>Female</i>	<i>Male</i>
<i>English Major</i>	3	3
<i>Non-English Major</i>	3	3

Table 3.1.2 Description of EMI Sample Distribution

### Chinese Medium-of-Instruction (CMI) Secondary Schools

	<i>Female</i>	<i>Male</i>
<i>English Major</i>	3	3
<i>Non-English Major</i>	3	3

Table 3.1.3 Description of CMI Sample Distribution

### Data Processing

Customized Visual Basic functions are designed to perform different stages of data analysis. For the first stage, a module of coding is used for language detection (refer to appendix A1). Utterances are categorized into “CHIN”, “ENG”, “CHIN-ENG” or “NUM/ PUNC” (number/ punctuation). This is to differentiate speech of pure English and Chinese from mixed practices, as well as grouping data for better quantifying calculation. Another module of coding is used to extract code-switched items (refer to appendix A2). This is for gathering database for the later part-of-speech tagging, thus the analysis of linguistic conditions that constrain code-switching. As for determining which type of code-switching these “CHIN-ENG” utterances are, we have conducted percentage calculation to help speed up the process. In the first place, no pattern of tag switching is found in our corpus. Then, to differentiate Inter/Intra-sentential CS in such a large sample pool, it is essential to make use of some calculations to speed it up. Formulas in Excel are used to count total characters and number of words of code-switched items, followed by percentage calculation (refer to appendix A3-4). As the



actual data below as examples:

Utterance	Matrix Lang	CS Item	CHIN	ENG	Type
我今個 <u>sem</u> 唔計 <u>lab</u> 有兩日 有早堂 (I have morning classes for 2 weekday this semester, excluding laboratory sections.)	Cantonese	Sem lab	11 words 84.6%	2 words 15.4%	Intra- sentential
可唔可以 <u>send</u> 琴日買鞋嗰 間嘢個地址黎 (Can you send me the address of that store where you bought shoes yesterday?)	Cantonese	send	15 words 93.7%	1 word 6.3%	Intra- sentential
urs should look like mine. 你 嚟下兩個星期之後嘅時間表 先係最准 (It's the most accurate if you check the schedule in two weeks' time.)	English	你嚟下兩個星 期之後嘅時間 表先係最准	17 words 78.3%	5 words 21.7%	Inter- sentential

Table 3.1.4 Table of example utterances

In case where the code-switched item takes up less than 50% proportion (usually even less) of the utterance, it is normally considered as an intra-sentential CS. In case where the code-switched item takes up more than or equal to 50% proportion (usually even

more) of the utterance, it is normally considered as an inter-sentential CS. And of course, there are many exceptional cases, usually found in very short utterances, as one word's difference changes the percentage drastically in 2-to-10-word phrases. Therefore, for utterances with CS items taking up 25% to 75%, they are reviewed manually; and type of CS will be determined again according to the definitions of the terms. This is to eliminate situations when percentage is not critical enough to reflect the actual pattern (i.e., in short utterances), and when human judgement is needed. For example:

Utterance	Matric Lang	CS Item	CHIN	ENG	Type
請槍 is incorrect (Cheating is incorrect)	English	請槍	2 words 50%	2 words 50%	Intra-sentential
You mean choosing between 午餐時段 and 歡樂時段? (You mean choosing between Lunch Hour and Happy Hour?)	English	午餐時段 歡樂時段	8 words 61.5%	5 words 38.5%	Intra-sentential

Table 3.1.5 Table of example utterances

Note that in the above cases, even when the CS item takes up 50% or more, it is sensible that they belong to intra-sentential CS, rather than inter-sentential CS. When we review utterances with CS items taking up 25% to 75%, pattern of language distribution (e.g., “between [CHIN] and [CHIN]”), matrix language of the full conversation (e.g., English

is dominantly used in all utterances of a conversation), and literal meaning (e.g., “請  
槍” is one unit, a noun, semantically and linguistically) are considered.

Tagging of different parts of speech may also be accomplished with the help of the software known as TagAnt (refer to appendix A5-6). It is shown in the form of "word + pos tag," and this format is used for both English and Cantonese.

### **3.2 Sociolinguistic Survey**

A Survey is designed to collect sociolinguistic backgrounds of all interlocutors of conversations collected. Survey data regarding sociolinguistic backgrounds, i.e., Gender, English Major Status, EMI/CMI Status, will be coded to utterances of the corresponding interlocutors. They will then be quantified in order to examine the relationship between these social factors and the code-switching behavior. Qualitative analysis via open-ended and situational questions will be carried out to explore the reasons for code-switching in Hong Kong, and the significance of this language use in online socializing / other possible societal ramifications.

## 4. Findings and Discussions

### 4.1 General Code-switching Pattern

In an overview, code-switching is found in around 12.6% (7,081) of all utterances. Among all code-switched utterances, nearly 99.534% (7,048) of them are Intra-sentential code-switching, which is an overwhelming result in our corpus. This is mostly due to the nature of the acquired conversation data. The genre of WhatsApp messages is reflective of instant messaging in mobile applications, where users choose to compose and send words or short sentences rather than paragraphs. Therefore, it is rare to see two separate full phrases of different languages in a single speech (i.e., one text bubble). Of all intra-sentential CS utterances, 73.1% (5,154) of them use Cantonese as the matrix language, while 26.9% (1,894) of them use English as the matrix language.

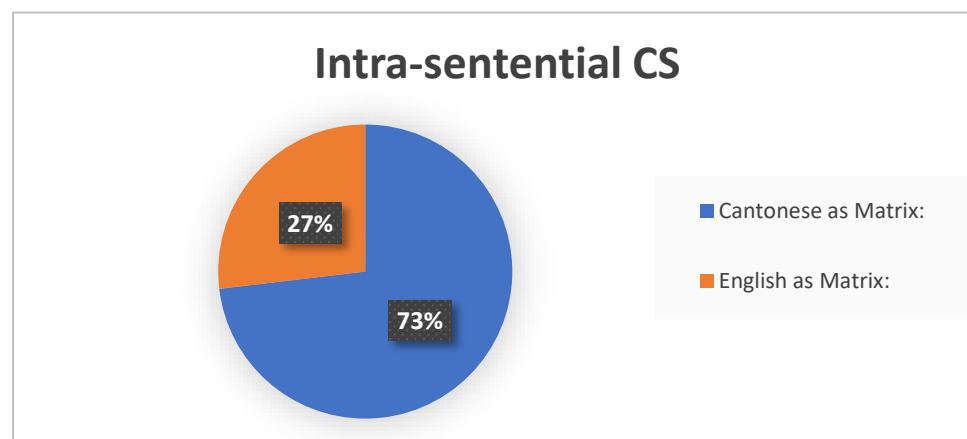


Chart 4.1.1 Distribution within Intra-sentential CS

Cantonese serves as the matrix language for the majority of data, while English is embedded inside Cantonese. For example:

E.g., 覺得佢好似 complain 緊咁  
(I feel like he is complaining)

The remaining data make use of English as the matrix language, while Cantonese is interspersed throughout English. Take, for instance:

E.g., I don't need 宿分 this sem  
(I don't need hostel points this semester)

According to the findings of our corpus, the combination of Cantonese as the matrix language and English as the embedded language is the most prevalent type among undergraduate students in Hong Kong. This finding is in line with the findings of previous research conducted by other scholars and is supported by our corpus.

## 4.2 Linguistic Conditions constraining Code-switching

### English Code-switches

When interlocuters code-switch to English, they engage in code-switching when using the following parts of speech (POS):

<b>1</b>	<b>Noun</b>	<b><i>*Lunch, meeting, weekend*</i></b>	<b>35.95% (3,043 words)</b>
<b>2</b>	Proper Noun	<i>*Covid, Google, Mary, GPA*</i>	27.35% (2,315 words)
<b>3</b>	Verb	<i>*Apply, quit, said, send, drop*</i>	14.51% (1,228 words)
<b>4</b>	Adjective	<i>*Sad, sorry, impossible, free*</i>	6.44% (545 words)
<b>5</b>	Adverb	<i>*Nearly, very, tomorrow*</i>	4.45% (377 words)
<b>6</b>	Interjection	<i>*Hey, oh, yup, okay*</i>	4.18% (354 words)
<b>7</b>	Adposition	<i>*In, to, during, after*</i>	1.97% (167 words)
<b>8</b>	Pronoun	<i>*I, you, he, she, myself*</i>	1.36% (115 words)
<b>9</b>	Conjunction	<i>*And, or, but*</i>	1.10% (93 words)

Table 4.2.1 Linguistic Conditions of English Codeswitches

These are the top 9 POS of English code-switches that Hong Kong undergraduates employ in Cantonese utterances. The total quantity of English code-switches is 8,465 words. We can see that code-switching is most frequently found in nouns (35.95%) and proper nouns (27.35%), followed by verbs (14.51%). In other words, more than 60%

of English code-switches are nouns. For example, “progress meeting” is inserted into Cantonese speech, as in “睇下 progress meeting 洗唔洗改期” (See if the progress meeting needs to be rescheduled.).

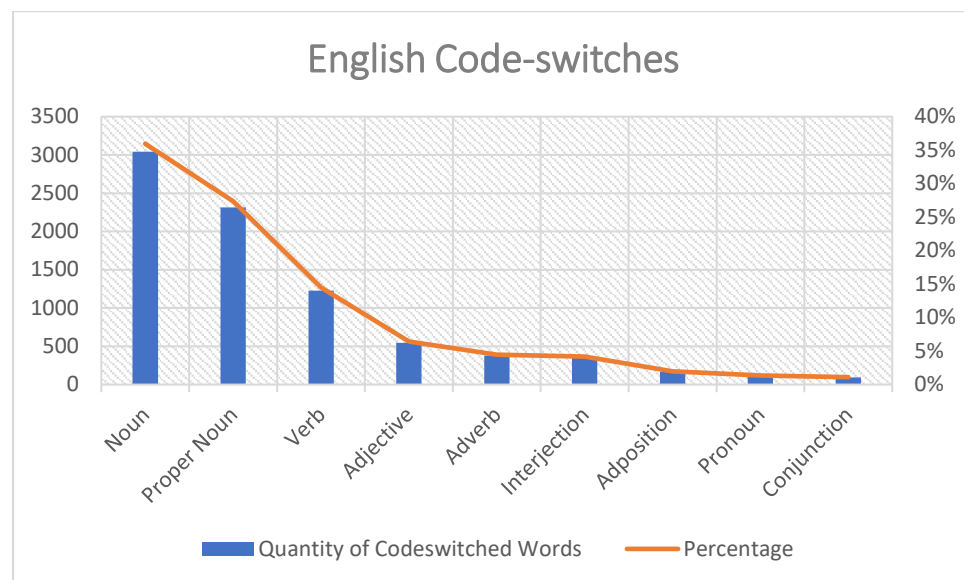


Chart 4.2.2 Linguistic Conditions of English Codeswitches

The predominance of English nouns in C-E code-switching can be observed more clearly in the graph below. Under comparison, other POS are relatively insignificant.

### Chinese Code-switches

When interlocuters code-switch to Chinese, they engage in code-switching when using the following parts of speech (POS):

1	Noun	*事，公司，出口* (event, company, exit)	46.60% (1,261 words)
2	Verb	*話，拖，打* (say, drag, hit)	34.77% (8941 words)
3	Adverb	*已，全，不，最* (already, all, not, most)	5.21% (141 words)

4	Adjective	*好, 熟, 邪* ( <i>good, close to sb., evil</i> )	4.43% (120 words)
5	Modifier	*前_, 女_* ( <i>pre-, woman_</i> )	1.52% (41 words)

Table 4.2.3 Linguistic Conditions of Chinese Codeswitches

These are the 5 most common POS in which Cantonese code-switches are used in English utterances. The total quantity of English code-switches is 2,706 words. Code-switching is most frequently found in nouns (46.60%) and verbs (34.77%), followed by adverbs (5.21%). Approximately half of all code-switches in Cantonese are nouns. For example, “交收” is incorporated into English discourse, as in “U finish the 2 交收?” (You finished the two deliveries?).

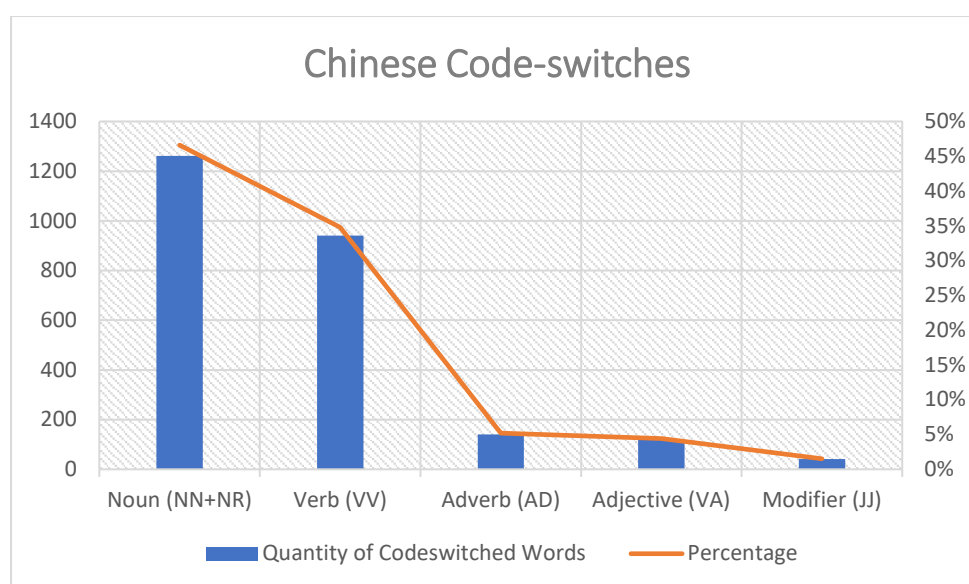


Chart 4.2.4 Linguistic Conditions of Chinese Codeswitches

Code-switching to Chinese occurs most commonly in the presence of the linguistic condition - noun. And verb also have relevance to an extent.



## **Discussion**

In both cases, code-switching takes place most frequently in the POS, noun. It is observed in our corpus that nouns are more easily borrowed as CS items than verbs and adjectives. Unlike other parts of speech, such as nouns and verbs, grammatical function words like prepositions, articles, adposition, and modifiers are very unlikely to be borrowed. This can be explained by word classes in language contact and borrowing hierarchies. In Hong Kong, a city where both English and Cantonese are used dominantly, the concept that different word classes have distinct responses to the extent of linguistic interaction, i.e., language contact, might serve as the backdrop for our discussion (Whitney, 1881).

According to the adoptability scale, under language contact, borrowed nouns (i.e., content words) are almost three times more prevalent than verbs, followed by adjectives, adverbs, prepositions, and interjections (Haugen, 1950). In order to explain the prominence of nouns and verbs, Haugen suggests that it is connected to the vocabulary growth over a speaker's lifetime (Haugen, 1950). In this case, it is related to the multicultural background and English education in Hong Kong. However, code switching is less likely to occur with grammatical elements since they are part of a consistent inventory acquired in early infancy. Numerous past research also

demonstrate the preponderance of nouns over other word classes in cross-linguistic usages. The high borrowability of nouns is a result of their semantic role as names of new objects, the need for distinction and for making references (Weinreich, 1953). The practice of code-switching in nouns contributes to the expansion of vocabulary by providing names for new concepts and practices that are peculiar to particular social and cultural contexts (Haugen, 1950).

### 4.3 Influence of Social Factors on English Code-switching

In order to study whether Gender, English-major status and EMI/ CMI status influence one's propensity to employ English codeswitches and their extent, a proportion analysis is carried out. Consider the data gathered below (refer to appendix B for raw data).

#### **Percentage of English Code-switches employed** (inc. both inter/intra-sentential CS)

<i>Social Factor</i>	<b>Percentage</b>	<b>Actual word count</b>	
<i>Female</i>	3.10%	<u>6,330</u>	↑ 185%
<i>Male</i>	2.41%	2,221	
<i>English Major</i>	1.19%	1,970	
<i>Non-English Major</i>	5.06%	<u>6,581</u>	↑ 234%
<i>EMI</i>	1.97%	3,281	
<i>CMI</i>	4.07%	<u>5,270</u>	↑ 61%

\*Note: Sample size of our corpus is 308,552 words.

Table 4.3.1 Proportion analysis

Due to the exceptionally huge sample size, comparing the resulting percentages is not efficient enough to obtain a clear and straightforward conclusion. It is essential, then, to pay close attention to the actual word count and examine the frequency of English

code-switching across various social factors. The preceding data should serve as a reference for the subsequent sections, in which each social factor mentioned in the above will be discussed independently.

#### **4.3.1 Gender**

According to the corpus, female undergraduates used almost three times as many English code-switches (6,330 terms) as male undergraduates (2,221 words). The number of English code-switches which female undergraduates employed is likewise 185% more than that of male undergraduates. It is obvious that females have higher propensity to employ English code-switches than males. It can be explained by the more welcoming attitude of women towards new linguistics forms according to social metadata. Women have historically been excluded in situations that use the ‘standard-like’ forms (Pure language in this case) compared to men (Meyerhoff, 2018). Sociolinguistically, women are more innovative towards atypical/ newly emerged linguistic features (e.g., prefer code-switching), and more against to standard form (e.g., no code-switching), referring to social metadata in sociolinguistic theory. According to our survey data, around 60% participants are “always and often” aware of the language behavior of engaging in C-E code-switching during a conversation; and around 30%

realize it “sometimes”. This shows that code-switching tends to be a conscious act among our participants. Therefore, it is likely that female participants consciously employ more English code-switches as a form of empowerment in language.

#### **4.3.2 English Major Status (Proficiency)**

According to the data, the English Major status is the most critical factor among the three social factors. Non-English Major students employed English code-switches for a total of 6,581 words, which is 3.3 times of that employed by English Major students (1,970 words). English code-switches was employed by Non-English Major students at a rate 234% higher than that of English Major students. This reveals that students who study English and have a higher proficiency of English do not necessarily employ English code-switches more. It is found that students of high English proficiency prefer using pure English in WhatsApp most of the time. According to the database, around 81.3% utterances (31,372 out of 38,578) performed by English Major students are in pure English. This indicates that it is rare for them to insert English in Cantonese. Oppositely, Non-English Major students would use Cantonese as Matrix language most of the time, leading to increased usage of English code-switches.

### **4.3.3 EMI/ CMI Status**

The EMI/ CMI status is not a significant factor that influence one's propensity to employ English code-switches. Students from CMI schools employed 5,270 words of English code-switches, resulting in a 61% increase over that of students from EMI schools. The difference between the two sets of data is not adequate enough to conclude that there is a definite relationship between EMI/ CMI status and English code-switching. After all, CMI school background may have a slight influence on people's propensity to employ English code-switches, however, it is not as significant as the other factors.

#### 4.4 Reasons/ Motivations for Code-switching

In this section, with reference to survey data and responses, possible reasons and motivations for code-switching will be explored.

##### Lexical Gap

The behavior of code-switching can be understood as importation of forms, which enriches the vocabulary. As there may not be an equivalent English/ Cantonese word in authentic lexicon and/ or speakers' mental lexicon, people code-switch to compensate for language limitation. According to the survey findings, many of our respondents concur that they code-switch due to a lexical gap.

<b>Reasons for employing English codeswitches</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Did not know the equivalent Cantonese words	16.7%
To compensate for language limitation (Absence of matching words)	20.8%

Table 4.4.1 Reasons for employing English codeswitches

<b>Reasons for employing Cantonese codeswitches</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Did not know the equivalent English words	58.3%
To compensate for language limitation (Absence of matching words)	41.7%

Table 4.4.2 Reasons for employing Cantonese codeswitches

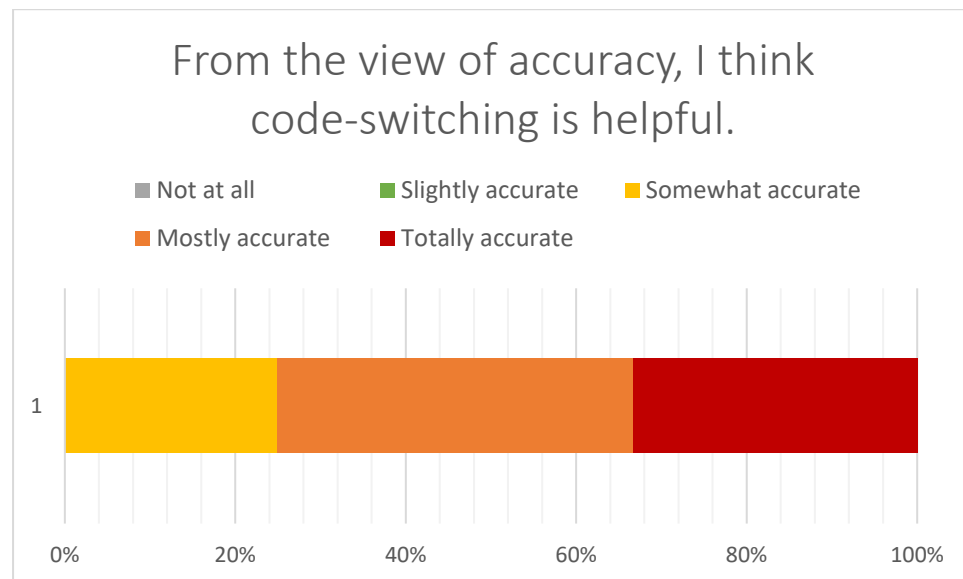
This is especially supported in the case of employing Cantonese codeswitches. Nearly 60% respondents reported that they code-switch to Cantonese in English discourse because they do not know the equivalent English words; around 40% agreed that CS functions to compensate for lexical gap. For instance, in corpus there are utterances like:

E.g.,      6 green 降燥熱 pills  
              (6 green pills for reducing “dryness-heat”)

Here, the word “燥熱” is absent in English, or untranslatable without certain background knowledge. “燥熱”, also known as “上火”, is a unique concept in traditional Chinese medicine (TCM). TCM emphasizes balancing “yin” and “yang” for perfect health. If “yang” is greater than “yin”, your body will generate excessive heat and cause “燥熱”, which can result in ulcers. In fact, “燥熱” is a commonly used term in Hong Kong. The term may sound odd and lose its original meaning if it is translated into English, hindering communication. Therefore, it has to be embedded into English in order to avoid misunderstanding. Aside from this case, our corpus contains many instances of code-switching owing to lexical gaps. “...some Chinese phrases cannot be rendered directly in English - so I keep them in original form”, one of the respondents reported. In this instance, CS is not unintentional, but is employed intentionally to ensure that the right message can be transmitted.



It is surprising to see how CS becomes a communicative tool that helps facilitate conversations. In regard to the statement “From the view of accuracy, I think code-switching is helpful.”, all respondents agreed that it matches with their personal situation/ view to a large extent.



Graph 4.4.3 Statement - “From the view of accuracy, I think code-switching is helpful.”

41.7% of respondents consider the above statement mostly accurate; 33.3% of them think it is; 33.3% of them think it is totally accurate. The findings demonstrate that CS does, in fact, play a part in the achievement of accuracy while one is delivering a discourse.

### Socializing

Code-switching is also perceived as a communicative norm in Hong Kong. Many responses share the concept that CS is favorable for socializing purposes. In response

to the question “Why do you think you code-switch to English/ Cantonese?”, our participants responded:

*“to communicate with close friends more efficiently and in a good vibe!”*

*“...a way to build up closeness to sb. who also speaks Cantonese”*

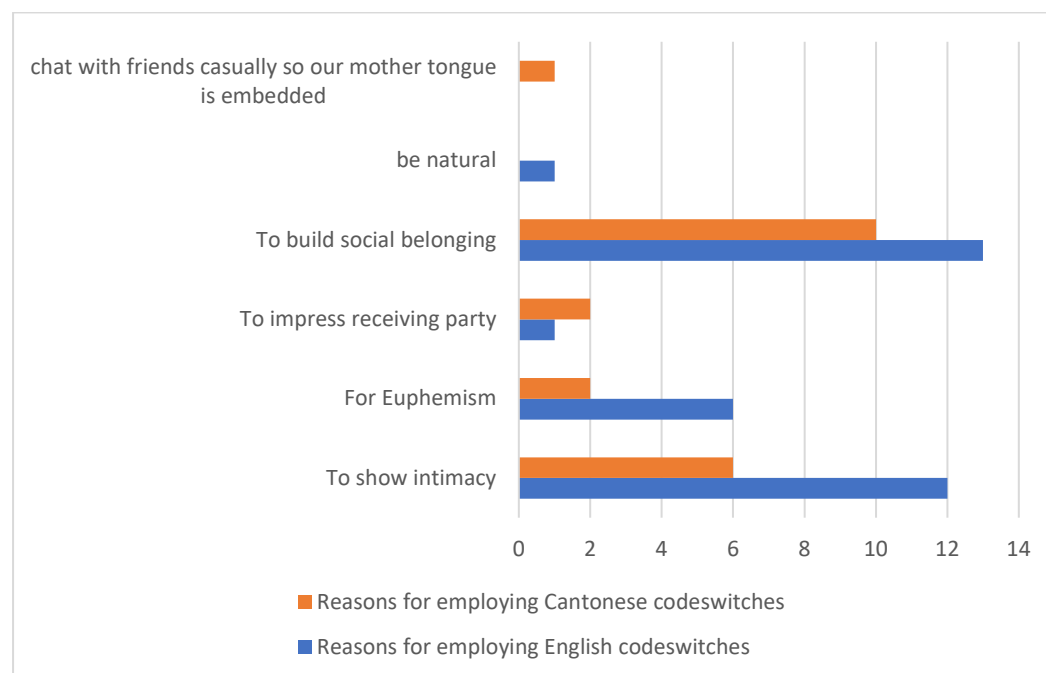
*“it's more natural and sounds more casual in conversation~”*

“ 你今晚 *firm* 唔 *firm* 架”

*(Are you firm or not with tonight ('s party)?)*

*These become our language, only young people say so”*

We may see how CS can contribute to a relaxed and down-to-earth conversational manner and tone, as well as its positive effect in building relationships. It is also reflected in the responses below:



Graph 4.4.4 Socializing-related Reasons for Code-switching

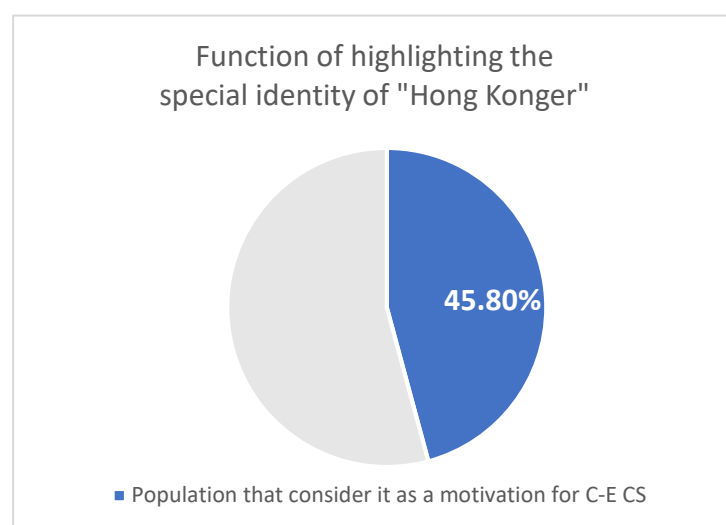
These responses show how important CS is in social dynamics and how it may be used.

In the context of building social belonging and expressing intimacy, CS is most often

employed. 41.7% and 54.2% of respondents agreed that building social belonging is one of their motivations for CS, in both cases of employing Cantonese and English respectively. It is undoubtedly that the informal practice of CS gives a friendly and easygoing sense or atmosphere, and that it is useful in social contexts, such as WhatsApp and casual face-to-face chats, for the purpose of making connections.

### To Express Cultural Identity

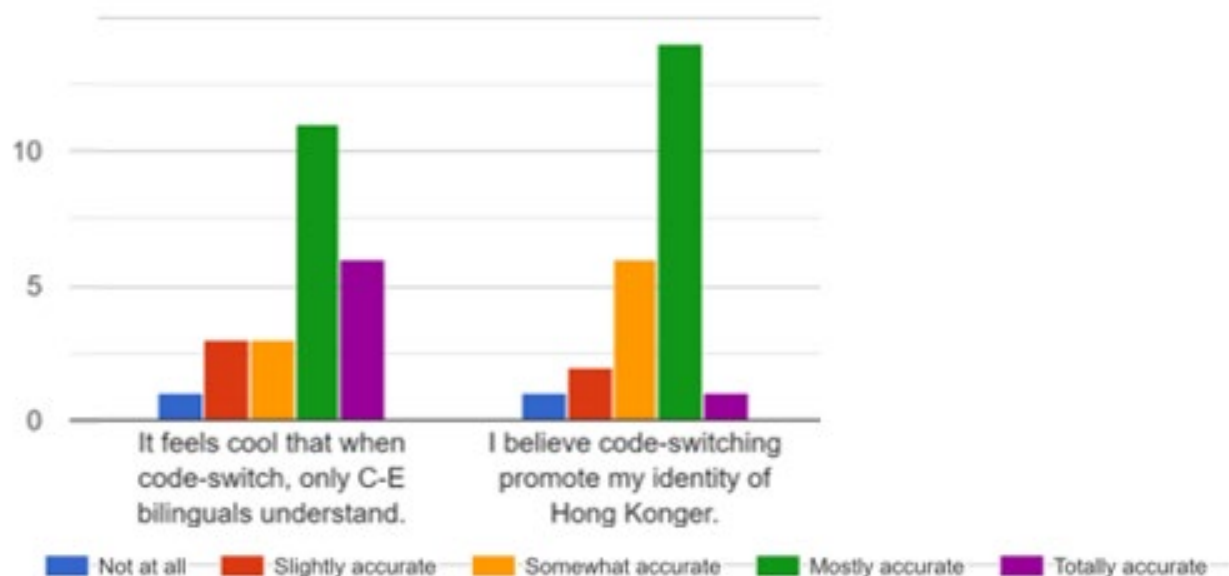
On a higher level, the C-E CS trait is also considered as an indicator of in-group and out-group. CS is not readily accessible to outsiders since it exhibits “bilingual language play and local creativity” (Luk, 2013). People who claim to be “real Hongkonger” may use C-E CS as a mean to express and prove their cultural identity. About half of survey respondents stated that emphasizing the “Hongkonger” identity is a factor that encourages them to practice C-E CS.



Graph 4.4.5 Motivation for C-E CS

In response to the following statements, the majority of participants believed that C-E had a favorable relationship with identity construction.

How accurately do the following statements match your personal situation/view?



Graph 4.4.6 Statements related to Identity construction

For the statement “It feels cool that when code-switch, only C-E bilinguals understand.”, 70.83% of respondents find it mostly or totally accurate. As for the statement “I believe code-switching promote my identity of Hong Konger.”, 62.50% of respondents hold the same opinion. It is clear that the C-E CS is positive and helpful to the people of Hong Kong in their efforts to develop a sense of local identity. Indeed, contact between languages may give birth to variances, which can have repercussions for a person’s sense of identity and their self-esteem (Freynet and Clément, 2019). As a result of the fact that only native Hong Kong people who are fluent in both English and Cantonese are able to understand this hybrid language, it has come to be seen as an emblem of

Hong Kong's cultural identity among young generations. The prevalence of C-E CS helps promote the sense of belonging to Cantonese and thus Hong Kong. The sentiment of pride somehow renders C-E CS an in-group marker that promotes the construction of cultural identity.

## **5. Conclusions**

In general, our research results are consistent with previous findings. Intra-sentential code-switching is the most common type of Code-switching in Hong Kong. And the predominant tendency would be Cantonese as Matrix language; English as embedded language. Moreover, nouns are the most frequently code-switched items, while grammatical function words like prepositions, conjunctions, pronouns constrain CS more. Among the three social factors – Gender, English Major Status and EMI/CMI Status, English Major Status is the most significant factor influencing likelihood of employing English code-switches. Non-English Major students tend to employ English code-switches more frequently, whereas English Major students prefer monolingual communication, i.e., pure English. Their high proficiency level in English allows them to communicate exclusively in English with little need for code-switching. Possible reasons and motivations for C-E code-switching in Hong Kong include the presence of lexical gaps, socializing purposes and cultural identity construction.

## 6. Implications

Further research on the relationship between age and language behavior of Code-switching can be an extended study. As reflected in responses collected, age could be an influential factor:

*“sometimes English words turn into popular words among we hk teenagers, for example "你今晚firm 唔firm 架" (Are you firm or not with tonight ('s party)?) These become our language, only young people say so”*

*“because friends chat with me and they code-switch a lot, I also feel like it's hard to avoid using English”*

*“the english term is more commonly accepted by peers, people will think that you are so "kam" if you talk in full Chinese even in WhatsApp.”*

To acquire a more comprehensive understanding of code-switching in Hong Kong, I believe it would be beneficial to further study and include the social aspect of age.

In addition, findings suggest how we may apply code-switching in socializing. Through observing and using C-E CS, ethnic minorities can better acquire Cantonese/ HK culture, as well as integrate into society by understanding code-switching patterns. As shown in responses collected, CS is “a communicative norm in HK”, “a way to build up closeness to sb who also speaks Cantonese”. The ability to CS, such as beginning code-switching with nouns, might help individuals communicate more effectively.

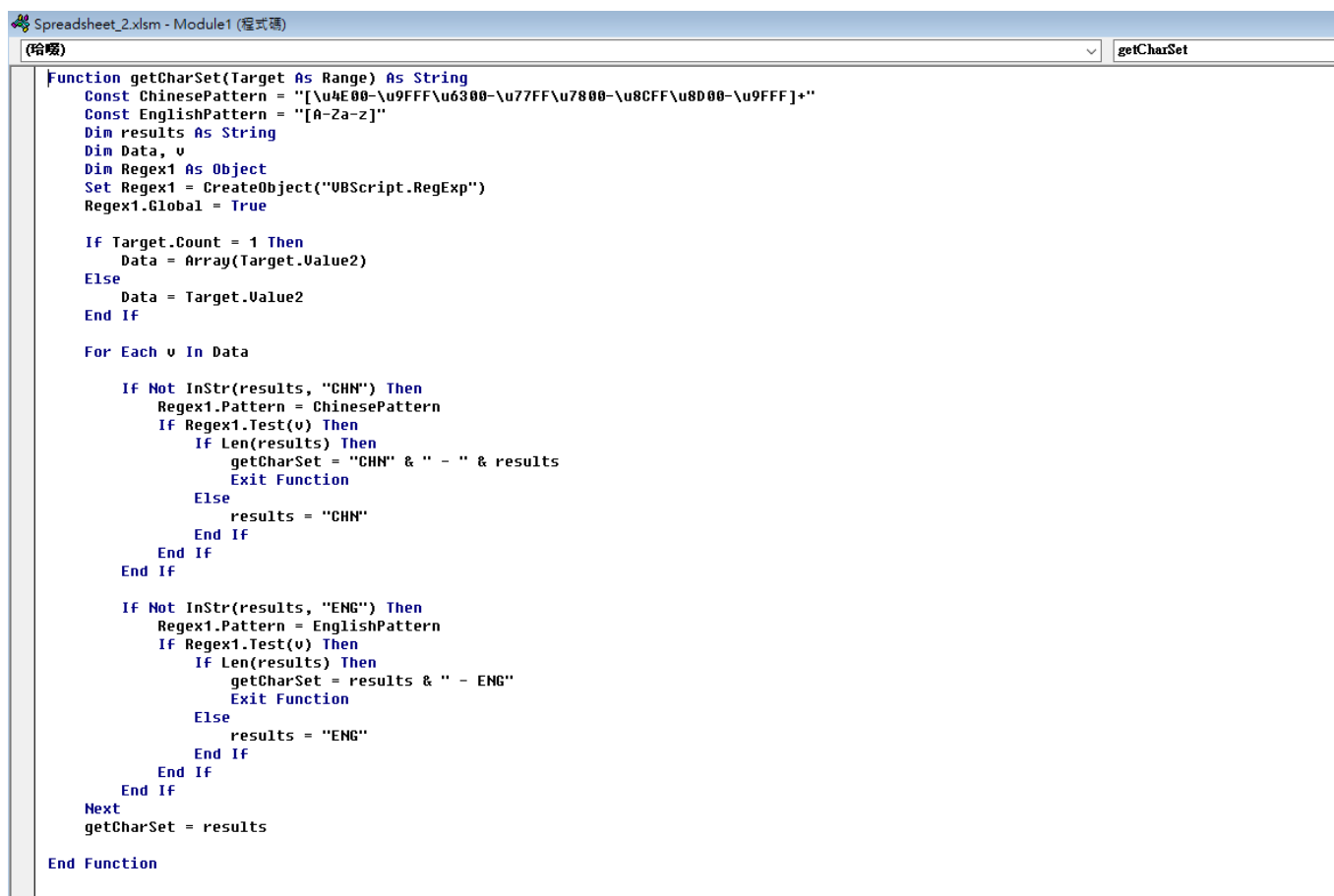
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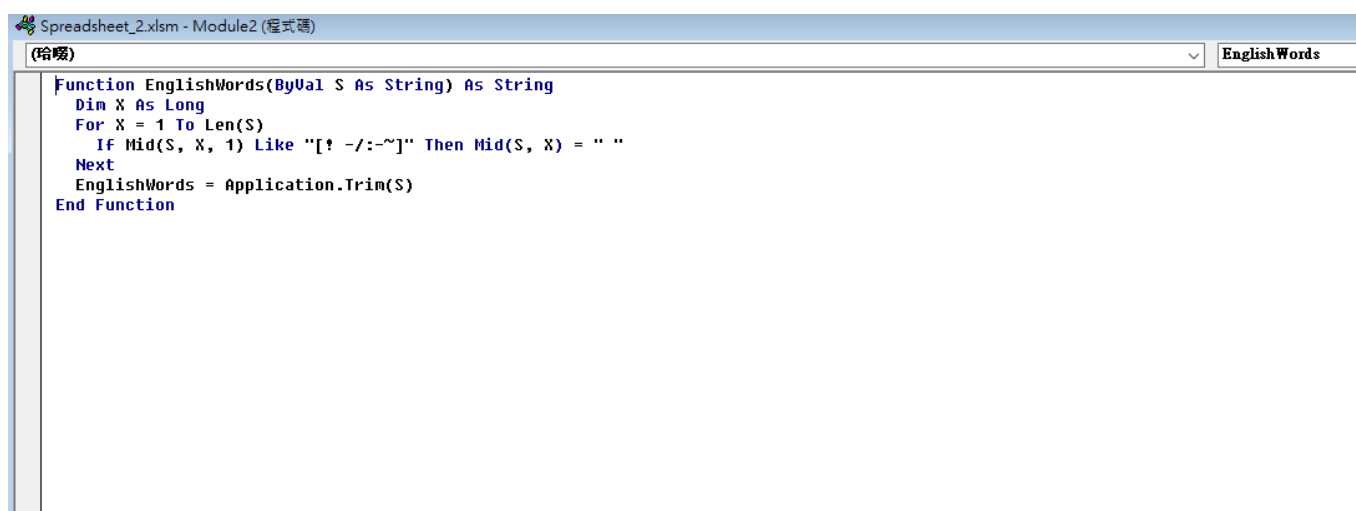
## Appendix A



The screenshot shows the Visual Basic Editor for 'Spreadsheet\_2.xlsm - Module1 (程式碼)'. The code defines a function 'getCharSet' that takes a 'Target As Range' and returns a 'String'. It uses two regular expressions: 'ChinesePattern' for Chinese characters and 'EnglishPattern' for English letters. The function iterates through the data in the target range, testing each value against these patterns. If a match is found, it updates the 'getCharSet' result and exits the function. If no match is found after checking all data, it returns an empty string.

```
Function getCharSet(Target As Range) As String
    Const ChinesePattern = "[\u4E00-\u9FFF\u6300-\u77FF\u7800-\u8CFF\u8D00-\u9FFF]+"
```

A1. Customized Visual Basic Functions, Module 1



The screenshot shows the Visual Basic Editor for 'Spreadsheet\_2.xlsm - Module2 (程式碼)'. The code defines a function 'EnglishWords' that takes a 'ByVal S As String' and returns a 'String'. It iterates through each character in the string 'S'. If a character is not an English letter (checked using 'Like "[! -/:~]"'), it is replaced with a space. Finally, the function returns the trimmed string using 'Application.Trim(S)'.

```
Function EnglishWords(ByVal S As String) As String
    Dim X As Long
    For X = 1 To Len(S)
        If Mid(S, X, 1) Like "[! -/:~]" Then Mid(S, X) = " "
```

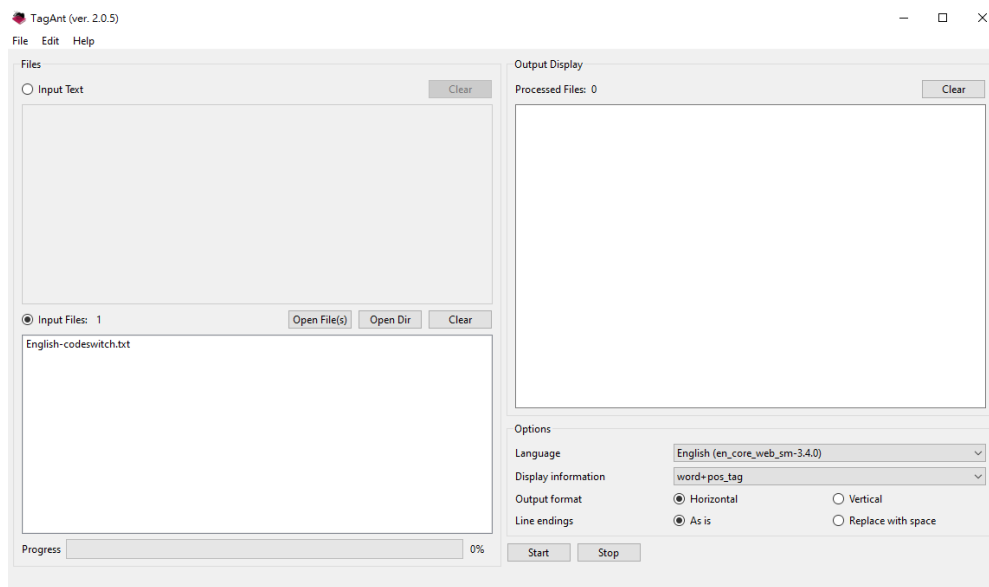
A2. Customized Visual Basic Functions, Module 2

=LEN(SUBSTITUTE(A16," ",""))

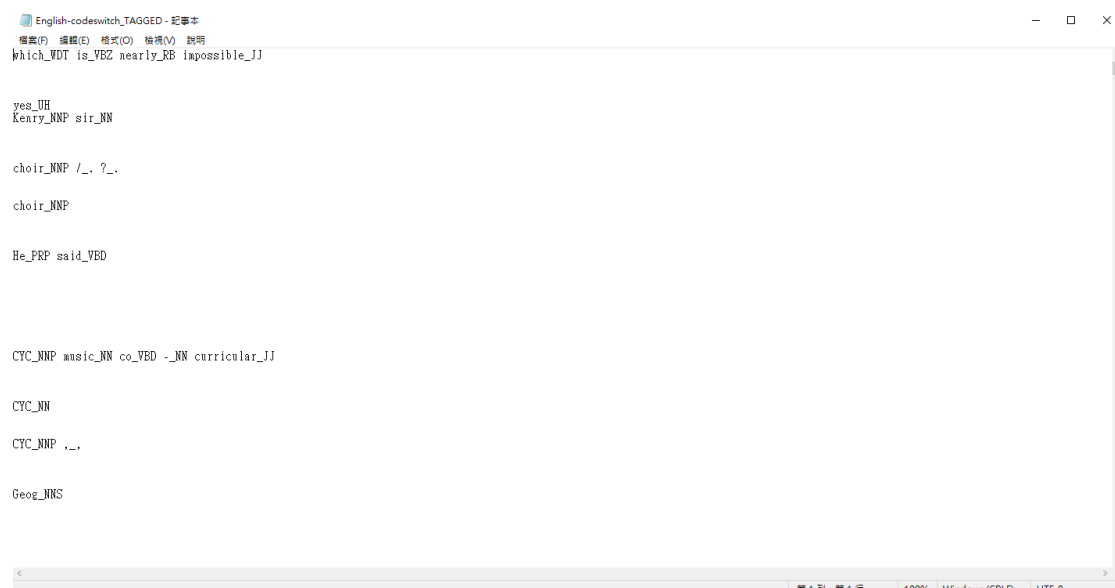
A3. Excel Formula for calculating total characters

=IF(LEN(TRIM(B16))=0,0,LEN(TRIM(B16))-LEN(SUBSTITUTE(B16," ",""))+1)

A4. Excel Formula for calculating number of English words



A5. The software AntTag used for POS Tagging



A6. Outcome of AntTag, Tagged items

## Appendix B

English Medium of Instruction (EMI) Secondary Schools					
		Female	Male		
English Major		116	62		
Non-English Major		1997	1106		
Chinese Medium of Instruction (CMI) Secondary Schools					
		Female	Male		
English Major		1521	271		
Non-English Major		2696	782		

B1. Table of English Code-switches employed

English Medium of Instruction (EMI) Secondary Schools					
		Female	Male		
English Major		70247	43108		
Non-English Major		33758	19357		
Chinese Medium of Instruction (CMI) Secondary Schools					
		Female	Male		
English Major		30205	22428		
Non-English Major		69653	7200		

B2. Table of Total Word Count

English Medium of Instruction (EMI) Secondary Schools					
		Female	Male		
English Major		0.16513	0.14382		
Non-English Major		5.91563	5.7137		
Chinese Medium of Instruction (CMI) Secondary Schools					
		Female	Male		
English Major		5.03559	1.20831		
Non-English Major		3.87062	10.8611		

B3. Table of Percentage of English Code-switches employed

## Appendix C

A1																			
id.user																			
A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q	R	S	T
utterance	Year of Collc	Year of Dated	Sociolingistic Sitd	Language	Matrix la	Code-st	Type	English	Chinese	Codematched POS Tagn	Codematched POS Tagz	Gender	Eng-magv	Emt.CM26 str	Un-v	EN%	V	W	X
C8021 you25 26 29會唔想我哋一齊都教會佬啊	2022	2020 HK00330	CHN	-zh-Hant	0				你25 26 29會唔想我哋一齊都教會佬啊			F	Non-English	CM1	100.0	0.0			
C8008 我要補習呀，如果去戰話要講成三堂，which_WDT is_VBZ nearly_R	2022	2019 NA	CHN - ENG	-zh-Hant	1 inter			which is nearly impossible	我要補習呀，如果去戰話要講成三堂，			F	Non-English	EMI	81.0	19.0			
C8021 好可惜	2022	2020 HK00330	CHN	-zh-Hant	0				好可惜			F	Non-English	CM1	100.0	0.0			
C8027 啲緊實咁掛住	2022	2020 HK00330	CHN	-zh-Hant	0				啲緊實咁掛住			F	Non-English	CM1	100.0	0.0			
svs 有得同你去玩 yes_HH can_I play w_	2022	2019 NA	CHN - ENG	-zh-Hant	1 intra			yes yes	有得同你去玩			F	Non-English	EMI	85.7	14.3			
C8008 kenny sir 講幾句	2022	2019 NA	CHN - ENG	-zh-Hant	1 intra			kenny sir	講幾句係俾你一先定每個星期五部嘢？			F	Non-English	EMI	89.5	10.5			
C8008 佢有講過嗎？	2022	2019 NA	CHN	-zh-Hant	0				佢有講過嗎？			F	Non-English	EMI	100.0	0.0			
C8021 我都唔覺但講過	2022	2020 HK00330	CHN	-zh-Hant	0				我都唔覺但講過			F	Non-English	CM1	100.0	0.0			
C8021 應該喇條一次？	2022	2020 HK00330	CHN	-zh-Hant	0				應該喇條一次？			F	Non-English	CM1	100.0	0.0			
C8021 但點解讀乜嘢呢！	2022	2020 HK00330	CHN - ENG	-zh-Hant	1 intra			choir / ?	但點解讀既 啱係11年呀？			F	Non-English	CM1	78.6	21.4			
C8008 he's over, but please	2022	2019 NA	CHN	-zh-Hant	0				未必，他話預留星期一比但補課			F	Non-English	EMI	100.0	0.0			
C8008 可能係長期性w	2022	2019 NA	CHN	-zh-Hant	0				可能係長期性			F	Non-English	EMI	100.0	0.0			
C8021 so it was like ch	2022	2019 NA	CHN - ENG	-zh-Hant	1 intra			choir	所以就讀吧			F	Non-English	EMI	83.3	16.7			
C8021 下	2022	2020 HK00330	CHN	-zh-Hant	0				下			F	Non-English	CM1	100.0	0.0			
C8021 我想變成日精	2022	2020 HK00330	CHN	-zh-Hant	0				我想變成日精			F	Non-English	CM1	100.0	0.0			
C8021 He said 每個月月	2022	2019 NA	CHN - ENG	-zh-Hant	1 intra			He said	每個月兩次左右			F	Non-English	EMI	77.8	22.2			
C8021 下	2022	2020 HK00330	CHN	-zh-Hant	0				下			F	Non-English	CM1	100.0	0.0			
C8021 非你要補習件修	2022	2020 HK00330	CHN	-zh-Hant	0				非你要補習件修			F	Non-English	CM1	100.0	0.0			
C8008 變另一一班	2022	2019 NA	CHN	-zh-Hant	0				變另一一班			F	Non-English	EMI	100.0	0.0			
C8021 好似開朗些光棍	2022	2020 HK00330	CHN	-zh-Hant	0				好似開朗些光棍			F	Non-English	CM1	100.0	0.0			
C8008 但又唔滿清楚	2022	2019 NA	CHN	-zh-Hant	0				但又唔滿清楚			F	Non-English	EMI	100.0	0.0			
C8008 我話比你知道呀	2022	2019 NA	CHN	-zh-Hant	0				我話比你知道呀			F	Non-English	EMI	100.0	0.0			
C8008 我CYC music	2022	2019 NA	CHN - ENG	-zh-Hant	1 intra			CYC music co-curricular	我問一下，哪度有180度大轉變			F	Non-English	EMI	80.0	20.0			
C8021 點	2022	2020 HK00330	CHN	-zh-Hant	0				點			F	Non-English	CM1	100.0	0.0			
C8021 兩個都做左？	2022	2020 HK00330	CHN	-zh-Hant	0				兩個都做左？			F	Non-English	CM1	100.0	0.0			
C8008 我攞左CYC	2022	2019 NA	CHN - ENG	-zh-Hant	1 intra			CYC	我攞左			F	Non-English	EMI	80.0	20.0			
C8008 至於得唔得	2022	2019 NA	CHN	-zh-Hant	0				至於得唔得			F	Non-English	EMI	100.0	0.0			
C8008 見到你話你知	2022	2019 NA	CHN	-zh-Hant	0				見到你話你知			F	Non-English	EMI	100.0	0.0			
C8008 攞左CYC，我而	2022	2019 NA	CHN - ENG	-zh-Hant	1 intra			CYC	攞左，我而家身心舒暢			F	Non-English	EMI	90.9	9.1			
C8021 好啊	2022	2020 HK00330	CHN	-zh-Hant	0				好啊			F	Non-English	CM1	100.0	0.0			
C8021 好攞你終於認返	2022	2020 HK00330	CHN	-zh-Hant	0				好攞你終於認返			F	Non-English	CM1	100.0	0.0			
C8021 做自己鍾意既～	2022	2020 HK00330	CHN	-zh-Hant	0				做自己鍾意既～			F	Non-English	CM1	100.0	0.0			
C8008 Geog當得你講	2022	2019 NA	CHN - ENG	-zh-Hant	1 intra			Geog	當得你講			F	Non-English	EMI	80.0	20.0			
C8008 其實我覺得我今	2022	2020 HK00330	CHN	-zh-Hant	0				其實我覺得我今次真係捱得			F	Non-English	EMI	100.0	0.0			
C8021 好啊	2022	2020 HK00330	CHN	-zh-Hant	0				好啊			F	Non-English	CM1	100.0	0.0			
C8021 嘩啊我都覺	2022	2020 HK00330	CHN	-zh-Hant	0				嘩啊我都覺			F	Non-English	CM1	100.0	0.0			
C8021 聽日死得	2022	2020 HK00330	CHN	-zh-Hant	0				聽日死得			F	Non-English	CM1	100.0	0.0			
C8021 相～	2022	2020 HK00330	CHN	-zh-Hant	0				相～			F	Non-English	CM1	100.0	0.0			
C8008 Ch10-ch11	2022	2019 NA	ENG	en	0			Ch -ch				F	Non-English	EMI	66.7	33.3			

The full corpus data file can be found in

[https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1CwgM645Yp7iVrgfv5nszzrzEr3N1h3mv/edit?usp=share\\_link&oid=109630291900515541425&rtpof=true&sd=true](https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1CwgM645Yp7iVrgfv5nszzrzEr3N1h3mv/edit?usp=share_link&oid=109630291900515541425&rtpof=true&sd=true)

### C.1 Corpus data

C.2 Sociolinguistic Survey [please see next page]

# Cantonese-English Code-Switching

This study is undertaken for the sociolinguistic research objective of investigating **Cantonese-English (C-E) Code-Switching in Hong Kong WhatsApp Conversations**.

I am a student at the Chinese University of Hong Kong majoring in English.  
You are cordially welcome to join in my study, which investigates the phenomena of C-E code-switching in online socializing contexts in terms of social dynamics. There will be a collection of anonymized WhatsApp data to create a corpus of contemporary corpus of online communication for analysis.

Disclaimer: The information collected is going to be used only for academic purposes and will not be disclosed to anybody or to any organization.

\*必填

## Consent and confidential information

1. Will you be donating your data? \*

\* "Data" here refers to survey data, and/or WhatsApp data.

By clicking "Yes", I agree that

- 1) I am **free from coercion of any kind**
- 2) I am **donating** my data to **help advance the field of sociolinguistics in Hong Kong**
- 3) I agree to use my data **under the condition of anonymity**, and will be opting to agree electronically without affixing my signature.

Please notice: Your personal data (i.e., your name, phone number, all security numbers, URLs, usernames, and other identifiable information) will be de-linked and scrubbed from the data using a mix of manual and computational tools.

请仅选择一个答案。

☐ Yes, and I agree with the above.

## A. Personal Information

In total 9 questions

2. 1. What is your Name? (e.g. Peter, any other nickname)  
*\*for the purpose of differentiating only*

---

3. 2. What is your Age? \*

---

4. 3. What is your Gender identity? \*  
I consider myself as...

请仅选择一个答案。

☐ Male

☐ Female

☐ Prefer not to say

☐ 其他: 

---

5. 4. What is your Major and year of study? \*  
(e.g. ENGE/4, IBBA/2)

---

6. 5. What is your first language? \*

请仅选择一个答案。

☐ Cantonese

☐ English

☐ Putonghua

☐ 其他: 

---

7. 6. How long have you learned English? \*

请仅选择一个答案。

- ☐ 1-2 years
- ☐ 3-5 years
- ☐ 5-9 years
- ☐ 10-14 years
- ☐ 15-19 years
- ☐ ≥20 years

8. 7. Which Language is the primary medium of instruction at your secondary school? \*

你中學的主要教學語言是？(e.g. 中中，英中)

请仅选择一个答案。

- ☐ Cantonese
- ☐ English
- ☐ Putonghua
- ☐ 其他: \_\_\_\_\_



9。 8. Cantonese proficiency: How well do you speak and understand Cantonese? \*

请仅选择一个答案。

Not Well

1

☐

2

☐

3

☐

4

☐

5

☐

Very Well

10。 9. English proficiency: How well do you speak and understand English? \*

请仅选择一个答案。

Not Well

1

☐

2

☐

3

☐

4

☐

5

☐

Very Well

**Cantonese-English (C-E)  
code-switching**

Generally **code switching** means -  
the shifting of language or we can simply say  
moving from one language to another language  
in a conversation.

Examples of C-E code-switching:



**Yeung Tsz Wai**

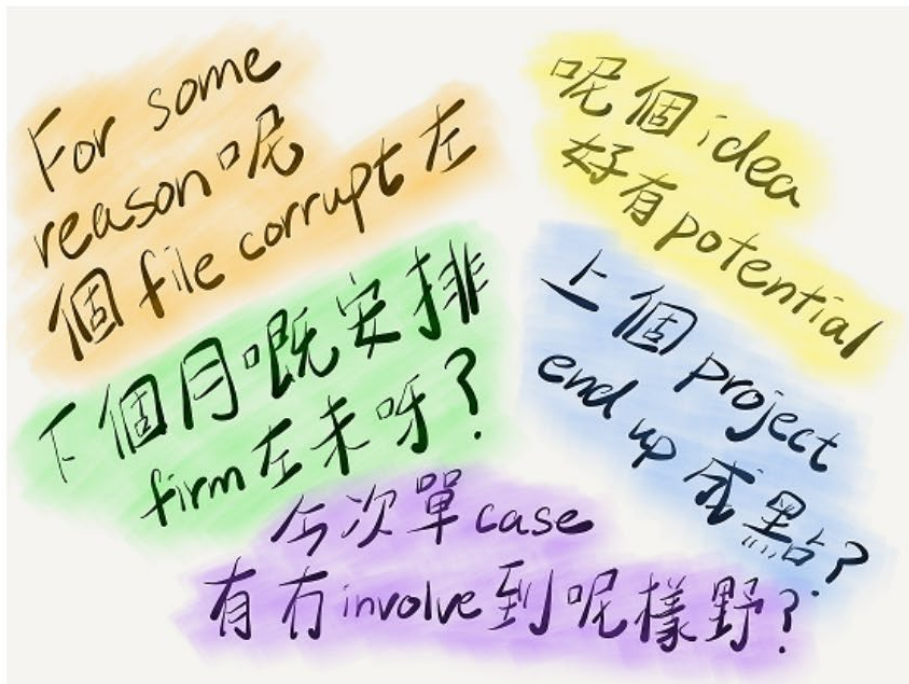
December 15, 2012 via mobile · Edited

係main lib 搵左成日書, 終於可以番hall 訓陣覺....

Tag Photo Add Locati... Edit

Like · Comment · Stop Notifications · Share · Edit

Examples of C-E code-switching



Examples of C-E code-switching



## B. Assessment towards Code Switching/Mixing

Please answer the questions according to the sequence of questions.

In total 7 questions

11. 1. Do you code-switch between Cantonese and English when using WhatsApp or similar messaging platforms? \*

请仅选择一个答案。

☐ Yes

☐ No

12. 2. How often do you realize that you are engaging in C-E code-switching during a conversation? \*

请仅选择一个答案。

- ☐ Always  
☐ Often  
☐ Sometimes  
☐ Rarely  
☐ Never

13. 3. Why do you think you **code-switch to English**? \*

*Free feel to express your thoughts!*

- any reasons?
- any motives that drive you to code-switch?
- any purpose to code-switch?

**E.g.** 聽日係唔係deadline?

想問我借錢? No way!

我個best friend唔得閑去食tea

我地盡量今日做完佢, okay?

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- 14 ° 4. Why do you think you **code-switch to Cantonese**? \*

*Free feel to express your thoughts!*

- any reasons?
- any motives that drive you to code-switch?
- any purpose to code-switch?

**E.g.** I think it's time to 認清事實 now

Does she really think she is some kind of 大人物? So ridiculous.

I'm buying desserts back dorm, you okay with 芋圓?

we have meeting tonight? 你肯定?

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#### B. Assessment towards Code Switching/Mixing

- 15 ° 5. Why do you **employ English codeswitches** when texting in Cantonese? \*

*You may choose more than 1 answer*

请选择所有适用项。

- ☐ To add emphasis
- ☐ To show intimacy
- ☐ Did not know the equivalent Cantonese word
- ☐ To compensate for language limitation (No matching words)
- ☐ For Euphemism (委婉說法)
- ☐ To avoid misunderstanding
- ☐ Feel easier to speak in English at times
- ☐ To show off
- ☐ To impress receiving party
- ☐ To build social belonging
- ☐ ☒ Not applicable. I don't employ English codeswitches when texting in Cantonese.
- ☐ 其他: \_\_\_\_\_

- 16 ° 6. Why do you **employ Cantonese codeswitches** when texting in English? \*
- You may choose more than 1 answer*

请选择所有适用项。

- ☐ To add emphasis
- ☐ To show intimacy
- ☐ Did not know the equivalent English word
- ☐ To compensate for language limitation (No matching words)
- ☐ For Euphemism (委婉說法)
- ☐ To avoid misunderstanding
- ☐ Feel easier to speak in Cantonese at times
- ☐ To show off
- ☐ To impress receiving party
- ☐ To build social belonging
- ☐ ☒ Not applicable. I don't employ Cantonese codeswitches when texting in English.

☐ 其他: \_\_\_\_\_

- 17 ° 7. The phenomenon of code-switching is common in Hong Kong. Having English embedded is claimed to be a new pattern in Cantonese communications. \*

Which of these factors do you think most encourage you to code switch between Cantonese and English?

*You may choose at most 3 answers*

请选择所有适用项。

- ☐ Influence from friends
- ☐ Influence from social medias
- ☐ Function of highlighting the special identity of "Hong Konger"
- ☐ Ease in retrieving words from your brain
- ☐ Situational factor (participants, settings, topics) - e.g. in context of chatting with bestie informally

☐ 其他: \_\_\_\_\_

**C.**  
**Overview**

To make it easier to read the questions, it is advised that you adopt the horizontal screen orientation when answering the questions below.

*In total 1 questions*

18. 1. How accurately do the following statements match your personal situation/view? \*

\*A questions here refer to the case of **Cantonese-English code-switching**

请在每行中仅选择一个答案。

	Not at all	Slightly accurate	Somewhat accurate	Mostly accurate	Totally accurate
I prefer more frequent codeswitches.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
From the view of accuracy, I think code-switching is helpful.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
From the view of fluency, I think code-switching is some kind of interrupting.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I think code switching pollutes our mother tongue (Cantonese).	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
It feels cool that when code-switch, only C-E bilinguals understand.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I believe code-switching promote my identity of Hong Konger.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I like the trend of code-	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>



switching in  
Cantonese.

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**The end of  
the  
questionnaire.**

Thank you for your thoughtful feedback.  
If you have concerns regarding this research project, please  
contact Mary Tsang Yuen Man, the study's investigator  
(1155144527@link.cuhk.edu.hk).

**Thank you for your time!**



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# **Exploring the multi-faceted linguistic landscape of Hong Kong: A regional analysis**

Circle Yuen Ying

Supervisor: Prof. Wilkinson Daniel Wong Gonzales

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Sat in the center of Asia, Hong Kong is a remarkable city of contrast—it is a bustling metropolis where East meets West and a place where traditional values coexist with modernity. As one of the world's most densely populated areas, the linguistic landscape of Hong Kong is a unique blend of languages and dialects from around the world. With both Chinese and English as official languages and a whole host of languages used by minority groups, Hong Kong is a melting pot of Asian and Western cultures, reflecting its worldwide links and multifaceted array of languages. For this reason, this study aims to uncover the unique LL in Hong Kong's public sphere.

Linguistic landscapes manifest in all shapes and sizes— from public signage and commercial advertising on billboards, to place names and inscriptions on government buildings (Landry & Bourhis, 1997). This classical operationalization of linguistic landscape by Landry and Bourhis has been widely accepted and frequently cited in scholarly literature. However, subsequent academics have attempted to expand or modify such description to reflect the complexities of LL. For example, Scollon and Scollon-Wong (2003) and Spolsky (2009) expanded the definition to encompass not only the tangible display of language but also the intangible sociopolitical forces that shape the LL. That is, these linguistic artifacts not merely serve a practical purpose, but they also convey semiotic meanings that align with the social environment of the communities they serve. However, the notion of LL is a relatively young concept which first emerged in 1997, and thus, still somewhat understudied. Numerous countries have yet to conduct in-depth studies on LL and one such example is Hong Kong.

Thus, this paper will examine all kinds of visible displays of written language in three districts of Hong Kong—Mongkok (MK), Tin Shui Wai (TSW), Discovery Bay (DB)—

based on digital pictures taken. The three sites were carefully chosen because, perceptually, these areas appear to have contrasting characteristics such as their geographical locations, cultural backgrounds, and drastically different linguistic repertoire of their people. Furthermore, the three stand for Hong Kong's urban, suburban, and rural areas respectively. Besides, it has been joked that if one drives an hour in India, the whole language, food, and culture changes a hundred times. Inspired by this notion, I am curious to know – objectively – whether such drastic regional variability takes place in a compact city of 1,100km<sup>2</sup> like Hong Kong too. The huge geographic distance between MK, TSW, and DB (see Figure 2 in Section 7) provides an excellent opportunity to examine whether significant differences in the LL exist among various regions of Hong Kong.

In other words, an aspect that distinguishes this study would be its focus on the possible impact of diverse cultural influences and geographic location; through a comparative analysis of the LL of areas with varying levels of Japanese influence, proximity to mainland China, and status as a tourist hub, I wish to look into the potential motivations that shape the public spaces of this city.

In the parts that follow, a thorough examination of Hong Kong's LL will be presented. Section 2 outlines the objectives of this research while Section 3 introduces pioneer studies in the field that contribute to a better understanding of the topic. Section 4 provides a brief overview of Hong Kong's historical background and its language development from 1841 to the present day. In Section 5, the focus will be narrowed down to three selected districts in Hong Kong, with a discussion of their cultural backgrounds. In Section 6, I will discuss the hypotheses made regarding the LL in each of these districts while in Section 7, I will detail the methodology used for data collection and coding. Moving forward, Section 8 provides an overall view of the LL in all three districts, including the potential factors that shape the linguistic landscape. The section will also compare the language prominence in the three sites and evaluate the accuracy of the hypotheses made earlier. The data will be analysed based on the quantity shown in tables, as well as the visibility and order of language shown in the photographs.

## **2. OBJECTIVES**

In the light of the changing political landscape in Hong Kong, it is crucial to study its LL to capture the significant cultural transformation taking place. Ultimately, this paper seeks to (i) understand the linguistic dynamics in Hong Kong, (ii) present a panorama of the LL across the three selected sites in Hong Kong and (iii) investigate the underlying reasons that mould the different city's public spaces. In addition, the three main research questions addressed in this paper are:

1. What are the patterns / visibility and order of language use in the linguistic landscape of different districts in Hong Kong?
2. How is the LL of Hong Kong characterized in terms of Japanese influence, proximity to China, and status as a tourist hub?
3. Does the frequency of Simplified Chinese characters vary in relation to the distance from the mainland border, and is this related to the use of Cantonese in other regions?

## **3. LITERATURE REVIEW**

During the budding stage of linguistic landscape (LL) studies, scholars' attention was predominantly directed to *English* language on shop signs, which offered limited insight for investigating multilingualism in the cityscape. In addition, their research scope was confined to shop signs, thus, neglected other linguistic objects like road signs and governmentally erected notices. For instance, MacGregor (2003) explored the LL in Japan, Seijo, and ascertained that English was more prevalent on shop signs of women's clothing stores and hair salons as it conveyed a sense of superiority and "fostered customers' trust". However, the study only collected a total of 120 photographs of shop signs. Afterwards, Dimova (2007) conducted the first LL study in Macedonian city and analyzed shop signs of internet cafes, hospitality establishments, boutiques and etc. The results revealed that English language signs were perceived as "prestigious" and "opulent" and served as status symbols for businesses. Yet, his photographic evidence collection was limited to a mere 346 instances. The studies in the early phase of LL entail a relatively smaller scale of data collection process.

However, since the latter half of the 2000s, there has been a growing interest in the study of, not only English signs, but also multilingual signs in the LL. Backhaus (2007) contributed to this arena of research through an extensive empirical investigation of multilingual signs in Tokyo. He distinguished between official and non-official multilingual signs, with official signs being those established by governmental bodies, while non-official signs being those used to express solidarity. Ultimately, Backhaus came to the conclusion that the multilingual LL of Tokyo was influenced more by its citizens than by the authorities, after noting that 75% of signs were not official. In the same fashion, Ben-Rafael et al. (2006) sought to distinguish between private and official signs in the LL of three Israeli cities. They classified signs established by public authorities e.g., public entities and government, as public; while signs by private parties e.g., associations, were deemed private.

Recently, there has been an expanding body of comparative studies in LL, which brought to the field new perspectives and discoveries. Barni and Bagna (2010), for instance, looked into numerous cities in Italy, including its capital, Rome, Arezzo, Ferrara, Florence, Monterotondo, and Prato. Their study compared the “language presence and vitality” in these areas and inspected the factors that shape the LL in each place, with a focus on languages such as Chinese, Romanian, Russian, and Ukrainian. Likewise, across various countries in Europe, Grbavac et al.’s (2015) compared the LL of two cities—Leuven in Belgium, and Mostar in Bosnia and Herzegovina. As the two places are both “multicultural” and “multilingual” with “dysbalanced political contexts”, the authors aimed to determine whether any language similarities exist between them.

In the field of LL research, the conventional and most widely adopted methodology involves the systematic quantitative sampling of a large number of photographs taken along a main street. Notable scholars such as Cenoz and Gorter (2003) and Backhaus (2007) have followed this approach, where all visible signage in the selected street, regardless of their size, were captured while non-fixed objects such as advertisements on buses, taxis, and passerby clothes were excluded. That being said, some scholars have criticized, or raised concerns over this approach as they believed mobile and non-static texts ought to be included in the analysis, that moving objects constitute a significant subset of the LL. As a result, recent studies have begun to

incorporate these non-static texts in their data collection process, as can be seen in the works of Valijarvi and Kahn (2018) and Begum and Sinha (2021).

Yet and still, only a limited number of case studies have specifically examined Hong Kong's LL. One such study was carried out by Jaworski and Yeung (2010), who collected data in 2007 from eight sites across Hong Kong with substantial socio-economic disparities. These districts include Mongkok, Tsuen Wan, Sai Wan, Shatin Heights, University, Mid-levels, Kowloon Tong, and Victoria Peak. The study focused solely on residential signage and undertook an exploration of the use English, Chinese, and other foreign languages in names of residential buildings. Perhaps quite similarly, Finzel (2012) as well took a comparative approach to study the commercial signage in Shek Tong Tsui and Wan Chai. By using a rent index to determine the economic composition of the two sites, Finzel delved into the correlation between linguistic competence of the inhabitants and the presence of English signs in their neighborhood. However, it should be noted that this research had limitations, that is, a focus on only "shop signs", and a bias towards the prevalence of English language. Another study by Lai (2013) reviewed the extent of the PRC's influence on Hong Kong's LL after 12 years of sovereignty change. An astonishing 1160 visual signs in open public spaces in four selected areas (i.e., Central, Tsim Sha Tsui, Mongkok, Sheungshui) were analyzed. The author ended the paper by discussing China's influence in the form of simplified Chinese and Mandarin transliteration.

LL studies have been conducted for over 40 years, but it was not until the last decade, with the rise of digital cameras and smart phones, that a growing number of began to provide more insights into this field. Nevertheless, Hong Kong has not been the center of much holistic work, with roughly 20 studies officially published so far. The scarcity in the literature of HK's LL, thereafter, underscores the importance of this study. On top of that, existing studies tend to focus on urban areas, particularly the capital or central cities, thereby overlooking the rural regions. Besides, sites like Central, Tsim Sha Tsui, and Sheung Shui have been thoroughly studied— this paper aims to fill the research gap by exploring the LL of previously unexplored districts like Discovery Bay and Tin Shui Wai. In Section 4, I will provide background information on HK and these districts.

## **4. A SOCIO-HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF HONG KONG**

### ***4.1 – 1841-1997 – The Colonial Legacy: How British Rule Shaped Hong Kong***

Hong Kong's linguistic scenery is indeed influenced by its colonial past. The use of English as an instrument of colonialist subjugation has been deeply entrenched in Hong Kong as the British had ruled the city for over 150 years before China's resumption of sovereignty in 1997 (Carroll, 2007). During this time, English was extensively employed across all spectrums to facilitate communication including government and business domains. Hong Kong transformed from a humble fishing village to a prosperous city through investments made by the British colony in transportation system and infrastructure, which gradually merged with the pre-existing Canton culture to create a unique linguistic hybrid. This swift economic advancement paved the way to a proliferation in population, attracting individuals from China and other Asian countries who sought out "employment opportunities" (Mok, 2021).

Hong Kong today is a thriving metropolis with over 7.4 million inhabitants (Census and Statistics Department HKSAR, 2021), having one of the highest population densities in the world (Worldometers, 2023). The city's diverse demographics is a consequence of its colonial history and the subsequent international connections, which has resulted in a considerable number of speakers of different languages including Indonesian, Tagalog, Hindi, and Nepalese. Indeed, having a total of 619,568 ethnic minorities, the expatriate community constitutes up to 8.4% of the whole population in Hong Kong (Census and Statistics Department HKSAR, 2021).

### ***4.2 –1997 Onwards – A Gateway to China: The Unique Geography of Hong Kong***

Hong Kong is situated on the southeastern coast of China; due to its strategic location, it has been a gateway for China to intermediate financial investment and trading with other countries. The 1997 handover and the continuous integration with the PRC, has led to the growing prevalence Mandarin Chinese and Simplified Chinese in the city.

The phenomenon is salient in various aspects of institutional land use, for instance, Mandarin announcements can be heard alongside Cantonese and English in the MTR

(Mass Transit Railway) stations, trains, and buses. To top it off, in 2012, the Hong Kong government mandated that all bureau and department websites “should be available not only in traditional Chinese and English, but also in Simplified Chinese” (OGCIO), further contributing to the linguistic hegemony of this dominant language. The linguistic shift has also led to the adoption of Mandarin-based transliteration in Hong Kong (Lai, 2013), as demonstrated by the rebranding of *Pokémon* from the Cantonese name 寵物小精靈 (trans: the pet elf) to the Mandarin-inclined pronunciation 寶可夢 (Mandarin: Bǎo kě mèng; Cantonese: [bou2 ho2 mung6]). These linguistic transformations illuminate the every-changing nature of the linguistic landscape of Hong Kong.

#### ***4.3 Bridging the Language Divide: Hong Kong’s language policy***

Although Hong Kong is now a Special Administrative Region under the People’s Republic of China, its colonial past nevertheless remains a crucial part of its scenery. Indeed, the widespread usage and instruction of English as a second language in high schools and universities is evidence of the colonialism’s legacy, as are the city’s architecture, educational system, and language policies.

To “sustain the city’s competitive edge” and to “enhance our role in fostering exchange and stronger ties with Great China”, the government of Hong Kong introduced the “Biliteracy and Trilingualism” policy in 1997 (Education Bureau, 2014). Specifically, “Biliteracy” refers to the ability of individuals to **read** and **write** in two languages with proficiency, namely standard written Chinese and English. “Trilingualism”, on the other hand, highlights the fluency in **listening** and **speaking** three languages: colloquial Cantonese, English, and Putonghua). Eventually, this policy aims to equip postcolonial generations with the necessary linguistic competence in terms of input comprehension and output production.

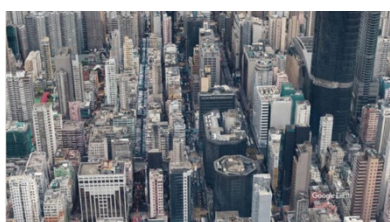
Empirical evidence shows that the “Biliteracy and Trilingualism” policy has been successful in promoting second language acquisition in Hong Kong. A study by Wang and Kirkpatrick (2015) discovered that almost half of schools in Hong Kong, specifically 41.92%, use Putonghua as the Medium of Instruction (MoI) in the Chinese curriculum. In addition, 96.13% of schools offer Mandarin subjects. So far, English is used as the medium of instruction for all other subjects in 30% of high schools, which translates to 114 schools.



Furthermore, the policy can foster learners' sense of national identity and belonging as they view their multilingual ability with pride or as a form of distinction (Wong, 2017).

## **5. BACKGROUND OF DISTRICTS IN HONG KONG**

In order to provide a comprehensive understanding of the districts, it is vital to delve into their respective backgrounds. The three districts showcase diverse landscapes—from urban to suburban to rural— they present an intricate blend of cultural influences, each with a distinct sociolinguistic profile. It is crucial to analyze these contrasting settings as they reflect how language practice and language attitudes differ among different type of communities with varying social, cultural, and economic backgrounds.



Urban area: Mongkok



Suburban area: Tin Shui Wai



Rural area: Discovery Bay

### **5.1 MONGKOK**

In one of Hong Kong's busiest retail cores, Mongkok, Chung and Chan (2011) conducted a fieldwork study and noted that the district is famous for its vibrant street markets and local shopping areas, featuring small booths, boutiques, and non-chain cube shops stocked with affordable cosmetics, trendy fashion goods, electronic products, and various other inexpensive items. In addition to the local commodities, Mongkok, especially in Sino Centre and Argyle Centre, as well offers a wide range of Japanese anime products, music CDs, and K-pop merchandise which "cater to the specific needs of teenage consumers" (Chow et al., 2016). Moreover, Wong and Lee (2021) commented that apparel shops in Mongkok began selling the Japanese Lolita dress and accessories, further reflecting the district's obsession with Asian culture. Much like Akihabara in Japan, Mongkok is a hotspot for ACG fans, boasting various entertainment options such as cinemas, karaoke bars, and arcade centers that enhance its appeal.

### **5.2 TIN SHUI WAI**

Tin Shui Wai plunges us into the different world of social issues, including "poverty", "youth gang", "crime", and "mental health" problems (Tsang & Chu, 2007; Shuiyang et al.,

2021). Most recently, the government began to revitalize and optimize the district's public facilities and infrastructure. Built in the 80s to alleviate housing problem and overcrowded households, Tin Shui Wai is a new town in the New Territories of Hong Kong along China's southern border. In Kan's paper (2022), it is indicated that a large proportion of the residents in TSW are low-income families who have migrated to Hong Kong from Mainland in the early 2000s to take advantage of the new high-rise "public rental housing estates" and "subsidized homeownership housing". This immigration wave has created not only an isolated community, but also sparked conflicts and tensions with other local residents who believe that their way of life has been disrupted (Yip, 2022). As a result, the district has a rather distinctive social environment and atmosphere that differ from other places in Hong Kong.

### **5.3 DISCOVERY BAY**

A far cry from the two selected sites, Discovery Bay is a wealthy recreational area located on Lantau Island, one of the outlying islands of Hong Kong that can be accessed through ferry (See Figure 2). Since the district is largely car-free, dwellers mostly rely on golf carts and bikes to move around; its scenic surroundings, sandy beach and serene hiking trails has made it a popular destination for tourism (Lee & Leung, 2018). It is also known for having a higher proportion of English-speaking denizens and Caucasian because such residential oasis is well liked among foreigners (Forrest et al., 2004). The different cuisine served on the island provides a glimpse into the area's linguistic variety—from Italian and French to Spanish and Thai. Besides, the buildings and houses on the island are all built in the English style with red-tiled roofs and balconies (See Figure 1), giving DB a isolated but distinct colonial feel.



**FIGURE 1** – photo taken on Discovery Bay, showing the western-style architecture

## **6. HYPOTHESES**

As this paper delves into the linguistic landscape of these sites, certain patterns of variability can be anticipated in relation to the research questions at hand. Given MK's remarkable concentration of Japanese otaku collectibles and Korean music fandom products, it is highly likely that I will encounter a diverse range of languages and scripts like Japanese and Korean in the LL of Mongkok—those that may not be prevalent in other areas. Additionally, as a local trade center, Mongkok is also expected to showcase a profusion of Cantonese signage, whereas the presence of Simplified Chinese may be scarce. Juxtaposing MK and DB, in TSW, I expect to see a predominance of Chinese signage, likely in Simplified Chinese, with a lesser presence of Cantonese and English. This is due to its proximity to the mainland border and the large number of Chinese inhabitants.

Research questions	Expected outcomes on language prominence	Expected outcomes on English signage	Expected outcomes on Cantonese signage	Expected outcomes on Simplified Chinese signage
Japanese influence (Represented by MK)	Japanese and Korean	Less visible	More visible	Less visible
Proximity to China (Represented by TSW)	Chinese	Less visible	Less visible	More visible
Status as a tourist hub (Represented by DB)	English + minority languages	More visible	Less visible	Less visible

Furthermore, it is hypothesized that foreign languages may not be widespread in TSW

owing to the district's socioeconomically disadvantaged population, which presumably has lower level of education and language proficiency. Lastly, given DB's status as a tourist hub and a Caucasian community, my assumption is that English will be the most prominent language and that Chinese signages may be the least prevalent among 3 selected sites. Apart from that, based on the large variety of restaurants in DB, I anticipate a multilingual LL in the area with many minority languages present in menus and banners. Due to its far-away location from the urban city, I hypothesize that it is unlikely to see significant usage of Simplified Chinese and Cantonese in the LL of DB.

**TABLE 1** – Summary of the hypotheses related to the research questions

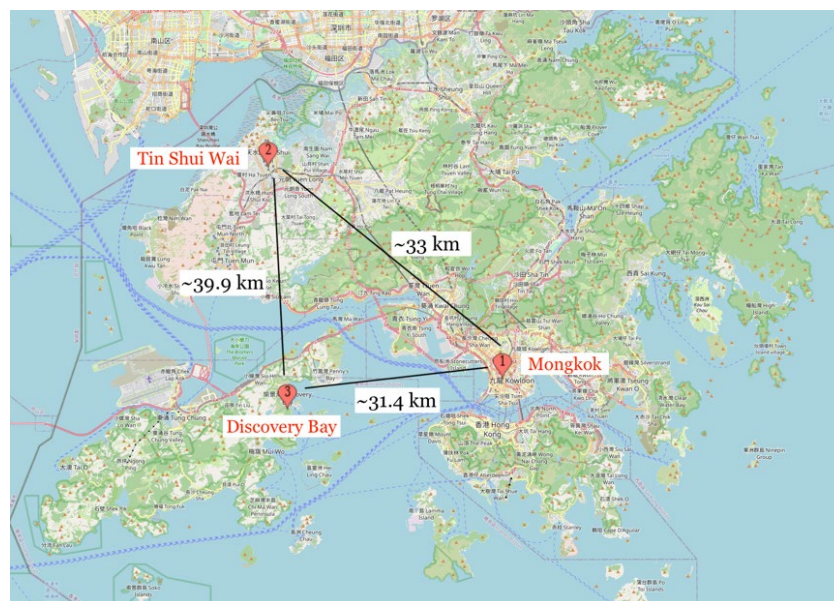
## **7. METHODOLOGY**

In general, a quantitative approach was adopted for data collection in this investigation. Three fieldworks were carried out between February and March 2023 in Tong Choi Street (MK), Tin Yiu Street and Tin Yan Street (TSW), and Plaza Lane (DB), during which photos of signs displayed in public places were taken. To ensure fairness, the data collection process involved randomization, that is, (1) the streets selected, and (2) the type of sign recorded in each store were all randomly chosen. For instance, I randomly picked streets from a comprehensive list of all the streets in each of the three areas.

### **7.1 Data Collection**

For the empirical data collection, instead of photographing *all* visible linguistic objects like other scholars do (Cenoz & Gorter, 2006), a deliberate decision was made to take only **one photo per store**. Additional photos were also taken of random signs on streets that did not belong to any store. This method was chosen for several reasons. Firstly, in the context of LL, the aim is to fully capture or depict the panorama of linguistic diversity in a certain area. Taking multiple photos of the same store can result in over-representation of a particular language or script, which may distort the overall view of the LL. Such potential bias could be mitigated by simply taking one picture each store. The decision was also based on the Backhaus' (2007) assumption that linguistic objects within a single store are likely to be similar. Hence, this approach not only ensures the LL captured in the sample is not compromised, but also keeps the database simple and manageable.

In sum, this study covered a total of 4 streets in 3 areas and collected 327 photographic pieces of evidence. My research encompasses an analysis of both top-down signs posted by governmental bodies and bottom-up signs produced by individuals or small local businesses (Backhaus, 2007). A diverse data sample was used with a variety of sign types such as shop names, buildings names, commercial billboards, price tags, graffiti, traffic signs, road signs, public notices, map stands, banners, pull-up banners, murals, and handwritten stickers on lamp posts. Moving signs like advertisements on private vehicles and thrown-away wrappers and boxes were too counted. In accordance with the data collection frameworks proposed by other researchers (Lai, 2013), signs that were “visually unclear”, displayed no texts or words, duplications of another recorded sign in the same street, or way above the ground level (e.g., on the second floor) were excluded from the study. These restrictions allowed data collection to remain consistent, controllable, and fair.



**FIGURE 2** – Map of Hong Kong with the three sites pinned

## 7.2 Data Coding

In analyzing the data, a systematic data coding process was carried out using Excel spreadsheet. Generally, I used a matrix with three categories to classify the investigated streets – “level of Japanese influence”, “proximity to the mainland”, and “status as a foreign tourist hub”. Then, each picture / sign will be coded according to several parameters namely, the presence of languages (Chinese, English, Japanese, Korean, and

other languages), the presence of Simplified Chinese, and the presence of Cantonese. The coding process as well considered whether the sign was monolingual, bilingual, or multilingual. Another parameter that will be recorded is which language is on top and at the bottom of the sign, thence, monolingual signage or signage with single-line text design were not coded e.g., Figure 3. Furthermore, the relative size of English texts to non-English languages was also recorded. Yet, it would be irresponsible for me not to address that no specific tool or instrument was used in this study to measure the font size. Rather, the writer assessed and evaluated it visually. Although prior studies have used this method and found it to be reliable (Landry & Bourhis, 1997; Ben-Rafael et al., 2006), there is a chance that some subjectivity may have been involved in the assessment. Therefore, this limitation must be acknowledged before interpreting the findings of the study



**FIGURE 3** – Signage with single-line text design was not coded

## **8. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

### **8.1 The General Pattern**

In this study, I aim to explore the LL of three different districts and compare the patterns of language use in each. Before delving into the comparison, as to the primary research objective regarding the panorama the LL in all three districts, this section will first present a comprehensive and overall view of the LL in all three districts, including the potential factors that shape the LL.

Type of signs	Number of signs
Monolingual	99 (30.3%)
Chinese only	57 (17.4%)
English only	36 (11.0%)
Other languages	6 (1.8%)
Bilingual	188 (57.5%)
Multilingual	40 (12.2%)
Total	327 (100%)

**TABLE 2** – the distribution of monolingual, bilingual, and multilingual signs

Table 2 illustrates a breakdown of the distribution of monolingual, bilingual, and multilingual signs in the LL of Hong Kong. Surprisingly, bilingual signs, with most of them being government-related posters and notices, constitute the majority (188, 57.5%) and account for more than half of all signs. Backhaus (2006) observes that bilingualism is common in official signs due to the need for “mutual translations” in both English and Chinese. This high proportion of bilingual signs can too be attributed to the previously-noted sizable number of ethnic minorities (619,568) in Hong Kong, who can read the lingua franca English. On the contrary, monolingual signs are rare, comprising just 30.3% of all signs. Among monolingual signs, Chinese-only signs (57, 17.4%) are seen more often than English-only signs (36, 11.0%). Monolingual signs in other foreign languages, such as French, Italian, and Japanese, are rare, occupying only 6 (1.8%) of all signs, which is consistent with the fact that the use of these languages is limited in Hong Kong— only 0.7% people occasionally practice French and there are solely 23K Japanese residents (Consulate General of France in Hong Kong & Macau, 2020; Statista Research Department; 2023). Multilingual signs which display 3 or more languages, follow monolingual signs at a proportion of 12.2%.

The interesting thing to note about all this is that, when comparing these findings to Lai's study conducted in 2009, one can observe a fundamental evolution of the LL of Hong Kong over a decade. Previously, Hong Kong is yet to be a fully globalised city; most signage and notices were printed only in monolingual Chinese to cater to the Chinese readership (see Table 3). However, the majority of signs now shifts towards being bilingual, with this change potentially being attributed to the aforementioned "Biliteracy



and Trilingualism" policy in Section 4, and the proliferation of English proficiency levels. For instance, the proportion of the population that can speak English has increased from 43.9% in 2006 to 51.9% in 2016, as reported by the Census and Statistics Department HKSAR (2016). Besides, the use of multilingual signs shows a 10 times growth over 14 years, soaring from 1.5% to 12.2%. While multilingual signs remain the least frequently used type of sign, their rise can signal inclusivity and cultural openness, making it a desirable option for companies seeking to appeal to a diverse customer base. Many of these signs involve code-mixing at the sentential level to make them look more “international” and attractive (see Figure 4).

Type of signs	Number of signs	Percentage
Monolingual	620	53.4
Bilingual	523	45.1
Multilingual	17	1.5
Total	1160	100

**TABLE 3** – Data in Lai’s (2009) study



**FIGURE 4** – A multilingual spray cleaner advertisement

Overall, the prevalence of bilingual and multilingual signs speaks to Hong Kong’s globalized and cosmopolitan identity, while the predominance of Chinese and English monolingual signs reflect the historical and practical factors that have shaped the city's LL over time. In the following sections, the paper will examine the difference in language



preference in the three districts in two angles: (1) based on the *quantitative data* shown in table, and (2) in terms of the *design and order* of language on the signs.

## 8.2 Comparison of Language Prominence Between MK, TSW, and DB

### 8.2.1 Chinese Signs

In the hypotheses section, I posited that regional variability might exist for code preference among the three districts with varying levels of Japanese influence, proximity to China, and status as a foreign tourist hub.

<i>Language</i>	<i>Chinese</i>	<i>English</i>	<i>Japanese</i>	<i>Korean</i>	<i>Other languages</i>	<i>Total number of signs</i>
<i>Mongkok</i>	118 (93.7%)	95 (75.4%)	20 (15.9%)	3 (2.4%)	10 (7.9%)	126
<i>Tin Shui Wai</i>	101 (100%)	66 (65.3 %)	4 (4%)	0 (0%)	3 (3%)	101
<i>Discovery Bay</i>	48 (48%)	95 (95%)	1 (1%)	1 (1%)	27 (27%)	100

**TABLE 4** – comparison of language prominence in three districts

Chinese is the means of everyday communication in Hong Kong, but its presence in the cityscape may vary across sites. In Table 4, a clear and consistent pattern of change emerges from the data: the closer an area is to the mainland border, the higher the prominence of Chinese signs. Upon closer inspection, the distances between Tin Shui Wai, Mongkok, and Discovery to Shenzhen (China) are 10.8 km, 27.2 km, and 28.3 km, respectively. This reveals that the district nearest to China, Tin Shui Wai, displays a statistically significant preference for Chinese signs, with an astonishing **100%** of its signs containing Chinese words. Being a neighboring area to China, TSW is one of the best places for new arrivals and immigrants to settle. This is related to the migration networks theory which suggests that people are more likely to relocate to areas where social networks or connections with family and friends have already been established: the transition might be made easier since people are more at ease and familiar with the cultures and languages of nearby places (Yesevi, 2020). Hence, 58% of TSW's population come from Hong Kong and 38.1% from the mainland (Centamap, 2016). In other words, Chinese ethnicity comprises of 96% of the demographics in TSW. Consequently, TSW may necessitate the use of language on visual signs in street to meet the needs Chinese-reading pedestrians.

On the other hand, in DB, Chinese occurrence is exceedingly infrequent, with less than half of the signs (48, 48%) using Chinese language code. This may be due to its geographical location, as it is the furthest away from Shenzhen and is located on an island. Besides, this perhaps related to the status of DB as more of a tourist hotspot and expat community; Chinese signs would not be practical there as they are incomprehensible for Caucasian. Mongkok, although not close to the mainland border, still has a significant preference for Chinese signage (118, 93.7%). Owing to the district's background as a shopping center where mostly local transactions take place; it is in the interest of businesses in MK to have Chinese signage to cater to the needs of their clients.

In essence, the findings demonstrate that proximity to China, especially that it gives rise to more Chinese immigrants, plays a vital role in shaping code preference for Chinese in Hong Kong's LL, and thus confirming my hypothesis. Additionally, my analysis highlights the importance of considering various factors such as demographics and commercial activities when examining the LL of different sites.

### **8.2.2 English Signs**

Table 4 displays the varying degree of English language prominence across the three districts. DB has the highest percentage of English signage at 95% (95), followed by Mongkok at 75.4% (95) and Tin Shui Wai at 65.3% (66).

The concentration of English signage in DB can be attributed to its status as a tourist hub, DB attracts sightseers from various nationalities, including England, Korea, Japan, the mainland and Hong Kong, which justifies the use of English signage for practical communication purposes. For instance, Figure 5 shows a renovation notice from a restaurant written in pure English, informing potential customers about the reopening date and contact information. Clearly, English signs' function in DB is merely instrumental, aimed at targeting English-literate travellers and residents.



**FIGURE 5** – a renovation notice from a restaurant in DB

Interestingly, MK and TSW—which are not necessarily tourist hotspots—still have a considerable amount of English signage (roughly three-quarters of all signs). While official government signs that provide mutual translations in Chinese and English contribute to such phenomenon, other reasons such as the “fashionability factor” must not be overlooked. In fact, English serves as a stylistic semiotic resource constructing another style of “westernization, modernization, success” and is considered a “potent signifier of class distinction” (Gorter & Cenoz, 2008; Manan et al., 2017). Symbolizing elitism and the upper class, English expressions are frequently used on billboards of retail centers and condominiums to attract the attention of customers, as seen in the store names *Witty Commercial Building*, *Hung Kwong Shopping Arcade*, *Universe Optical* in MK, and *Like Fresh*, *Power City* in TSW. This trend reflects the use of English as a marketable medium in such a way that Manan’s (2017) paper pointed out:

an owner of a famous bakery shop suggested that he chose an English name because his target was mainly the rich and sophisticated class of people who in his views, were inclined towards modernity and were impressed by brands.

In the present study, the same kind of stereotype (or what Rosenbaum et al. (1977) called “snob appeal”), can be observed, whereby upscale English names are employed for economic reasons to boost business profitability in MK and TSW. Take for example Figure 6, where a dessert shop in MK named 滿堂 used the English name *My Wish Dessert Shop* in the outside sign for promotional purpose so that it can, as Hall (1997) put it, “go global and local in the same moment”. In much a same way, Figure 7, an apartment complex in TSW named 景湖居 (trans: lake-view house) used the non-equivalent English part

*Kenswood Court* to project an aesthetic image of its brand. This grants 景湖居 an aura of embellishment and affluence that is exclusively associated with high-end residential housing. After all, the function of English language in these instances is simply “ornamental rather than communicative”; it serves to add a sense of sophistication, rather than specifically targeting English-reading consumers (Brock, 1991). Therefore, certain enterprises opt to use a foreign name to represent their label, whilst details regarding their services are mainly in the local language (Lai, 2007). As presented in figure 8, the real estate company SOLO uses an English name but provides information about their apartments for rent and the address in Chinese. In such cases, English serves as a symbol rather than designated for the Caucasian community and English readers (Shang & Xie, 2020).



**FIGURE 6** – A sign in MK with brand name written in both Chinese and English



**FIGURE 7** – An apartment name in TSW having an English non-equivalent



**FIGURE 8** – Company name written in English but details in Chinese

### 8.2.3 Japanese and Korean Signage

Drawing from the collected data in Table 4, the usage of Japanese signs in the three districts of Hong Kong varies to a certain extent. 20 Japanese signs were found in MK, making up 15.9% of all the signage surveyed there. This contrasts with TSW, where only 4% (4) of the signs are in Japanese, and DB, which had the lowest percentage of Japanese signs at 1% (1).

In Section 5, it was noted that MK is the centre of Japanese products, thereby creating a higher demand for Japanese language services. For this reason, there are likely to be more Japanese monolingual signs in this district, for example, Figure 9 showcases an *Izakaya* (tavern) signboard that features a Japanese calligraphy written in a combination of two Japanese scripts: *Kanji* (highlighted in yellow) and *Hiragana* (in green) to attract customers interested in Japanese cuisine. Furthermore, even bilingual or multilingual signs in MK manage to take Japanese as the matrix language when code-switching, as demonstrated in Figure 10. The poster in this photograph utilizes Japanese consistently as the primary base language, with a few English lexicons such as *AMUFUN*, *amuse*, *HP*, *YouTube*, and *OK* interspersed within the sentences. This indicates that



Japanese is the preferred language choice in MK since the intended audience comprises of avid consumers of Japanese culture.



**FIGURE 9** – monolingual signboard in Japanese in MK



**FIGURE 10** – Poster in MK having Japanese as matrix language and English the code-switched

In fact, one might legitimately raise question of whether Japanese influence is an important factor at all, given that Japanese signs in MK only accounts for 15%. To answer this question, a CHI-squared test was employed. It is frequently used as a statistical method to determine if there is a significant association between two categorical variables in an objective manner (Ugoni & Walker, 1995). The current test revealed a small p-value (0.00001), meaning the observed relationship between the two variables is *unlikely* to have occurred by chance. This finding (summarized in the contingency table

below), thus corroborates earlier claim that there is a great tendency for Japanese signs ( $p < 0.05$ ), in areas with Japanese cultural influence.

	Japanese signs	Non-japanese signs	Marginal Row Totals
Area with Japanese influence	20 (9.63) [11.16]	106 (116.37) [0.92]	126
Area with no Japanese influence	5 (15.37) [6.99]	196 (185.63) [0.58]	201
Marginal Column Totals	25	302	327 (Grand Total)

**TABLE 5** – the number of Japanese signs in places with and without Japanese influence

Despite the above, when analysing the prevalence of Japanese signs in TSW and DB, it became evident the “prestigious effect” associated with the Japanese language must also be considered in shaping the LL of Hong Kong. Although Japanese cultural influence may be minimal in sites like TSW and DB, Japanese signs are still present. It is because Japanese is a “high-status culinary language”: the mere “visual presence” of the Japanese language, regardless of what it means, already denotes style, fame, quality and luxury (Jurafsky et al., 2016). For example, in Figure 11 (TSW), the chain bakery 東海堂, which has no connection to Japan other than the use of Japanese imported fruits in their cakes, has a Japanese name アローム (Arome) on its signboard. This stems from the fact that “made in Japan” is an indicator of exceptional “product quality”, “authenticity”, and “healthiness” for non-Japanese shoppers (Matwick & Matwick, 2019). Another example in Figure 12 shows a store 魚尚 in TSW advertising in both Chinese and Japanese. Ironically, it is not a Japanese store; it too belongs to Maxim's Caterers, the same Hong Kong-based company that owns 東海堂. In contrast to MK's Japanese signs, the signs in TSW used Chinese as the matrix language and employed fragmented linguistic items when code-switching to Japanese, such as the nominalizer の and adjectival phrases like ジャンボ 美味しい (trans: jumbo yummy) in Figure 12. Such visibility is due to the prestigious connotation and product assurance that the language carries.



**FIGURE 11** – A bakery 東海堂 in TSW using a Japanese name



**FIGURE 12** – An advertisement using Chinese as the base language while Japanese code-switched in TSW

In contrast, the results indicate that Korean signs are almost non-existent in TSW (0%) and DB (1, 1%), while in MK, they only account for a mere 2.4% (3) of the total signs observed. These statistics not only highlight the marginalization of Korean language in Hong Kong, reflecting its relatively small community size, but also refutes my initial hypothesis and expected outcome that Korean would be prevalent in MK's LL due to the



popularity of K-pop culture (see Table 1). The scarcity of Korean signage in the selected districts could stem from the predominance of Chinese and English. This verifies that the impact of K-pop plays a relatively minor role in this context.

Besides, MK as a hub for both J-pop and K-pop culture raises the question of why Korean signs is just not as prominent— one possible explanation might be that the Japanese writing system, which includes the use of *Kanji* characters, shares similarities with Chinese *Hanzi*. This allows for a considerable degree of mutually intelligible between the two languages (Tsou & Kwong, 2011). And in so, *Kanji* can be used while still being understood by pedestrians. The Korean writing system, *Hangul*, on the flip side, does not have any resemblance to Chinese characters at all, making it less accessible to Hong Kong readers and thus less frequently used on signs (see Table 6).

Japanese <i>Kanji</i>	Chinese <i>Hanzi</i>	Korean <i>Hangul</i>
戦	戰	
歩	步	
毎	每	

**TABLE 6** – Difference between the Japanese, Chinese and Korean writing systems

#### 8.2.4 Signage in Other Foreign Languages

As mentioned above, usage of European-language signage adopted by shops and restaurants may not necessarily reflect the origins of the owners or their products. Foreign-name branding, much like Japanese-name branding, may not aim to build a rapport with the relevant language groups, but rather to obtain the prestige associated with the languages. This linguistic phenomenon is evident in all three districts, for example, *Café de Coral* in MK, *7Café* in TSW, and *Salon de Coiffure* in DB do not have any direct link to either France or French language. In reality, *Café de Coral* is a fast-food restaurant founded in Hong Kong that specializes in Chinese cuisine, while *7Café* is, according to their website, a convenient store selling instant coffee “using coffee beans sourced from Brazil, Honduras and Indonesia”. Similarly, *Salon de Coiffure* does not offer French hair care products, nor is it owned by any French person. This testifies that the function of signage in European languages may primarily serve to convey symbolic

meaning instead of providing useful information, particularly since French language connotes concepts such as “quality of life”, “wealth”, “high culture”, “good taste”, and “well-being” (Landry & Bourhis, 1997; Jaworski & Yeung, 2010; Bagna & Machetti, 2012).

To top it off, many buildings as well utilised European-language branding— in DB, for instance, the road sign shown in Figure 13 displays the complementarily translated name of 香港愉景灣酒店 as *Auberge Discover Bay HK*, with the French word *Auberge* (trans: inn) chosen over the simpler English form *Hotel*. This is because the exotic “Frenchness” represents “foreign and therefore different and therefore better” (Tufi & Blackwood, 2016). As such, while the audience may not fully comprehend the intended meaning behind such expression, what is crucial is not the content itself but rather the presence of it that can evoke image of a distant continent of baguettes and wine, and “a certain exoticism” (Bogatto & Hélot, 2010; Kelly-Holmes, 2000).



**FIGURE 13** – A road sign containing French in DB

This type of foreign language advertising signs is not uncommon, as Table 4 demonstrates, within MK, a total of 10 signs (approximately 7.9%) contain minority

languages including French (n =2), Vietnamese (n =2), Italian (n =1), Turkish (n =1), Thai (n =1), Hindi (n =1), Danish (n =1). TSW features foreign languages in 3% of signs. One can observe a notable disparity in the use of foreign languages in DB, where 27 out of 100 signs are mostly in French (n =9), Italian (n =7), and Spanish (n =5). The language usage patterns in these regions may differ owing to the fact that DB is a major tourist destination: given the cultural diversity and varying linguistic repertoire of its visitors, signs are offered in multiple languages to accommodate them. Additionally, these signs may provide a sense of comfort and familiarity for some individuals reading their native language. The high proportion of foreign language signs in DB reinforces my hypothesis that linguistic diversity is more pronounced in tourist hubs like DB than in non-tourist areas.

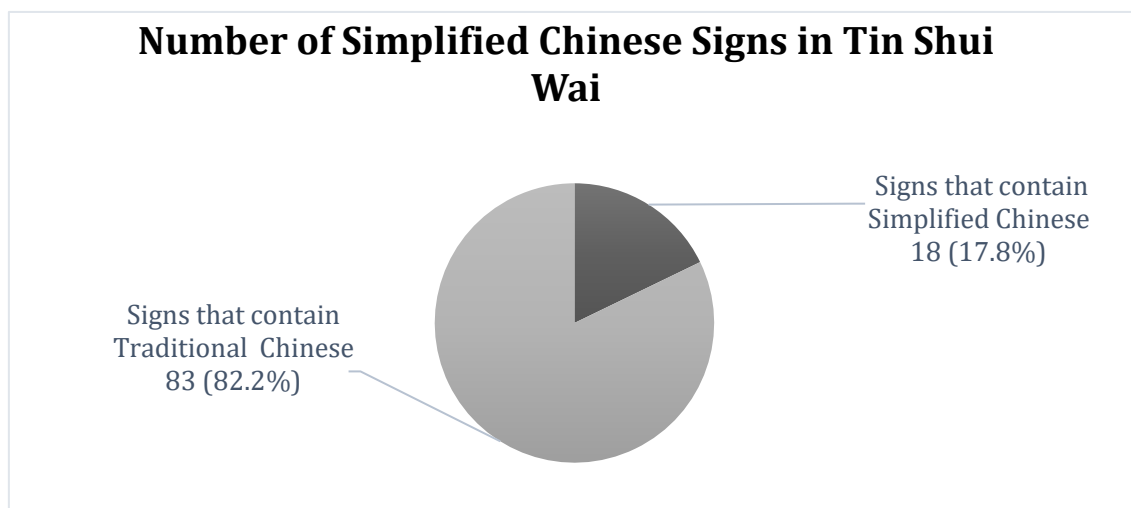
### 8.2.5 *Simplified Chinese Signs*

It is worth acknowledging that a major difference between Hong Kong and China lies in the fact that Hong Kongers read and write in Traditional Chinese whereas Chinese people do so in Simplified ones (McBride-Chang et al., 2005). To clarify, Simplified Chinese is Traditional Chinese, but with the complex structure simplified through eliminating some strokes and radicals (Liu et al., 2016). The table below compares the two scripts using the characters of Simplified Chinese extracted from the photos taken:

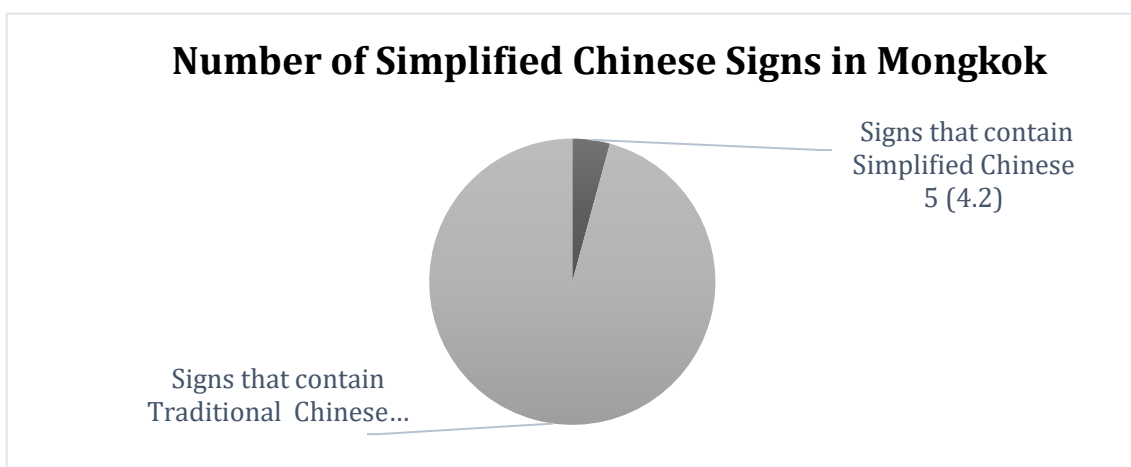
Traditional	Simplified	English
曬	晒	Sunbath
寶	宝	Baby
煙	烟	Smoked
膽	胆	Courage
潤	润	Moisturize

**TABLE 7** – A comparison between Traditional and Simplified Chinese characters

In this section, I will provide an analysis of the prevalence of Simplified Chinese characters in Hong Kong, with a focus on its increasing frequency in relation to proximity to mainland China. The statistical data presented in Figure 14 entails a higher incidence of Simplified Chinese characters in TSW, one of the closest districts to mainland China—among 101 signs that contain solely or partly Chinese, 83 were found to be in Traditional Chinese and 18 signs (17.8%) are in Simplified Chinese characters. Following TSW is MK (see Figure 15), which is located slightly further away from China’s border. MK’s LL exhibited a relatively lower prevalence of Simplified Chinese characters, as only 5 (4.2%) signs contained such characters. The stark contrast in the prevalence of Simplified Chinese characters can be seen in DB, a faraway and relatively alienated island distant from Shenzhen, where not even a single Simplified character could be found among the 48 Chinese signs analyzed (see Figure 16). On a more general note, out of all 267 sample Chinese signs across all districts, 23 were found to be in Simplified script.



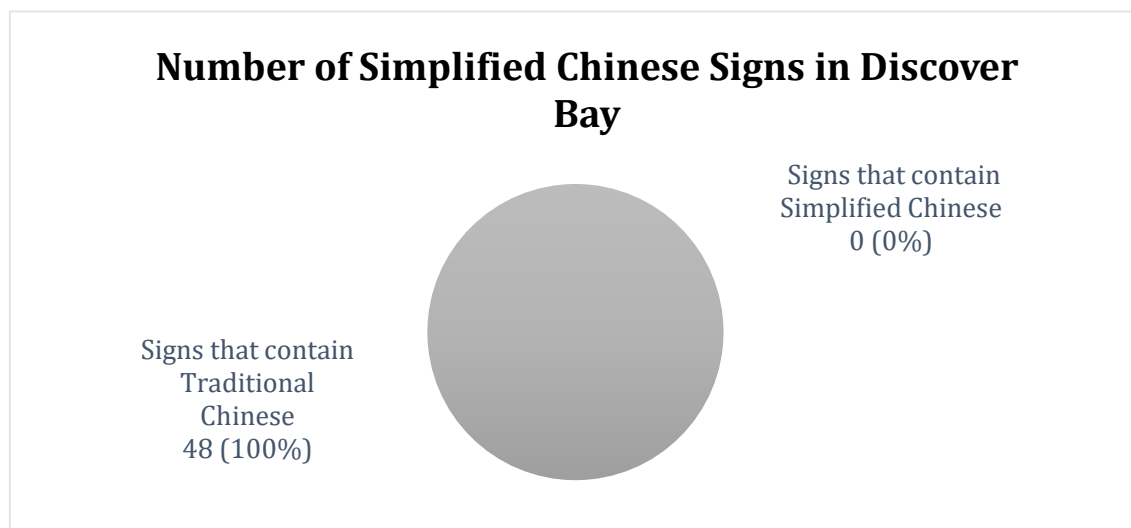
**FIGURE 14**



**FIGRUE 15**

**FIGURE 16**

These findings suggest that the use of Simplified Chinese characters in Hong Kong is largely influenced by geographical proximity to mainland China and the subsequent immigration factor. According to the accommodation theory, the high influx of Chinese immigrants and tourists in TSW who are accustomed to using Simplified Chinese justifies the need for this script in this area. The theory posits that individuals adjust their language use, including register and communication style, to match the linguistic



preferences of their target audience. It is worth-noting that Graddol & Danielewicz-Betz (2015) argue that in districts where mainlanders and parallel traders often gather, there are often Simplified-Chinese signs that prohibit or warn against impolite faux pas such as spitting,

public, disorderly queue phenomenon is supported by reports and news



urinating in jaywalking, etc. This in fact numerous articles

(Levin, 2013; Wong, 2013), and even the former commerce secretary of Hong Kong has called for educating Chinese visitors on proper social etiquette and civilized manners (Lai, 2014). This is evident in TSW—a pet fish shop has a warning sign on their aquarium that reads, “I am timid, please don’t scare me” (Figure 17). This label was written in Simplified

Chinese to cater to the target audience of mainlanders. What can be infer from these is that, unlike the cases of Japanese and French, the use of Simplified scripts in neighboring districts of China is indeed for communication purposes rather than for aesthetic reasons.

**FIGURE 17** – A warning sign on a fish tank in Simplified script

Upon conducting this research, it was initially believed that proximity to China was the primary factor for the prevalence of Simplified Chinese characters in Hong Kong. However, an additional reason was discovered—its efficiency. According to Table 7, Simplified characters are, as its name implies, indeed simpler and easier to write with “approximately 22.5% fewer strokes than traditional characters” (Gao & Kao, 2002). Gunde (2002) too contends that writing in Simplified script is quicker than the reverse process. For instance, the price tag of 紐西蘭 金奇異果 (trans: New Zealand Golden Kiwifruit) in Figure 18 has its Traditional character 蘭 (21 strokes) replaced by the Simplified 兰 (5 strokes) to save time. In much a same way as using abbreviations in English, it circumvents the issue of slow handwriting, particularly in busy wet markets where sellers need to write swiftly to keep up with the demand. My study found out that Simplified characters were predominantly found in wet market stores and Cha chaan teng, further emphasizing its efficiency in such fast-paced environments.

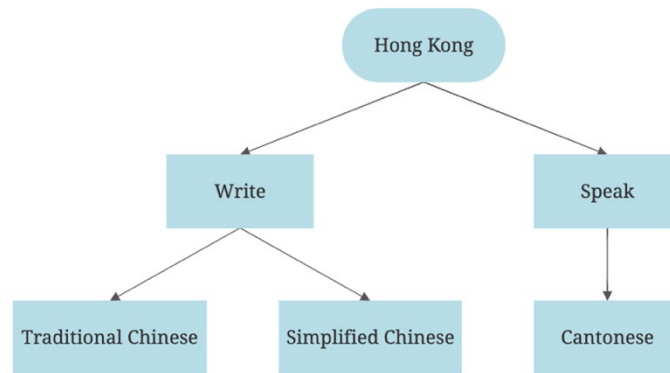
The present study found a higher usage of Simplified Chinese in TSW (17.8%), compared to a mere 2.5% in another northern district, Sheungshui, as reported in Lai’s 2009 study. Apparently, there is a marked increase in the use of simplified script in *neighboring districts* of China over the past decade. If this upward trend continues, the use of simplified Chinese in the cityscape of Hong Kong would become more prominent in the foreseeable future. These findings shed light on the constantly-evolving LL in Hong Kong and underscore the pressing need for continued research in this area.



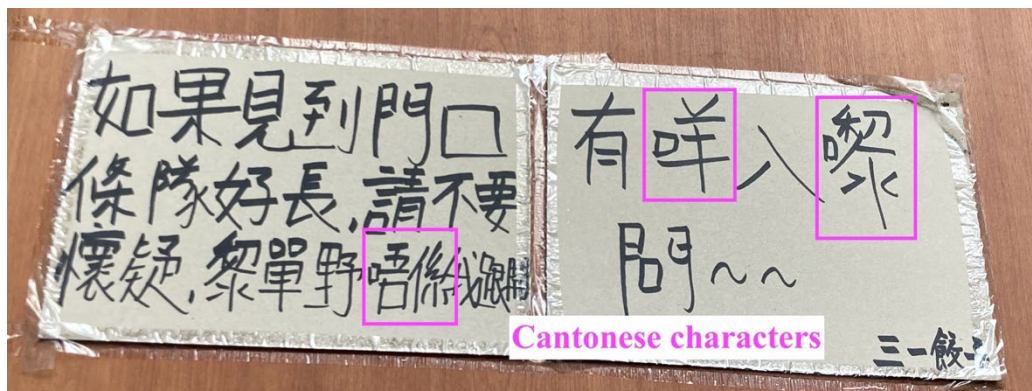
**FIGURE 18** – A price tag in TSW’s wet market using Simplified Chinese character

#### **8.2.6 Cantonese Signs**

Cantonese and the aforementioned Traditional Chinese are two distinct linguistic systems; Traditional Chinese refers solely to the standardized orthographic form of the Chinese language that was used for literary and formal communication (Shang, 2021), while Cantonese is a Sinitic language largely spoken in the Special Administrative Regions of China such as Hong Kong and Macau (De Sousa, 2011). Cantonese has its own distinctive set of phonology, lexicons, and syntactic structures that differentiate it from Mandarin (Luke & Lau, 2008; Zhang & Samuel, 2012). In this study, any signs featuring one character that is exclusively employed in Cantonese will be coded as a Cantonese sign. As an instance, in Figure 20, certain characters such as the negator 唔, copular verb 係, question participle 咩, and intransitive verb 嚟 are not observed in Mandarin or standard Chinese, but are exclusive to Cantonese, thus are classified as a Cantonese sign.



**FIGURE 19** – Writing and speaking system classified in this study



**FIGURE 20** – a sign that includes Cantonese characters

Based on the data presented in Table 8, it appears that my hypothesis that written Cantonese is less visible in tourist hubs like DB holds true, with only 2 signs (2%) displaying colloquial Cantonese words or syntax. However, the hypothesis that Cantonese is more visible in local districts like MK is refuted, as only 12 signs (9.5%) in MK are in Cantonese compared to 9.9% in TSW. These findings suggest that the use of Cantonese in public signage may not necessarily be dictated solely by geographic proximity or tourist vs local districts, and other factors may come into play.

SITES	MONG KOK	TIN SHUI WAI	DISCOVERY BAY
CANTONESE	12 (9.5%)	10 (9.9%)	2 (2%)
TOTAL	126	101	100



**TABLE 8** – Distribution of Cantonese signs in different districts

In fact, the use of written Cantonese in LL is influenced by various factors, such as the level of formality. In Hong Kong, Chinese, with its serious and formal tone, takes precedence in top-down signs, that is, official or government-related signs such as those related to public transportation or public safety. Cantonese, on the other hand, is considered colloquial and sub-standard in academic contexts, hence its use is largely restricted to informal domains in bottom-up signs such as menus, private posters, and advertising billboards (Peng et al., 2023). Additionally, Cantonese can be used to create wordplay that engages the audience in a thought-provoking manner, like in the example of the shop name *Chill Good* of Figure 21 (Lee, 2019). The verb *Chill* denotes literally “relaxation” in English, but interestingly, it is also a transliteration of the colloquial Cantonese adverb 超 [ciu1], which means “super” and hence here, “Super Good”.



**FIGURE 21** – A desert store in MK with a transliteration of Cantonese word

Apart from informality, the use of Cantonese language serves to establish a connection with the local customers by conveying familiarity, solidarity, and rapport (Beh, 2017). According to the consumer theory, consumers make spending decision based on their individual preferences on goods and services (Barten & Böhm, 1982). Thus, retailers who aim to secure the local market may want to use their mother tongue “[they] want to be identified with” to attract potential customers who chooses to as well classify themselves as Hong Kongers (Gorter, 2013). As illustrated in Figure 22, a cafe in MK exemplifies this by being entirely named in Cantonese, which translates to "Brokeass sells coffee". It employs a colloquial curse word “撚” that is often used as a derogatory suffix to describe a person with a particular trait, akin to the suffix *-er* in English. The use of this vulgar Cantonese word can be perceived as an affective strategy that adds a layer of humor and friendliness to the sign, impacting—in a positive way—shoppers' perception and their decision on whether to shop there. Its success is evident in its online popularity (see Figure 23). In essence, the selective use of Cantonese appeals to local Hong Kongers.



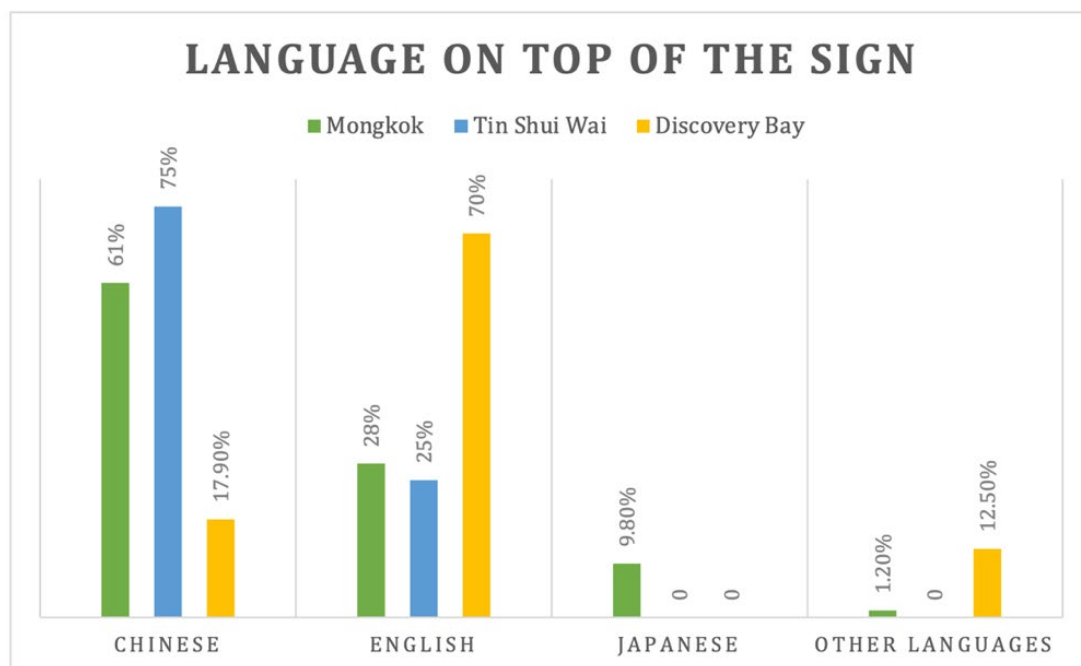
**FIGRUE 22** - A Cantonese sign outside a cafe in MK



**FIGURE 23** – Instagram posts show that the store is popular among Hong Kongers

### ***8.3 Visibility and Order of Languages***

Scollon and Scollon (2003) have proposed another approach to analyze language on signs, referred to as “geosemiotics”. They contend that a number of “principles of layout” determine the order of language appearance on signs (Gorter, 2013). Such principles specified that (1) the preferred code is typically positioned at the **top**, **left**, or **center** area, and (2) the peripheral code is oftentimes placed at the **bottom**, **right**, or near the **margins**. In this study, geosemiotics is adopted because it sheds light on the interdependence of language and space, and proves that there are no clearly defined disciplinary boundaries (quantitative approach) in the field of LL studies.



**FIGURE 24** – Type of language on top of the sign

A unique feature that sets this study apart from other LL studies is that I examined the sequencing and font size of Chinese and English text on *same* type of signs (transportation signs, street map stands, and notices etc.) in the three districts. Overall, in Figure 24, the results reveal that Chinese is predominantly displayed on the top position in MK (50, 61%) and TSW (39, 75%), with English translations in smaller font size underneath (see Table 9 below). Conversely, English text on signs (39, 70%) is consistently placed above the Chinese counterparts in Discovery Bay. Since English a lingua franca for communication, it is therefore given more prominence in tourist attractions. Notably, Japanese occasionally appeared at the top of signs in MK too (8, 9.8%); French and Italian were also given a preferable position in DB (7, 12.5%). In sum, based on Scollon and Scollon’s theory of place semiotics (2003), my findings indicate a hierarchy between languages: Chinese is favored in MK and TSW, whereas English is prioritized in DB.





Transportation sign in TSW



Transportation sign in DB



Street sign in TSW



Street sign in DB



Map stand in MK



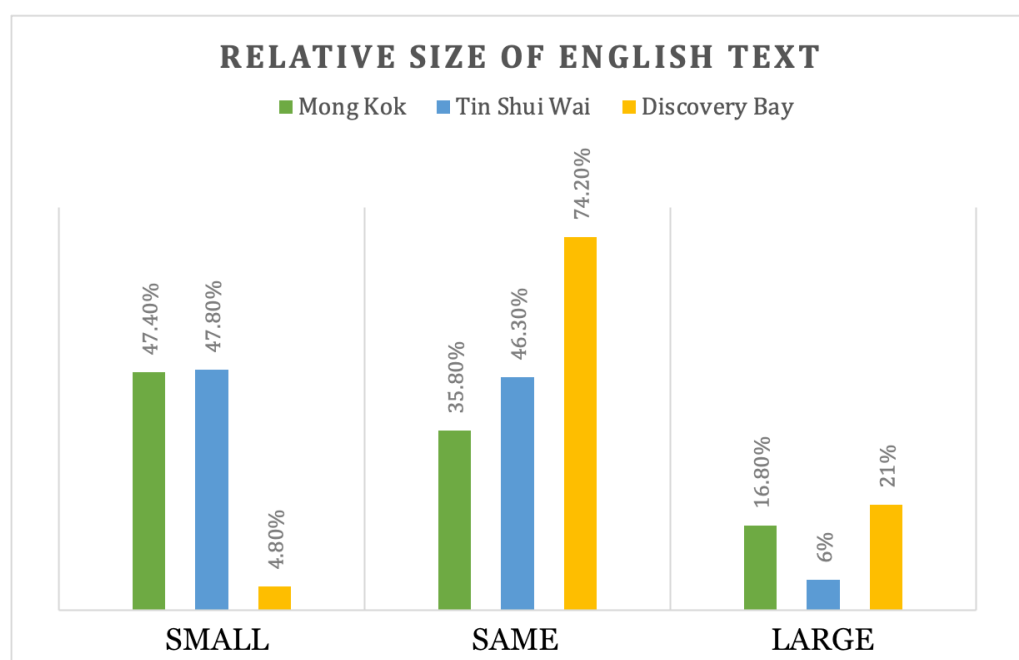
Map stand in DB

 <p>Prohibition sign in TSW</p>	 <p>Prohibition sign in DB</p>
 <p>Notice in TSW</p>	 <p>Notice in DB</p>

**TABLE 9** – Comparison between the same type of signs in the three sites

As mentioned, another way to index prominence is the manipulation of font size. Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) stated that by altering the relative size of words, one can control their visual salience and therefore, their readability. Quite self-explanatorily, larger texts are more visible and attention grabbing, thus can convey a sense of dominance or superiority of the language over another (Ebert et al., 2023). For this, I investigated the balance of language on bilingual and multilingual signs in the 3 sites (see Figure 25). In MK and TSW, English is significantly smaller in font sizes than other languages, accounting for 47.4% and 47.8% respectively; large English text are rare,

comprising only 16.8% and 6% of the total. Discovery Bay stands out from the other two sites, with a substantially higher proportion of same-sized English texts, accounting for 74.2% of the total, and large sizes account for 21%. In DB, small-sized English texts are mostly invisible, such that only 3 (4.8%) signs of such kind found. These patterns can be explained by the demographic characteristics of each area, with Mongkok and Tin Shui Wai having a higher concentration of local residents and small businesses, and Discovery Bay being a more affluent area with a higher concentration of expatriates and large corporations. This could result in different preferences for font sizes, as well as different advertising strategies targeted at different consumer groups. Moreover, as alluded to earlier, English is used more for an ornamental function in MK and TSW, hence, the need for it to be larger and easier to read is less.



**FIGURE 25** – Relative size of English text in MK, TSW, and DB

The discussion below provides a detailed analysis of the sign structures in the three districts. In the linguistic landscape of Mongkok, Chinese language has a clear preference over other languages. For instance, in the Figure 26, a parallel bilingual sign presents its hotel name in Chinese (海城時鐘賓館) and its mutual translation in English (Ocean City Hotel); however, the Chinese text is positioned at the center, while the English text is added to occupy the margin areas in order to fill in the gaps. This is similar to the



graphic technique called “tiling”, which fills all available space and holes so that the design fits together seamlessly, creating a sense of completeness and unity in the layout (Van de Walle & Thompson, 1980). In this context, English text functions as a supplement to the Chinese language rather than serving as the primary language. Moreover, although the two languages are positioned in a symmetrical left-right sequence rather than an upper-lower alignment, the design of the sign favors Chinese because traditionally “Chinese characters have always been arranged in vertical columns” whereas readers in alphabetic scripts e.g., English, adopt the horizontal reading direction (Miles & Shen, 1925; De Sousa, 2012).



**FIGURE 26** – Chinese is more prominent due to its position and in a vertical vector

In like manner, Chinese language holds a higher status in various aspects of visual representations of languages in Tin Shui Wai. Taking the real estate advertisement in Figure 27 as an example, although the English text “Hello Hong Kong” is positioned in the upper portion of the poster, it is relegated to the marginalized left corner. On the contrary, the complementary Chinese text (trans: normal traveler clearance between Hong Kong



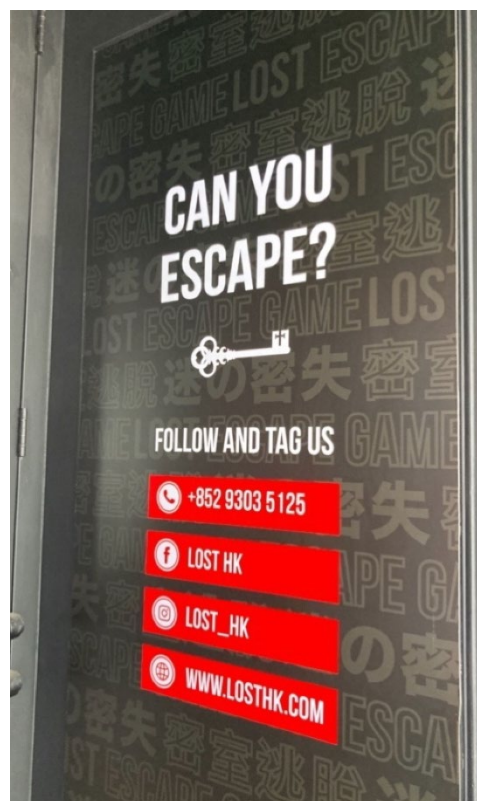
and the Mainland has been fully resumed, housing prices eventually soar), which carries the core message, is placed prominently in the middle. Besides, the font style also plays a part in shaping the impact of the texts: the Chinese text in the center is emphasize with a bold black outline, while the English text has a faint white glow effect that is barely noticeable. In addition, the bright and vivid properties of the Chinese text’s fluorescent colors can create a stark contrast that “catch the eye faster [and] hold attention longer” in human visual system, particularly since they are in a larger font size (De Winter & Wagemans, 2022). Furthermore, research has shown that the color green in typography is “most easily picked up” than red from a distance (Keisler, 2020). All aspects—the size, style, and color—indicate distinct meanings, but together they act as a marker of the code preference for Chinese. This pattern of visual prominence for Chinese language can be observed in numerous streets across TSW.



**FIGURE 27** – Chinese is more prominent in terms of position, font size, and color

In Discovery Bay, signage employs a distinct visual hierarchy that gives prominence to English through orientation of language. For example, in Figure 28, the comparable sizes of English, Chinese (密室脫逃), and Japanese (の) texts may convey a symbolic meaning that the three are equally emphasized, nonetheless, Chinese and Japanese are marginalized at the back and are presented in a muted grey color that shares

similar chromatic with the black background, resulting in reduced legibility. This suggests a lack of value placed on these peripheral codes in DB. Contrasting with this subdued color scheme, the foreground of the sign showcases the English text written in bold capitalized letters, which stands out in stark white against the dark backdrop. The English text occupies the most prominent position on the signs, above the Chinese and Japanese word. According to Scollon and Scollon' system of preference, this strategic use of color and spatial arrangement indicates a preference for English language, catering the needs of the majority English-speaking population in tourist spots.



**FIGURE 28** –English text in front while Chinese and Japanese texts at the back

## **9. CONCLUSION**

In sum, as stated in Section 2, the fundamental purpose of this study was to present the visibility and order of languages in Hong Kong's linguistic landscape. I achieved this through the examination of font size, font style, color, and the sequence of languages on signs in Section 8.3. Moreover, I addressed the second research question, and established the significance of “Japanese influence” in shaping the linguistic landscape of Mongkok in

Section 8.2. Furthermore, the data from TSW demonstrated that “proximity to China” plays a crucial role in determining the presence of Chinese, as well as the absence of English and other foreign languages. I then proved that status as a tourist hub is indispensable in contributing to the amount of signage in English and European languages. Lastly, I argued that the closer an area is to the mainland border, the more prominent Simplified Chinese signage becomes, and that, regional variability does take place in a small city like Hong Kong. Yet, I must note that geographical factor does not affect the presence of Cantonese signs.

After all, the study of LL is imperative in understanding the intricate cultural dynamics in current context, particularly that the changing political climate has brought about a significant shift on the languages used in public spaces. In light of prior research conducted in Hong Kong, my findings appear to corroborate this assertion, as I observe a fundamental transformation of the LL of Hong Kong over a decade when comparing them with Lai's study in 2009. Furthermore, this study underscores the importance of considering the linguistic landscape as a dynamic and constantly evolving entity, as actors, influenced by various social, economic, and political factors, “can introduce new unknown designs” every day (Dasgupta, 2002). That is to say, the results presented in this article may change abruptly, therefore, continuous investigations are required to keep up with the changes.

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**“Untangling Identities:  
Rediscovering and Asserting Individuality and The Collective Africanness  
at Mariama African Hair Braiding Salon Through the Poetics of Hair Braiding  
in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Americanah*”**

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## Abstract

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie explores the intricate function that hair plays in defining black women’s cultural identity in her book *Americanah*, by using hair salons as a lens, emphasising how hair care practices can be used to declare one’s cultural heritage and recover lost traditions in a global hair business and marketplace that has historically marginalised and excluded black women. In a society that often perpetuates the othering of black women’s hair and culture, hair salons also serve as spaces for community building and “affirmation of the self. This paper argues that Adichie’s portrayal of Ifemelu’s experiences at Mariama African Hair Braiding salon and her interactions with undocumented African immigrants, Mariama and Aisha, in *Americanah* highlights the importance of shared spaces and immigrant narratives in forming and contributing to individual identities and the collective Africanness in the United States. Through the poetics of hair braiding, Adichie illuminates the intricate and sometimes fraught relationship between assimilation and asserting cultural heritage, ultimately arguing for the importance of maintaining balance between the two to create a sense of belonging and build a strong community in the African diaspora.

## Introduction

The hair salon is often regarded as a sanctuary for many looking to not only transform their physical appearance, but also to connect with others and form a sense of community. For instance, according to Tall's article *West African Hair Braiding Industry Is Being Destroyed by the Pandemic*, Ivorian-American immigrant Bintou shared that the braiding salons in Harlem served as more than just a place to get one's hair done. They were considered a hub for community and socialising, where hair braiders and clients could exchange advice and sell goods such as jewellery and body lotions (Tall). Bintou further described the salons as spaces where she could spend time with friends and relieve stress, ultimately developing a sense of familial community with other visitors at the salon. For her, these salons were the closest she could get to being in Africa while in the heart of Harlem.

This is also relevant outside of African hair salon culture, as the very space serves as a safe and familiar hub for the community, especially for marginalised groups, where people can feel comfortable expressing themselves and engaging in conversations about culture, politics, and daily life, while also receiving a service that is both personal and communal. In the case of most immigrants just like myself, it is inevitable that we yearn for a space run by people who understand our unique and distinctly cultural needs on the topic of self-care and beauty. To be in such a space allows us to express and be our authentic selves outside of social norms and its pressure to assimilate – both of which are vital aspects of finding a sense of belonging in a new country.

More than an environment symbolising cultural resistance and paving the way for socioeconomic advancements for immigrants, this essay is interested in the significance of hair salons as a space for the formation and deconstruction of one's identity, namely the individual and collective identities. Therefore, in this paper I will be looking exclusively at Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's portrayal of Ifemelu's experiences at Mariama African Hair Braiding salon and her interactions with undocumented African immigrants, Mariama and Aisha, and how *Americanah* highlights the importance of shared spaces and immigrant narratives in forming and contributing to individual identities and collective identities as Africans in the United States. Through the poetics of hair care, the tension of assimilating and asserting one's individuality at the salon untangles to reveal a suggestion of balancing both individual and collective identities, to maintain a sense of belonging and in building a strong community within the African diaspora in the United States and beyond.

The intersection of hair care and cultural identity has been covered extensively by literary scholars. Yerima (2017) argues that postcolonial individuals are conflicted in asserting their identities when in the face of western and indigenous beauty practices. The standards of beauty prescribe the relationship that women have with their bodies, determining the dimensions of their physical freedom and shaping who they become and what they achieve. These standards are often Western-imposed, posing a challenge for postcolonial women who struggle to conform to imperial aesthetics while contending with the indigenous notions of femininity and beauty that they were raised with. Such women might fluctuate between the two aesthetics or demonstrate a preference for one over the other. Yerima further elaborates that opting for wigs and hair weaves is a way of conforming to globalisation by disseminating Western notions of beauty, power, truth, freedom, and life. Hair is significant, and women not of Western descent may feel self-conscious and defensive until they conform to Western beauty standards. Failure to conform can result in being viewed as unfeminine, unprogressive, and uncivilised.

Lee Sneddon (2018) makes use of Michel Foucault's theory of heterotopia, drawing significance to Mariama's African Hair Braiding salon as a space where individuals do not meet societal norms. As Ifemelu enters this space, she experiences a clash of cultures, knowledge, and ways of living from other African immigrants. The hair salon is not merely a place for hair, but is essentially for the black community – as shown through the various guests that enter and exit the salon. Sneddon elaborates on how each individual perceives the space once in the hair salon, and how they perceive it from the outskirts of this environment. Ultimately, the paper focuses on the social and spatial politics of hair salons as a racially charged space that is both “detached and attached to its Africanness,” inevitably negotiating white and black spaces in America.

Further on the subject of hair salons, Marina Vlahaki (2021) dives deeper into the spatial and temporal relationship between Ifemelu, Mariama, and Aisha, citing theories such as Afropolitanism, Pan-Africanism, and Dubois' double consciousness to support her argument of Ifemelu's disharmonious encounters with the aforementioned women.

This essay will primarily be a close-reading of the events that take place at the hair salon through Ifemelu's perspective, and how through her interactions and exposure to the unique space of the hair salon, specifically a space run by undocumented immigrant women, propels her to rediscover her Nigerian and African identity. Consisting of just five chapters throughout the novel, these small scenes demonstrate the complexities of the immigrant

experience, and the relationship between assimilation and asserting one's cultural heritage through the act of hair braiding.

Adichie is a Nigerian-American author, feminist, and public speaker known for her ability to capture the essence of contemporary African life and its complex themes of immigration, identity, and belonging. Adichie has published several acclaimed novels, including *Purple Hibiscus* (2003), *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006), and *Americanah* (2013), all of which have been widely translated and have won numerous awards. She has since become a prominent figure in African literature and feminism, with her works widely acclaimed for their insightful portrayal of the complexities of African society and the experiences of African women<sup>1</sup>.

In her renowned novel *Americanah*, Adichie begins the novel with protagonist Ifemelu making her way to Mariama's African Hair Braiding salon in preparation for her move back to Nigeria, her home. Ifemelu migrated to the United States amidst heavy university strikes in Nigeria with the aim to graduate and support her parents during an economically and politically unstable environment at the time. Highly successful and educated, Ifemelu lives in Princeton undergoing a prestigious fellowship program. Throughout the novel, Ifemelu finds herself at odds with mainstream American customs she feels pressured to conform to as her identity is judged solely based on her skin colour. Ifemelu started an online blog named *Raceteenth or Various Observations About American Blacks (Those Formerly Known as Negroes) by a Non-American Black*, to express her views on what it means to be Black in the U.S. (273, 435). She explores American tribalism (227), Barack Obama (264, 398, 419), and the intersections of hair, race, and identity (367).

The more Ifemelu attempts to deconstruct and understand the white-centric American identity and expresses a desire to fit into the mould, the more miserable and disconnected she feels from her authentic self. She questioned who she was before setting foot in America. As she travels from the opulent neighbourhood of Princeton to the nearby town of Trenton, where the hair salon is situated, Ifemelu finds herself at odds with the rundown and unkempt environment. She perceives and interacts disharmoniously with the people, especially the

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<sup>1</sup> Adichie is often compared to another literary giant in the modern African literature canon: Chinua Achebe, author of *Things Fall Apart*. Achebe's work had a profound impact on African literature and paved the way for other writers to explore similar themes of identity, tradition, and belonging in their own works. In many ways, Adichie's work can be seen as a continuation of Achebe's legacy, as she explores similar themes in her own unique way. Like Achebe, Adichie writes about the complexities of Nigerian society, and the challenges faced by Nigerians both at home and abroad. Both writers also use their work to challenge stereotypes and misconceptions about Africa and Africans, and to assert the importance of African voices in contemporary literature. One fun trivia about the two authors is that Adichie had stayed in the same campus residence as Achebe in the University of Nigeria.

undocumented African women running the salon, symbolising her distance from her former self and the collective Africanness that the salon embodies.

## Princeton, Belonging, and the Politics of Hair in the United States as a non-American Black

“Princeton, in the summer, smelled of nothing, and although Ifemelu liked the tranquil greenness of the many trees, the clean streets and stately homes, the delicately overpriced shops, and the quiet, abiding air of earned grace, it was this, the lack of a smell, that most appealed to her, perhaps because the other American cities she knew well had all smelled distinctly. Philadelphia had the musty scent of history. New Haven smelled of neglect. Baltimore smelled of brine, and Brooklyn of sun-warmed garbage. But Princeton had no smell. She liked taking deep breaths here. She liked [...] the organic grocery store on Nassau street or outside the sushi restaurants or outside the ice cream shop that had fifty different flavours including red pepper [...] She liked most of all, that in this place of affluent ease, she could pretend to be someone else, someone specially admitted into a hallowed American club, someone adorned with certainty. But she did not like that she had to go to Trenton to braid her hair. It was unreasonable to expect a braiding salon in Princeton – the few black locals she had seen were so light-skinned and lank-haired she could not imagine them wearing braids – and yet as she waited at Princeton Junction station for the train, on an afternoon ablaze with heat, she wondered why there *was* no place where she could braid her hair.” (3-4)

The novel opens with the above introductory paragraph illustrating Ifemelu’s appreciation for the privilege of living in the Princeton area and her desire to fit into and be accepted by the white American society. Adichie takes us into the present moment of Ifemelu travelling from Princeton to Trenton to get her hair done, this journey exemplifying the tension of her individual and collective identities in this wealthy neighbourhood.

The metaphor of “smell” that Ifemelu ascribes to the individual cities in the U.S. that she has visited is associated with a quality that exhibits the kind of people who live in these neighbourhoods e.g. Philadelphia, New Haven, Baltimore, and Brooklyn, and the socioeconomic situations that are present in them. For example, Philadelphia is associated with the “musty scent of history” as it is considered one of the oldest cities in the U.S., in which it played a significant role in the nation’s founding and development. The Declaration of Independence and the drafting of the U.S. constitution, for example, took place in Philadelphia. Museums, historic sites, and universities are found within the area suggesting the people who congregate and live there are often educated, bookish high-class individuals. Contrastingly, Ifemelu described Brooklyn as having the smell of “sun-warmed garbage.” This is due to the fact that Brooklyn is one of the more densely populated areas in the

country, with a high concentration of people living in relatively small spaces. Brooklyn houses families and individuals of various income levels, though many of lower socioeconomic backgrounds, in its overcrowded and increasingly gentrified space, arising issues and debates on the displacement of many, particularly immigrant communities (Boston).

“Princeton, in the summer, smelled of nothing [...] it was this, the lack of smell that most appealed to her,” represents cleanliness and purity, an extended metaphor for the lack of a distinct cultural identity in Princeton, in comparison to the aforementioned cities. This predominantly white, affluent town suggests that Ifemelu may feel that, at least in Princeton, she is able to blend in more easily without her cultural identity as a non-American Black being immediately apparent or stereotyped “in this place of affluent ease.” Allured by the need to assimilate into the “hallowed American club,” Ifemelu sees herself as an outsider. By assimilating and adopting the privilege and success that people in Princeton have, she gains a strong sense of belonging and confidence. Her facade of being seemingly confident suggests that she feels more assured by her place in American society and can be taken seriously and respectfully by anybody. However, this desire to fit in comes at the cost of her own identity and heritage, revealing the complexities of the immigrant experience and the tension between the desire to assimilate, and maintaining one’s individual cultural identity.

This tension is illustrated in Ifemelu’s frustration at having to “go to Trenton to braid her hair. It was unreasonable to expect a braiding salon in Princeton.” Ifemelu draws a parallel between Trenton and Princeton, seeing braiding hair salons, often run by African immigrants, as having no place in opulent towns like Princeton that are primarily inhabited by upper-class individuals, most of whom are born-and-bred Americans or immigrants who have fully assimilated. In Ifemelu’s eyes and in wider American society, the hair salon is viewed as an “othered” space found on the peripheries of many metropolitan cities, utilised and run by groups who are marginalised in society.

Furthermore, this paragraph presents an analogy of the perception of ethnic hair between Black Americans and non-American Blacks. Ifemelu describes fellow black women living in Princeton, and perhaps many others living in affluent neighbourhoods, as “light-skinned and lank-haired; she could not imagine them wearing braids.” This suggests that, since the 1960s Black Power movement in the U.S., black women popularised natural hairstyles like afros and dreadlocks, which were seen as a way to reject Eurocentric beauty standards and reclaim Black identity and pride. During slavery, enslaved Africans were forced to cut their hair short to strip them of their cultural identity and assimilate them into

white society. As a result, hair became a symbol of resistance, with hairstyles like cornrows and twists used as a form of communication and cultural expression. However, these hairstyles were also met with controversy and discrimination in mainstream society, with some employers and schools banning them on the grounds of “unprofessionalism” or “inappropriateness.” Hence, “lank-haired” refers to the chemical straightening/relaxing of ethnic, kinky hair, symbolic of assimilating into the predominant and assertive white society of the U.S.

On the other hand, non-American Black communities like the Yorubas of Nigeria view the head as a sacred symbol of wisdom – the *àṣẹ*, a divine life force located on one’s head. In Africa, hair has been used as a symbol of social status, cultural identity, and spirituality for centuries. Different hairstyles were used to signify different things in different communities, and hair was often styled to reflect one’s social status or occupation. For instance, among the Yoruba people, the elaborate hairstyles worn by the queen or female leaders, known as *gelede*, were meant to communicate their power and prestige. Similarly, among the Himba people of Namibia, the women’s hair is styled in intricate braids and adorned with red ochre, which is believed to have spiritual significance. However, modern practice of braiding ethnic hair in Africa has developed to meet practical needs, such as easy management or protection from extreme weather e.g. dust storms, heat waves, and humidity. Thus, braids, cornrows, and dreadlocks are more commonly found on the continent than natural, afro hair. Yet, this intricate art of braiding hair remains a highly respected cultural practice.

Ifemelu expresses her frustration with the lack of hair salons in Princeton, and the absence of services catering to culturally diverse groups. Despite the fact that there are “sushi restaurants” found throughout Princeton and the “ice cream shop that had fifty different flavours,” Ifemelu “wondered why there was no place where she could braid her hair.” Those that she has seen in Princeton do not fit her expectations of having the hair texture and style that would necessitate braiding. This statement underscores the idea that Ifemelu is experiencing a sense of isolation in this privileged and affluent community, where she feels disconnected from her own cultural background and unable to find the services and resources she needs to maintain her appearance, despite the presence of other multicultural goods accessible in the community. Additionally, the mention of the “afternoon ablaze with heat,” and her location at “Princeton Junction station” highlights the physical discomfort and inconvenience that she must endure to access these services that are othered by the high-class



American society. This further emphasises the challenges and frustration she and other immigrants experience face living in a foreign culture.

## From Princeton to Trenton: Encountering disconnection with the Nigerian Identity

“So here she was, on a day filled with the opulence of summer, about to braid her hair for the journey home. There were people thrice her size on the Trenton platform and she looked admiringly at one of them, a woman in a very short skirt. She thought nothing of slender legs shown off in miniskirts – it was safe and easy, after all, to display legs of which the world approved – but the fat woman’s act was about the quiet conviction that one shared only with oneself, a sense of rightness that others failed to see. Her decision to move back was similar; whenever she felt besieged by doubts, she would think of herself as standing valiantly alone, as almost heroic, so as to squash her uncertainty. [...] She hoped her driver would not be a Nigerian, because he, once he heard her accent, would either be aggressively eager to tell her that he had a master’s degree, the taxi was a second job, and his daughter was on the dean’s list at Rutgers; or he would drive in sullen silence, giving her change and ignoring her ‘thank you,’ all the time nursing humiliation, that this fellow Nigerian, a small girl at that, who perhaps was a nurse or an accountant or even a doctor, was looking down on him. Nigerian taxi drivers in America were all convinced that they really were not taxi drivers.” (9-10)

The commute from Princeton to Trenton underscores Ifemelu’s disconnection with her Nigerian identity. The passage serves as an analogy of Ifemelu’s perception of other people and her own sense of disconnection. By admiring the fat woman’s quiet conviction in displaying her body, Ifemelu recognizes the importance of being true to oneself, even if it goes against societal norms. This analogy reflects Ifemelu’s struggle to reconcile her individual identity as a Nigerian in America. Her struggle to fully comprehend her disconnection from herself and her culture marks the starting point of her journey towards reclaiming and asserting her identity, which she would later rediscover at the hair salon.

The opening line of “So here she was, on a day filled with the opulence of summer, about to braid her hair for the journey home” is an important moment in Ifemelu’s journey towards reclaiming her Nigerian identity. Ifemelu’s decision to braid her hair instead of chemically straightening it like the black women she sees in Princeton where she lives, is a small but significant act of resistance. It suggests that one way she maintains her connection with her Nigerian heritage is through her hair. However, it’s also worth considering that Ifemelu may not want to “other” herself in Nigeria by wearing her hair naturally, as braiding and relaxing are more popular than wearing one’s hair naturally. By choosing to braid her hair, Ifemelu is slowly feeling her Nigerian heritage, as she braids to welcome herself back to

Nigerian society and ensures herself that this choice, compared to relaxing her hair, is the right one for her.

To draw a parallel between her own resistance and that of the “fat woman,” Ifemelu “looked admiringly” at the woman wearing a “very short skirt,” noting the bravery it takes to display one’s body openly and proudly despite negative public perception of big-bodied women. Ifemelu admires the woman’s act not for its own sake, but for the “quiet conviction” that the woman displays, which is “shared only with oneself.” This admiration reflects Ifemelu’s own journey towards reclaiming her Nigerian identity, which she has yet to share with the world. By recognising the importance of being true to oneself, even if it goes against societal norms, Ifemelu draws inspiration from the fat woman’s sense of self and conviction. This same conviction and sense of rightness would later inspire Ifemelu’s firm decision to move back to Nigeria, and the self-awareness she develops; being true to herself without seeking the approval of others.

This moment is significant as Ifemelu had long been estranged from her Nigerian and African roots. The act of going to the hair braiding salon may not be an event she looks forward to, but she is propelled to in an subconscious and hesitant act to feel closer to her authentic self. By observing the fat woman and her resistance to society’s preconceived ideas of a woman’s body, and how she proudly displays it, inspires hope in Ifemelu that she can shake away her need and desire to assimilate into mainstream American customs. She is shackled by expectations to succeed in the U.S., as she is fortunate to be able to embody such prestige that many immigrants come and work hard for. However, Ifemelu does not want that. She expresses this thought as “whenever she felt besieged by doubts, she would think of herself as standing valiantly alone, as almost heroic, so as to squash her uncertainty.” There is a conscious act of rejecting this expectation of succeeding and becoming very much American, stripped of her Nigerian and African self. This is suggested by the taxi driver scenario where Ifemelu “hope[s] her driver would not be a Nigerian” because she fears the driver will feel “humiliated” in her presence, or would either be “aggressively eager to tell her that he had a master’s degree, the taxi was a second job.” The driver’s need to prove his worth and education to her highlights the pressure that exists within the Nigerian and the wider African immigrant community to succeed in America. Ifemelu’s desire to distance herself from this pressure is further demonstrated by her discomfort with being identified as Nigerian in the presence of a fellow Nigerian, as the possible interactions between one another only solidify the expectations weighing down on her shoulders, of which she wishes to reject.

By juxtaposing these two moments, the quote shows Ifemelu's subconscious resistance against American cultural norms and assimilation, foreshadowing her character breaking out of this cycle and learning to embrace not just her Nigerian identity, but also the collective Africanness she will experience at the hair salon through her interactions with Aisha.

## Mariama African Hair Braiding Salon: A Heterotopia

"She gave him the address of Mariama African Hair Braiding. It was her first time at this salon – her regular one was closed because the owner had gone back to Cote d'Ivoire to get married – but it would look, she was sure, like all the other African hair braiding salons she had known: they were in the part of the city that had graffiti, dank buildings, and no white people, they displayed bright signboards with names like Aisha and Fatima African Hair Braiding, they had radiators that were too hot in the winter and air conditioners that did not cool in the summer, and they were full of Francophone West African women braiders, one of whom would be the owner and speak the best English and answer the phone and be deferred to by the others. Often, there was a baby tied to someone's back with a piece of cloth. Or a toddler asleep on a wrapper spread over a battered sofa. Sometimes, older children stopped by. The conversations were loud and swift, in French or Wolof or Malinke, and when they spoke English to customers, it was broken, curious, as though they had not quite eased into the language itself before taking on a slangy Americanism. Words came out half-completed." (10-11)

Coined by Michel Foucault, a "heterotopia" is a concept applying to spaces existing outside of normal societal structures and norms, with Mariama African Hair Braiding salon being an example of such a space (Foucault 127). Within the salon, activities that are not typically found in mainstream society occur, such as braiding hair in intricate patterns and designs that hold cultural significance for African immigrants. Hence, this racialized space may also be viewed as a space of othering, given its marginalisation and lack of recognition in mainstream American culture. During Ifemelu's commute, she displays disdain for having to travel to this part of town, where her perceptions of the salon and its community contribute to the othering of this valued space in the African diaspora in the U.S. She does not view this place as a community with whom she's able to assert and share her cultural identity, rather she perceives it as a space not for herself, but for other African immigrants whom she does not associate or identify with.

The above paragraph introduces the idea of Ifemelu only going to hair salons not found in areas where the majority of African immigrants gather, but attends a salon that is positioned in a relatively higher class neighbourhood. This suggests that Ifemelu immediately separates herself from the larger African immigrant community in terms of socioeconomic

standing, as she is able to afford the higher prices of a salon in a more affluent area. “Her regular one was closed because the owner had gone back to Cote d’Ivoire to get married” highlights the privilege of a group of African immigrants able to mobilise between spaces and borders due to their socioeconomic situation, enabling them to afford such travel and contrasting the realities and complexity of the immigrant experience found at Mariama’s. However, the ability to transcend locations and boundaries ironically limits Ifemelu from fully expressing her individual Nigerian identity and the collective Africanness, as she limits herself to one particular environment.

The passage describes the atmosphere and characteristics of African hair braiding salons that are typically located in lower-income areas and predominantly staffed by Francophone West African women: “They were in the part of the city that had graffiti, dank buildings, and no white people.” This sets the tone for the environment in which these salons are situated. Despite their surroundings, the salons themselves are adorned with “bright signboards with names like Aisha and Fatima African Hair Braiding,” which serve as beacons for their Black American and non-American Black customers, announcing themselves proudly within the neighbourhood. The physical conditions of the salons are also described, with radiators that are “too hot in the winter and air conditioners that did not cool in the summer,” illustrating the challenges faced by the African hair braiders in providing their services in less-than-ideal working conditions. Despite these difficulties, the salons serve as important cultural spaces that not only offer hair care services but also provide a sense of community and connection for African immigrants in the U.S. Additionally, the salons double as childcare centres, with babies tied to someone’s back with a piece of cloth and toddlers asleep on a battered sofa, suggesting the intersection of personal and professional lives for the women who work there. “Older children” would also stop by, further emphasising the communal nature of these spaces. The conversations that take place are often in French or Wolof or Malinke, and when the women speak English to customers, it is “broken, curious, as though they had not quite eased into the language itself before taking on a slangy Americanism.” This highlights the challenges faced by immigrants in navigating and adapting to a new culture and language, their “words [coming] out half-completed” demonstrating the African hair braiders’ difficulties in expressing themselves fully in English and their struggles in assimilating into American society. This phrase can also support the idea that these salons are crucial cultural spaces for the African immigrant community, enabling them to communicate in their native languages and maintain a sense of cultural identity. The broken English spoken in the salon illustrates the linguistic and cultural

diversity of the African diaspora, as well as the resilience of immigrant communities in adapting to new environments.

Compared to Ifemelu, the African hair braiders in the salon represent a group that is more connected to their cultural identity and community, as their work is centred around maintaining and celebrating African hair and cultural practices. This deep connection to their cultural identity and community is reflected in the braiders' ability to communicate with each other in their native languages, and their pride in the intricate designs and patterns they create in their clients' hair. For many of these braiders, the salon is not just a place of work, but a space where they can express themselves and their cultural heritage. This is especially important in a society where African immigrants often face discrimination and marginalisation, and where their cultural practices are often dismissed or viewed as "other." By creating and maintaining these spaces of cultural celebration, the braiders are actively resisting the dominant narrative that seeks to erase their identities and experiences through the expectations of fully assimilating into American society to be deemed as successful. Furthermore, the African hair braiders in the salon embody the complexities of the immigrant experience in the United States. They are often forced to navigate multiple identities and cultural expectations, and the salon is a space where they can assert and maintain their cultural identity in the face of these challenges. This sense of community and identity is not only important for the braiders themselves, but also for their clients, who come to the salon seeking a connection to their cultural roots.

At Mariama's salon, Ifemelu has an encounter with two West African hair braiders, Mariama and Aisha. Mariama is not only the owner of the salon but also an embodiment of an immigrant who has successfully balanced her identities with assimilating into American culture through her entrepreneurship and good customer service. Through exploring Mariama's character, this essay will illustrate how she is able to maintain a sense of self while navigating the complexities of living in a new country. Meanwhile, Ifemelu's hair is braided by Aisha, whose refusal to braid Ifemelu's hair a certain way reveals the tension between vastly different immigrant experiences. The act of braiding becomes a space where both characters come to reconcile this tension and learn to understand each other through the poetics of braiding.

## AISHA: The African Immigrant Experience and Rediscovering the Nigerian Identity and Collective Africanness

“It’s too tight,” Ifemelu said. “Don’t make it tight.” Because Aisha kept twisting to the end, Ifemelu thought that perhaps she had not understood, and so Ifemelu touched the offending braid and said, “Tight, tight.”

Aisha pushed her hand away. “No. No. Leave it. It good.”

“It’s tight!” Ifemelu said. “Please loosen it.”

Mariama was watching them. A flow of French came from her. Aisha loosened the braid.

“Sorry,” Mariama said. “She doesn’t understand very well.” But Ifemelu could see, from Aisha’s face, that she understood very well. Aisha was simply a true market woman, immune to the cosmetic niceties of American customer service. Ifemelu imagined her working in a market in Dakar, like the braiders in Lagos who would blow their noses and wipe their hands on their wrappers, roughly jerk their customers’ heads to position them better, complain about how full or how hard or how short the hair was, shout out to passing women, while all the time conversing too loudly and braiding too tightly. (15-16)

Ifemelu and Aisha represent different aspects of the immigrant experience. Aisha embodies the entrepreneurial working-class immigrant who is proud of her Africanness and is focused on building a better life for herself and her family in Senegal. Her character is emphasised as a “true market woman,” suggesting that she has a strong sense of self and is uninterested in conforming to American cultural expectations, while Ifemelu feels a sense of superiority over Aisha because she believes she has assimilated better into American culture. This vision of Aisha in a market in Dakar reflects Ifemelu’s pan-Africanist ideals, where she imagines a common market environment throughout the continent. However, in doing so, Ifemelu also reveals her sense of classism. By describing Aisha as a “true market woman” who is “immune to the cosmetic niceties of American customer service,” Ifemelu implies that Aisha’s behaviour is uncivilised and unrefined, contrasting it with the supposedly superior American customer service Aisha ought to follow, and of which Mariama represents. Ifemelu’s description of “braiders blowing their noses and wiping their hands on their wrappers, complaining, and conversing too loudly while braiding too tightly,” suggests that Ifemelu views these actions as barbaric, highlighting her classist attitudes towards these working-class women, and contributing to the tension between herself and Aisha throughout the process of braiding her hair.

In contrast, Ifemelu is independent and does not have to worry about supporting herself and her family as she holds a green card, which allows her to access certain services

in the U.S. However, Ifemelu still struggles with her identity as an African in America, navigating the complexities of racial and cultural differences and trying to find a place where she feels truly at home. Despite their initial conflict, their eventual reconciliation signifies a shared identity as Africans in the diaspora. This reconciliation is achieved through the poetics and metaphor of hair braiding, which emphasises the importance of understanding and appreciating each other's unique experiences and perspectives through this long process of inevitable bonding. Although Ifemelu does not initially like Aisha, their eventual understanding to reconcile and build solidarity as Africans in the diaspora highlights the power of community and collective identity.

In this scene, the tightness of the braid symbolises the initial tension between Ifemelu and Aisha, as well as the broader tension between African immigrants in the diaspora, especially those who have or are on their way to fully assimilating into the local culture. As mentioned, the hair carries great cultural significance and must be handled respectfully and carefully. Hence, trust is incorporated into the process of braiding. Due to the different environments that Aisha and Ifemelu have lived in in the U.S., this sense of trust does not come easily, but is fraught with tension and anxiety throughout braiding which is based on anticipated misunderstandings between the two. Ifemelu's request for Aisha to loosen the braid reflects her belief that she knows better than Aisha, ultimately reinforcing the power dynamics that exist between them as African immigrants in the U.S. Aisha's refusal to loosen the braid represents her commitment to maintaining her cultural practices and traditions, despite the pressure to assimilate. Aisha's approach to braiding hair is unapologetic and resistant to conforming to American norms that would affect her sense of agency at her job. This job is most likely all Aisha has, given her undocumented status, and it is understandable for her to assert her skill to maintain a sense of self. In this sense, Aisha's character embodies the struggle of many immigrants in the United States who face the difficult task of preserving their cultural identities while also adapting to a new environment.

"How you get your papers?" Aisha asked.

"What?"

"How you get your papers?"

Ifemelu was startled into silence. A sacrilege, that question; immigrants did not ask other immigrants how they got their papers, did not burrow into those layered, private places; it was sufficient simply to admire that the papers had been got, a legal status acquired.

"Me, I try an American when I come, to marry. But he bring many problems, no job, and every day he say give me money, money, money," Aisha said, shaking her head. "How you get your own?"

Suddenly, Ifemelu's irritation dissolved, and in its place, a gossamer sense of kinship grew, because Aisha would not have asked if she were not an African, and in this new bond, she saw yet another augury of her return home.

"I got mine from work," she said. "The company I worked for sponsored my green card."

"Oh," Aisha said, as though she had just realised that Ifemelu belonged to a group of people whose green cards simply fell from the sky. People like her could not, of course, get theirs from an employer.

"Chijioke get his papers with lottery," Aisha said. She slowly, almost lovingly, combed the section of hair she was about to twist. (450-451)

The aforementioned excerpt represents the concluding scene in a hair salon, where Aisha and Ifemelu find themselves alone to complete their braiding session. Aisha's query to Ifemelu regarding how she "[got] her papers" comes as a surprise to her, given the unspoken rule that immigrants do not touch on this topic with their peers, a topic considered a "sacrilege." The exchange reveals some of the tensions and taboos present within immigrant communities around the sensitive subject of legal status, as there are individuals who may have to resort to undocumented status due to various reasons, including failed marriages or lack of resources to pursue legal means. Aisha's question also highlights the complexity of immigrant experiences and the varying degrees of privilege and access that immigrants have in navigating the legal system. For instance, her failed marriage with a fellow American "bring many problems, no job, and every day he say give money, money, money," illustrates a larger issue of abuse and exploitation faced by many immigrants seeking to settle in a foreign land. Aisha's former partner demanded money from her constantly, leaving her with no job and no recourse. This subplot adds depth and nuance to the novel's exploration of immigration and cultural identity, highlighting the unique challenges and inequalities faced by immigrants, particularly women of colour. The scene is a poignant reminder of the harsh realities that immigrants face and the ways in which their legal status can often be tied to larger societal issues such as gender-based violence and economic exploitation.

Despite the sensitivity of the topic, Aisha's question creates a sense of familiarity and a "gossamer kind of kinship" between the two women as fellow African immigrants, and leads to Ifemelu feeling a sense of solidarity and rediscovering her Africanness. The imagery of a delicate spider web, suggested by the word "gossamer," reinforces the fragility and organic, patient interweaving of the bond between the two women. Ifemelu's humbling realisation that not all immigrants have access to the same resources and opportunities as she



did, and her resulting empathy for Aisha's struggles, demonstrates her growth and increased understanding of the complexities of immigrant experiences in the U.S.

Aisha's comment, "Chijioke get his papers with lottery," suggests that Aisha may view the lottery system as a way for immigrants to gain legal status easily and without the struggles that she has experienced, such as her failed marriage with an American citizen. However, her nonchalant tone when talking about Chijioke's luck at the lottery suggests that there may be some bitterness or envy underlying her words, envious towards the luck and privilege both Chijioke and Ifemelu have that are yet to reach Aisha.

The gentle combing of Ifemelu's hair by Aisha can be seen as a gesture of trust and intimacy between the two women. While Aisha's tone may reveal her vulnerability and longing for a better life, her act of braiding Ifemelu's hair suggests a desire for connection and bonding. Hair braiding is a traditional African practice that has been used for generations as a way of creating intimacy and forming relationships between individuals. By engaging in this practice with Ifemelu, Aisha is not only showcasing her skills but also demonstrating her willingness to connect with another African immigrant in a foreign land. The juxtaposition between Aisha's vulnerable tone and the act of braiding highlights the complexity of the relationship between the two women. On one hand, Aisha is opening up to Ifemelu and showing vulnerability, which can be seen as an act of trust. On the other hand, the act of braiding hair is a traditional practice that has been used to form connections and intimacy between individuals. This contrast suggests that while Aisha may be vulnerable and in need of assistance, there is still a sense of community and solidarity between the two women which is more than enough to ignite hope that she too could survive in a foreign environment that seeks to constantly "other" her.

Aisha finished a twist in silence.

"My father die, I don't go," she said.

"What?"

"Last year. My father die and I don't go. Because of papers. But maybe, if Chijioke marry me, when my mother die, I can go. She is sick now. But I send her money." For a moment, Ifemelu did not know what to say. Aisha's wan tone, her expressionless face, magnified her tragedy.

"Sorry, Aisha," she said.

"I don't know why Chijioke not come. So you talk to him."

"Don't worry, Aisha. It will be okay."

Then, just as suddenly as she had spoken, Aisha began to cry. Her eyes melted, her mouth caved, and a terrifying thing happened to her face: it collapsed into despair. She kept twisting Ifemelu's hair, her hand movements unchanged, while her face, as though it did not belong to her body, continued to crumple, tears running from her eyes, her chest heaving.

“Where does Chijioke work?” Ifemelu asked. “I will go there and talk to him.” Aisha stared at her, the tears still sliding down her cheeks. “I will go and talk to Chijioke tomorrow,” Ifemelu repeated. “Just tell me where he works and what time he goes on break.”

What was she doing? She should get up and leave, and not be dragged further into Aisha’s morass, but she could not get up and leave. She was about to go back home to Nigeria, and she would see her parents, and she could come back to America if she wished, and here was Aisha, hoping but not really believing that she would ever see her mother again. She would talk to this Chijioke. It was the least she could do. (450-452)

The above quote presents a powerful moment of emotional vulnerability and empathy between Ifemelu and Aisha, two African immigrants in the U.S. The conversation begins with Aisha revealing the tragic news of her father’s death and the difficulty she faced in attending the funeral due to her undocumented status. This immediately highlights the emotional toll that immigration and its associated legal challenges can have on individuals. “My father die, I don’t go,” is simple yet poignant in its representation of the many sacrifices that immigrants make in order to pursue better lives for themselves and their families. The conversation then shifts to Aisha’s hopes of marrying Chijioke as a way to gain some form of security and stability in her immigration status. Aisha’s emotional detachment and subdued tone while discussing her family’s struggles underscore the hardships that immigrants often face alone and in silence. Ifemelu’s response of “Sorry, Aisha” is a clear expression of empathy and an acknowledgement of the pain that Aisha is experiencing.

An emotional climax reaches as Aisha breaks down in tears while continuing to braid Ifemelu’s hair: “She kept twisting Ifemelu’s hair, her hand movements unchanged, while her face, as though it did not belong to her body, continued to crumple, tears running from her eyes, her chest heaving.” While Aisha continues to braid with mechanical precision, her facial expression reveals her emotional turmoil. This contrast between Aisha’s physical actions and emotional state serves as a powerful metaphor for the immigrant experience. Aisha’s calm and methodical braiding represents the immigrant’s desire to succeed in a new country. She maintains a steady hand, demonstrating her commitment to doing her job well and fulfilling her obligations. At the same time, her emotional breakdown symbolises the hardships and struggles that immigrants often face as they try to navigate a new culture and adapt to new ways of life. The tears running from her eyes and her heaving chest suggest that the challenges of her new life have taken a toll on her, and that her efforts to fit in and succeed have not come without cost. Aisha’s breakdown may also reflect a sense of homesickness or nostalgia for her home country, Senegal. The act of braiding, which is deeply rooted in African culture, may serve as a reminder of the cultural and familial

connections she left behind. By breaking down while performing this act, Aisha may be expressing a sense of loss or displacement, which is common among immigrants who must reconcile their desire for a better life with the longing for the familiarity and comfort of their homeland.

Ifemelu's offer to help by talking to Chijioke is both a moment of compassion and an acknowledgement of the power dynamics that exist between African immigrants who have legal status and those who do not. Ifemelu's initial reaction to Aisha was one of superiority, as she believed that she had assimilated better into American culture than Aisha. However, when Aisha revealed her personal struggles and tragedy, Ifemelu's perspective shifted, and she began to see Aisha as a fellow African in the diaspora. Through her conversation with Aisha and her willingness to help her, Ifemelu realised that she still had a connection to her African roots and that her experiences in America had not erased that part of her identity. This is evident in her thoughts as she contemplates leaving Aisha: "She was about to go back home to Nigeria, and she would see her parents, and she could come back to America if she wished, and here was Aisha, hoping but not really believing that she would ever see her mother again." Ifemelu begins to recognize the ways in which her own experiences in America have distanced her from her African identity. She realises that despite her own successes in the U.S., she is not immune to the struggles that other African immigrants face, and that her privilege has blinded her to the harsh realities of immigration. By committing to help Aisha ("Where does Chijoke work? I will go there and talk to him.") Ifemelu begins to see herself as part of a broader African community in the diaspora, and recognizes the importance of supporting and uplifting each other. This interaction with Aisha is a turning point for Ifemelu, as it marks her realisation that her Africanness is not something to be ashamed of or hidden, but rather a source of strength and resilience in the face of adversity.

Comparing Ifemelu's perspective at the train station on the way to the salon, her admiration of the "fat woman" and her "quiet conviction" is manifested in this very moment, where Ifemelu uses her privilege to empower fellow African immigrants. Further, compared to Ifemelu wishing to escape her Nigerianness and the pressures of assimilating into local American customs associated with that identity, just like that of the imaginative Nigerian taxi driver, she chooses to break this barrier by offering Aisha help regarding her situation and acknowledge the pain she must be growing through instead of faulting her, essentially regaining and reasserting both her Nigerian identity and the collective Africanness.

## MARIAMA: A balance of identities

In looking at how Ifemelu has changed throughout the novel, it's important to also consider the character of Mariama and the theme of balance in relation to identity. Mariama serves as a foil to highlight the possibility of achieving a balance between one's cultural identity and assimilation into American culture. While many immigrants may feel pressure to fully assimilate in order to succeed in America, Mariama has found a way to maintain her African identity while still thriving in her own business as a salon owner. Despite her limited resources, Mariama provides exceptional customer service and takes pride in her work, finding happiness in her success. By not sacrificing her cultural identity, Mariama serves as a vision of what it might look like to achieve balance between two identities.

"You from Nigeria?" Mariama asked.

"Yes." Ifemelu said. "Where are you from?"

"Me and my sister Halima are from Mali. Aisha is from Senegal," Mariama said.

Aisha did not look up, but Halima smiled at Ifemelu, a smile that, in its warm knowingness, said welcome to a fellow African; she would not smile at an American in the same way. She was severely cross-eyed, pupils darting in opposite directions, so that Ifemelu felt thrown off balance, not sure which of Halima's eyes were on her.  
(12-13)

Mariama introduces herself and her sisters to Ifemelu, revealing their respective African countries of origin. Halima, Mariama's sister, warmly welcomes Ifemelu with a smile that signifies a shared sense of belonging as fellow Africans. Ifemelu notes that Halima's smile is indicative of her "warm knowingness" and that "she would not smile at an American in the same way." This suggests that the shared cultural background between Ifemelu and Halima creates a sense of mutual understanding and acceptance as African immigrants, regardless of their respective backgrounds in the U.S. Halima's physical condition, being "severely cross-eyed with pupils darting in opposite directions," adds to the sense of disorientation that Ifemelu feels as someone who has been long estranged from the collective Africanness, which also serves to mirror Ifemelu's inner displacement in the salon. When Mariama asks Ifemelu where she is from, it shows that she recognizes and values individual identity, as she is curious to know more about her background and establish acquaintanceship. This also indicates that Mariama sees the salon as a space where different African immigrants can come together and share their experiences, breaking down barriers

between people of different social standings, highlighting the shared Africanness the salon embodies.

Mariama's new customer was wearing jeans shorts, the denim glued to her backside, and sneakers the same bright pink shade as her top. Large hoop earrings grazed her face. She stood in front of the mirror, describing the kind of cornrows she wanted.

"Like a zigzag with a parting at the side right here, but you don't add the hair at the beginning, you add it when you get to the ponytail," she said, speaking slowly, overenunciating. "You understand me?" she added, already convinced, it seemed, that Mariama did not.

"I understand," Mariama said quietly. "You want to see a photo? I have that style in my album." The album was flipped through and, finally, the customer was satisfied and seated, frayed plastic hoisted around her neck, her chair height adjusted, and Mariama all the time smiling a smile full of things restrained.

"This other braider I went to the last time," the customer said. "She was African, too, and she wanted to burn my damned hair! She brought out this lighter and I'm going, Shontay White, don't let that woman bring that thing close to your hair. So I ask her, What's that for? She says, I want to clean your braids, and I go, What? Then she tries to show me, she tries to run the lighter over one braid and I went all crazy on her." Mariama shook her head. "Oh, that's bad. Burning is not good. We don't do that. (227)

The following quote reflects Mariama's professionalism and attentiveness to her customer's needs, suggesting that Mariama has found a balance between the collective Africanness and assimilation into American customs. The customer's appearance is meticulously depicted, down to her "denim glued to her backside" and "sneakers the same bright pink shade as her top." Such detail not only provides a visual image but also hints at her American identity and fashion sense. The dialogue between the two characters further reveals their contrasting cultural backgrounds, with Mariama patiently listening to the customer's specific requests for her hair. Her quiet response of "I understand" demonstrates her attentiveness and professionalism, in contrast to the customer's "speaking slowly, overenunciating" and questioning Mariama's ability to understand her ("You understand me?"). Despite the customer's eagerness to assert herself and diminish Mariama's agency as salon owner, manager, and hair expertise, Mariama's quiet demeanour "smiling a smile full of things restrained" emphasises her strength in the face of adversity, maintaining a positive attitude and a commitment to her work and her customers. Her suggestion to show the customer photos from her album highlights her care for her customers and desire to ensure their satisfaction. This gesture asserts her individuality and pride as a business owner and undocumented immigrant while celebrating African culture, as a polite way to bridge the gap

between their cultural differences. By offering the photo album, Mariama is able to showcase her skills and expertise in African hair care practices, while also catering to the customer's desire for a specific style. This balance between individuality and cultural sensitivity is a testament to Mariama's ability to navigate the complexities of multiculturalism and assimilation, all the while maintaining her own sense of identity and pride in her African roots. It is a reflection of the resilience and determination that has allowed her to establish herself as a successful business owner and community leader, while also serving as a bridge between different cultures and traditions.

The customer then recounts a negative experience with a previous African braider who attempted to use a lighter to "clean" her braids, resulting in a negative reaction. Mariama's immediate disapproval of the burning method, expressed through her response, "Oh, that's bad. Burning is not good. We don't do that," highlights her sensitivity to cultural differences and misconceptions that can arise in a multicultural environment. Her response reflects her commitment to offering quality service and maintaining respect for African hair care practices, ensuring that her customers' experiences align with their expectations and cultural preferences. The act of braiding in this quote is an extended metaphor for the representation of the interweaving of different cultures and experiences. Braids are created by weaving together multiple strands of both the organic hair and faux hair and/or threads, resulting in a complex and interconnected pattern. Hence, the act of braiding is a metaphor for the fusion of various African immigrant and Black American experiences coming together, which Mariama and her customers navigate on a daily basis.

Further, the act of burning the braid symbolises a destructive force that threatens to unravel this delicate interweaving of cultures, narratives, and experiences in the community. The incident serves as an example of how cultural misunderstandings and miscommunications can lead to negative outcomes and harm, as what happened between the customer and the other African braider. Mariama's customer after all entrusts Mariama with handling her hair, implicitly believing that Mariama understands and respects the significance of cultural competency and sensitivity when serving diverse communities, as it fosters mutual understanding and respect. Mariama's disapproval of the burning method represents her commitment to finding a way to weave different cultures together that does not require the destruction or erasure of any one culture, furthering the collective Africanness that the salon embodies, as well as balancing it with local American customs without erasing its essence of home. In this sense, the act of braiding becomes a symbol of exchange and mutual respect, where each strand is valued and incorporated into the overall pattern.

Overall, the extended metaphor of braiding in this quote illustrates the complex and ongoing process of cultural fusion and exchange in multicultural societies, highlighting the importance of respect and understanding in creating a harmonious and interconnected community.

The film had ended, and in the new noiselessness of the room, Mariama's customer said, "This one's rough," touching one of the thin cornrows that zigzagged over her scalp, her voice louder than it needed to be.

"No problem. I will do it again," Mariama said. She was agreeable, and smooth-tongued, but Ifemelu could tell that she thought her customer was a troublemaker, and there was nothing wrong with the cornrow, but this was a part of her new American self, this fervour of customer service, this shiny falseness of surfaces, and she had accepted it, embraced it. When the customer left, she might shrug out of that self and say something to Halima and to Aisha about Americans, how spoiled and childish and entitled they were, but when the next customer came, she would become, again, a faultless version of her American self. (231-232)

The quote highlights the cultural clash between African and American values, specifically in the context of customer service. Mariama's willingness to redo the cornrow even though there was nothing wrong with it reflects her commitment to providing excellent service and her understanding of the American emphasis on customer satisfaction. However, Ifemelu senses that Mariama sees the customer's complaint as unnecessary, "could tell that she was a troublemaker," and that Mariama's smooth-tongued response is merely a façade to maintain good customer relations. The mention of the "shiny falseness of surfaces" implies that Mariama has embraced a certain level of duplicity in her interactions with customers, which may be necessary in her new American environment. Ifemelu sees Mariama as someone who has adapted well to American customs and values, specifically the importance placed on customer service and maintaining good customer relations. Ifemelu interprets Mariama's behaviour as a kind of performance, where she is able to switch between her "American self" and her true self, depending on the situation. Ifemelu's observation suggests that Mariama is skilled at navigating the complexities of cultural identity and can successfully balance her African and American identities. Although, it also implies that Mariama's assimilation has come at a cost, as she has had to sacrifice some of her authenticity in order to fit into her new environment.

The passage underscores the idea that cultural identity is not fixed but rather fluid and can shift depending on the context. Mariama, a Malian immigrant, can adopt and adapt to American cultural norms while still retaining her Malian identity. This ability to navigate

multiple cultural frameworks simultaneously reflects the experience of many immigrants. It is also worth noting that this cultural fluidity is not always a voluntary choice but can be imposed upon individuals due to societal pressures and expectations. Therefore, Mariama's American self can be seen as a coping mechanism to survive and succeed in her new environment. The text doesn't explicitly mention what Mariama thinks about this phenomenon, but it does suggest that she has accepted and embraced the American emphasis on customer service and the need for a faultless, polished image. Mariama has a certain level of awareness of this shiny falseness of surfaces, which implies that she is conscious of the insincerity in her interactions with customers. The fact that she might shrug out of that self and complain about Americans after the customer leaves, further suggests that Mariama recognises the gap between her true self and the American image she projects to her customers. However, Mariama's acceptance of this new American self also highlights that she understands the importance of assimilating and adapting to the cultural norms of her new environment in order to succeed and thrive.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, Adichie's *Americanah* explores the complexities of immigrant experiences and the significance of shared spaces in shaping individual identities and contributing to the collective Africanness in the U.S. The interactions between Ifemelu and the undocumented African immigrants, Mariama and Aisha, at Mariama African Hair Braiding salon highlight the tension between assimilation and cultural heritage. Adichie uses the poetics of hair braiding to demonstrate the importance of balance between the two and the need to maintain a connection to one's cultural roots while adapting to a new environment. By embracing both aspects of her identity, Mariama is able to create a sense of belonging and build a strong community within the African diaspora, in which her character serves to be an inspiration and a bridge between different cultures and traditions. Mariama's story exemplifies the resilience and determination required to navigate the complexities of multiculturalism and assimilation while preserving one's authentic self. Adichie's portrayal of Mariama and the salon serves as a testament to the power of shared spaces in fostering understanding, empathy, and a sense of unity among individuals with diverse backgrounds. Ifemelu and Aisha on the other hand, through the act and poetics of braiding, symbolise the interweaving of different cultural narratives and experiences. Their interactions and shared



stories within the salon demonstrate the potential for connection and mutual growth that arise from embracing cultural diversity. Adichie's exploration of these immigrant experiences challenges prevailing notions of assimilation and highlights the richness and strength that emerges when individuals are given opportunities to authentically express and assert their identities. *Americanah* reminds us of the importance of creating inclusive spaces where immigrant narratives are celebrated, and where the collective Africanness can flourish through shared experiences and understanding. Through Ifemelu, Mariama, and Aisha, Adichie invites readers to reflect on their own notions of identity, community, and the transformative power of embracing cultural heritage while embracing the opportunities presented by a new environment. *Americanah* ultimately underscores the beauty and complexity of the African diaspora, serving as a poignant reminder that it is through the weaving together of diverse experiences that a stronger and more vibrant collective identity is forged.

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# HONG KONG DAZE:

A collection of introspective rap lyrics on Hong Kong & memories



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## INTRODUCTION

Why write raps? I presume that many, especially those exposed to traditional forms of literature, might be appalled at the qualities associated with popular rap lyrics at first glance: rap is inane and frivolous; it embodies libidinous and decadent values with crude utterances and expletives; it lacks the aesthetic and intellectual refinements of poetry.

To all these sentiments I respond with a confident “No”. This is not to say that all rap is fantastic or that rap is superior. Yet such perceptions, too fixated on particular vulgar terms, neglect the witty exploitation of language; the imaginative ideas and vivid verses are glossed over when people only afford attention at its general impressions. Writing poetry is an expressive and reflective undertaking – yet such presumptuous and obstinate views only cloud the perception of the readers.

Most importantly, I believe rap is a form of poetry – that also rhymes, with a rhythm and typically a beat, where poetic and lyrical language are also used to convey introspective and reflective ideas. Moreover, as it is necessary for rap to be performed audibly, rap has an advantage. It is more engaging to speak directly to your audience, especially when they can hear your emotions. It can be difficult to fully express and explain the writer’s ideas in poetry or rap. However, it is possible that rap is better at engaging a wider audience than sophisticated poetry, which is important for initiating the discussion of the ideas. Lastly, I think rap lyrics also presents an intellectual challenge when you arrange your words creatively in a way that sounds great as well as is meaningful. Finally, rap, as a most compact form of creative expression with stringent rhyme schemes and rhythm, makes it so that almost every line has a purpose. Through wordplay, many insightful ideas may be concentrated in a shorter text and delivered effectively to the audience. There is potentially less unnecessary “waste” in a rap lyric than longer forms of literature.

This (half of a) rap collection, *Hong Kong Daze*, summarises my personal observations and reflections of Hong Kong since my late childhood. For 15 years I have called the city my home, but while my father is a local, I was not born here. Though I have been influenced by many local conventions and values, sometimes I feel like a foreign object in possession of different traits and divergent opinions to which that is commonplace. On top of that, Hong Kong is a strange blend of many things. Here East meets West, while ingenuity meets tradition. The rich live their lives alongside the poor; the cacophonous urban sprawl border tranquil, undulating expanses of nature. This leads to numerous intriguing occurrences emerging throughout my life. While pondering these observations and feelings, I find it necessary to contemplate the relationship between myself and the place where I grew up in, as any writer ought to do. This is the reason why I selected this theme for my lyrical writing.

I employ rap as my creative medium as I believe it is a relatively new and truly special genre in Hong Kong, using English to depict a mostly Chinese society. Some of my lyrics focus on reinterpreting my memories and the past, while others are open observations of the occurrences in our city. In many lyrics, I introduce new perspectives in different verses or lines, ending them with a twist of perception or ideas, and I reflect upon my intricate relationship with aspects of the city in which I grew up. It is therefore my hope that my lyrics invites readers (or rather, listeners) to remain observant to minute details and “read between the lines”, and maintain an open mind in the society we live in.

Lastly, I would like to apologise for the lack of music in this written report. Despite my emphasis on the paramount importance of sound, the inclusion of auditory features is truly beyond the bounds of reality. Perhaps by visualising the monochromatic, rhythmic words, listeners may be enabled to form vivid mental scenes while they peruse the lyrics.

## LYRICAL SHOWCASE

As with poetry, many techniques and references can sometimes be difficult to locate or understand, especially when rap is not a common form of literature. Sometimes the best and only thing that can be done is to have the writer annotate and explain their lyrics in lyrics or poetry websites. I ask for your understanding that I cannot do so without writing several two-thousand-worded essays.

In addition, I am greatly inspired by Dan Bull in the creation of these lyrics. Dan is a British nerdcore rapper (i.e. who raps about nerdy subjects) who makes copious raps about political and social issues in the United Kingdom. He is most recognisable by his intricate rhyming ability and ebullient, quirky lyrics that resonate with the lower-class. Assiduous fans of Daniel reading this report may find many areas in my lyrics which emanates his style, for I try to maintain both the aesthetic qualities of rap and the profundity of meaning.

## II. Hilltop

(Verse 1)

It's like the world just dawned upon a lying wife  
As curious cries echo a silent night  
Out comes a boy with the ambition to know  
And that desire only broadens as he listens and grows  
He set his sights out on the skies and distant seas  
Trying to surmise on what his eyes can read and see  
The kid would embark on a journey of discovery  
He's needless for blessings from Hermes or Mercury  
He's a traveller acting as if no repentance is given  
Making an entrance indeed in the most adamant manner and  
If hell or heaven's ever present on this world  
Then you better reckon that he'd venture into them

(Hook)

Because he's an adventurer  
His memory is his mentor  
Still remembered what his mother had said  
He's an adventurer  
His stamina generates with momentum  
Not stopping 'til he's reached the world's end  
He's an adventurer  
His memory is his mentor  
Still remembered what his mother had said  
He's an adventurer  
His stamina generates with momentum  
Not stopping 'til he's reached the world's end

## II. Hilltop

(Verse 2)

He's got a thirst for knowledge  
Traversing forests to search and forage for food for thought  
Through the lot he explored from the smallest of molecules  
To the tallest of monuments of historic importance  
And what horror that haunts them  
Purged from glory by wars  
Or swallowed by a scourge that's dormant:  
A burst of warmth from the earth's surface  
Is all that he's ever scratched  
And the world's enormous

(Verse 3)

But all of a sudden, he had done it  
He's up on the summit  
From which he's seen most of the world's wonders  
And was planning his next course when someone  
Slipped him a letter, it was out of the common  
As the long chain of words begged for his correspondence  
It's none other than his own mother  
He has journeyed alone  
And now he's yearning for home



## II. Hilltop

(Verse 4)

So he did that  
And he was welcomed, greeted, and treated  
Like a visitor  
His prayers were met with indifference  
As not a single face thought him familiar  
This place bears no resemblance  
In a flash of remembrance  
Of the place that he once called home  
His heart sinks to the ground  
As the sun goes down  
The dreaded moment when he finally knows

(Hook)

'Cause he's an adventurer  
His memory's been his mentor  
Still remembered what his mother had said  
He's an adventurer  
His stamina generates with momentum  
Hasn't stopped 'til he's reached the world's end  
He's an adventurer  
He's tempered by temperature  
And he could comprehend what those actual words meant  
He's an adventurer  
He'd avenge for everything that he's learnt  
Knowing he's nothing when he's at the world's end

### III. Piano

(Verse 1)

I remember those childhood days  
Staying wide awake and feeling wild, afraid of  
The roadside cars blaring night and day  
In the muggy summer, throwing up a vile haze  
In my tired face in a tiny space  
While I'd lie in wait for my arrival date  
At that quiet winterland miles away  
With her beguiling gaze next to a fireplace  
In life there will always be a time and place  
Where you can feel alive, free to fly away  
And mine had a Steinway piano, standing  
Beside her, smiling while she plays  
Her fingers glide with intimate grace and  
Tickle ivories in intricate ways  
I think and write down a million praises  
Sing my rhymes full of idiom phrases  
You bring my mind to Elysium, making  
The thing inside my vermillion casing  
Spring to life, like the lithium racing  
Through strings, collide into brilliant vibrations  
You're why I played the piano  
The music gave me inspiration  
Through grating altercations, days mundane  
You made me feel creative

(Hook)

Found my Piano dreams  
In the sound of piano keys  
We dance around and around with a tambourine

### III. Piano

(Verse 2)

You handled me like a Handel piece  
Two different melodies, branching from a mango tree  
Though far away, we come together like a family  
Like a pit bull puppy with Keanu Reeves  
My favourite piece used to be Für Elise  
'Cause you played it to me, before I sleep  
It's a delicate scene, now we're separated  
So maybe my memories are made up  
I caved to the way the society laid us  
Made a mistake, and my fire had faded  
Misplaced the pages, it's time to break up  
But promised myself to save them for later  
Now I'm sorry to say I've lost touch  
With you, your skills, and your soft touch  
Tried to recall what you've taught but  
Haven't thought much thought 'cause I'm such a lost cause  
Forlorn through raucous mortal flocks  
The scrawling notes I played are obnoxious  
The dawn's now mourning  
But the scores of songs and chords are not forgotten  
So let angels cradle me  
To sleep, dingle-dangle  
Hear the jingle-jangle  
And change our forte back to piano

(Hook)

Found my Piano dreams  
In the sound of piano keys  
Profoundly abound near the mantelpiece

#### IV. Room 2012

(Ad-lib Intro)

(Verse 1)

From Lantau to the New Territories,  
To Admiralty, Sham Shui Po, Mong Kok, and Quarry Bay  
Each dollar spent for our glory days  
Each apartment, each shopping mall conveys the same story  
When we're building big department stores twelve-storeys tall  
Some people live in tiny spaces smaller than their bathroom stalls  
That's called a cage home, made them a laughing stock  
When your neighbour's in your face, of course it's hard to talk about it  
Every several blocks there's a Park'n'shop  
But the elderly can't find a parking spot for their carts and trolleys  
All because the rich are hardly sorry for the poor  
I can tell it isn't exactly what we've bargained for  
Never mind parking lots, there sure are a lot of parks  
Where under a cardboard box the homeless sleep after dark  
And living in a small, subdivided flat  
Can really leave your self-esteem feeling small, cut, divided, flat  
It's a selfish scheme of fat real estate moguls  
Who seldom seem concerned about the state of the locals  
Control our ways of living like dictators and nobles  
From shopping to service their domination is total  
We peasants lost control, that's why we're desperately vocal  
So we're threatening the social hierarchy with new proposals  
They say: "home is only as large as your heart is"  
Well, their homes are only as large cause they're heartless

#### IV. Room 2012

(Hook)

A world of hotels and trendy lapels  
But the residential areas' as dense as a cell (yeah)  
A world of hotels with plenty on sale  
Leaves many poor fellas feeling empty, unwell (aww)  
A world of hotels and trendy lapels  
It's kind of senseless in that some have only memories to dwell  
Yet the world's a hotel converging centuries of tales  
And here're the memories of the boy from room 2012

(Verse 2)

The city we live in's a little bit packed  
It's silly it should be like that  
When three quarters of land are undeveloped, fact  
They hoard land reserves just to make the most cash  
From supply and demand, it's a classic class act  
'Cause it's natural to be capitalist, no matter how irrational it is  
To stack their chips of avarice against Diabolus  
When they develop properties like it's a Monopoly match  
Then of course now we lack new housing awfully (sad)

(Hook)

A world of hotels and trendy lapels  
But the residential areas' as dense as a cell (yeah)  
A world of hotels with plenty on sale  
Leaves many poor fellas feeling empty, unwell (aww)  
A world of hotels and trendy lapels  
It's kind of senseless in that some have only memories to dwell  
Yet the world's a hotel converging centuries of tales  
And here're the memories of the boy from room 2012

#### IV. Room 2012

(Verse 3)

Residing with my father in a subdivided apartment  
Little more than twelve yards, and the size of my Garden's  
A red cookie box on the side and a carton -  
Really wasn't my dream home by quite the margin  
But despite the hardships, our lives were fine  
'Cause inside our hearts we found kindness, love  
The lights were always bright in our cosy abode  
And every night this family truly felt like home  
Didn't need an actual silver spoon or a golden egg  
I wandered in the libraries and wondered in my head  
There's a whole world outside our virtual confines  
So why do they chase paper and those weird curly Signs?  
And thinking back, I was actually quite fortunate  
There were places I could go, and rents weren't extortionate  
So here I dedicate this music rap to all of you  
With hearts of gold, people who refuse to be subordinate  
To the corporates, staying true to our embodiment  
We see each other through, show the world of our story  
It's a truth we'll forever seek to better, improve  
Until a new morning rises for the pearl of the orient

#### IV. Room 2012

(Hook)

A world of hotels and trendy lapels  
But the residential areas' as dense as a cell (yeah)  
A world of hotels with plenty on sale  
Leaves many poor fellas feeling empty, unwell (aww)  
A world of hotels and trendy lapels  
It's kind of senseless in that some have only memories to dwell  
Yet the world's a hotel converging centuries of tales  
And here're the memories of the boy from room 2012

A world of hotels and trendy lapels  
But the residential areas' as dense as a cell (yeah)  
A world of hotels with plenty on sale  
Leaves many poor fellas feeling empty, unwell (aww)  
A world of hotels and trendy lapels  
Since when did we become a shell of the memories we held?  
Yet the world's a hotel converging centuries of tales  
Shall we get better or worse? Only the century will tell



## V. Hong Kong Daze (A homophonic rap challenge)

(Verse 1)

Sample this track about Hong Kong days  
While I sample and track my own Hong Kong days  
Feel how it's like living Hong Kong days  
And feel how it's like leaving Hong Kong dazed  
You greet the barista, getting brews to go  
Like you are hit by a ballista, get a bruise to go  
You show off your phone, it's something new, enhanced  
Which you'll soon trade away for something new in hand  
Coursing the streets sipping mocha, stop and go  
Cars in the streets sit like mock-ups, stop-and-go  
Then you receive an important call  
But not about what's in your future, a portent call  
You're after Pikachu, playing Pokémon Go  
While others peek at you, plain poking and go  
You caught a legendary! Feeling great, on a roll  
But then you trip over a storm drain grate on the road

(Bridge)

You've broken a bone, keep your eyes on the road, man  
Put ice on your toe and be nice to the roadman

(Hook)

This is the city that I love  
This is the city that I laugh  
About the city that I laugh  
About's the city that I love  
Hong Kong



## V. Hong Kong Daze (A homophonic rap challenge)

(Verse 2)

Sample this track about Hong Kong days  
While I sample and track my own Hong Kong days  
Feel how it's like living Hong Kong days  
And feel how it's like leaving Hong Kong dazed  
Always been told when life gets tough going  
He has to get up and then get tough, go in  
Always been told that his quest's on the mark  
But when given a question? He never questioned the mark  
Day after day keeping up with the grind  
And they after day keep him up with the grind  
On stacks upon stacks of complementary notes  
Without ever attaching complimentary notes  
He sweats bullets in a hall full of hordes  
When no one sweats bullets when they haul fuller hoards  
And then with flying colours, finally he passes  
So he can fly to college finely, he passes –

(Bridge)

They're waving at the bridge where he glances at his passes  
He waves them at the bridge, never glancing back, he passes

(Hook)

This is the city that I love  
This is the city that I laugh  
About the city that I laugh  
About's the city that I love  
Hong Kong

## VIII. I'm a Teacher

(Intro)

Good morning class, how's the weather today?  
Every day getting wetter, we're already in May  
What better way to display your thanks on Mother's Day  
Than to get better grades, whatever it takes?  
It's never too late to study for your next examination  
To start, here's some facts to engage – and to those saying:

(Verse 1)

“All's well that ends well”, even if it's raining -  
It's a praised play written by the great Shakespeare  
But clearly such a clichéd statement, a blatant mistake  
Clear as day it won't aid you  
See, your life is wasted - without higher education  
So you must strive against every expectation  
In the race for your rightful place in any institution  
Kind of like relations between Whites and Asians  
Fighting wars over “bad seeds” and tea leaves  
Giving kids PTSD from Greensleeves -  
A melody about a wet dream, an obese breed  
Of royalty decreed, he's in need of several queens  
Seizing priests when they disagreed, ventured to secede  
Imprisoning and killing women, isn't he a mean beast?  
Get what I mean? You better believe in hell, you see  
Heed those teachings or penalised you'll be

## VIII. I'm a Teacher

(Hook)

I'm a teacher, it's my job to teach ya  
Creatures how to be a high achiever  
Yes sir, proceed with your lecture  
We memorise for tests, study questions to the letter  
I'm a teacher, it's my job to teach ya  
Theses and teasers, you may never need either  
Yes sir, proceed with your lecture  
Projectors are off? We'll forget all the objectives

(Verse 2)

Look, reciting facts are imperative  
To ace exams, it's evident, we've all been doing it forever since  
But when high scores are solely representative  
Of personal intelligence, it's certainly indelicate,  
Concerning that people can't seem to see the negatives  
Students become hypercritical, competitive,  
While critical thought is in deficit  
Fact application and relevance labelled as irrelevant  
Morality, etiquette, and other elements  
Are neglected for developing intelligence  
Sedentary lessons make everyone incredibly effeminate  
Yet no one cares about aesthetics and elegance  
But what we do care is whether you've been educated:  
Whether the facts and figures you recite are adequate and  
If you ever doubted anything, remember this  
Everything is done directly for your benefit

## VIII. I'm a Teacher

(Hook)

I'm a teacher, it's my job to teach ya  
Creatures how to be a high achiever  
Yes sir, proceed with your lecture  
We memorise for tests, study questions to the letter  
I'm a teacher, it's my job to teach ya  
Theses and teasers, you may never need either  
Yes sir, proceed with your lecture  
Projectors are off? We'll forget all the objectives

(Verse 3)

Listen, can I be real for a second with you?  
I used to have this view since secondary school when I beckoned for truth  
Every knowledge I accrued in my youth made me conclude  
That reciting facts is actually useless, and it's ruthless  
True, there aren't things like model answers or solutions  
In the universe, but innumerable confusions  
To which the only thing that you could do is think through them  
Or produce your blueprints and use them  
Refusing to be ingrained or restrained  
Be creative and innovative, initiating  
A revolution inside the brain  
Degrees weren't crucial to Newton, for you it's all the same  
To make a contribution to the society  
Skill and talent come in all kinds of varieties  
I wish my time hadn't been deprived mindlessly  
But your time starts now, so write quietly

## VIII. I'm a Teacher

(Hook)

I'm a teacher, it's my job to teach ya

Creatures how to be a high achiever

Yes sir, proceed with your lecture

We memorise for tests, study questions to the letter

I'm a teacher, it's my job to teach ya

Theses and teasers, you may never need either

Yes sir, proceed with your lecture

Projectors are off? We'll forget all the objectives

(Ad-lib Outro)

## IX. Need for Sleep

[Intro]

Can you perceive, against a deep dark screen?  
The vivid imagery, a fidgety and livid individual in his sheets  
Charging up two bloody laser beams so bitterly  
Aimed at the peeling ceiling? Pity me

[Hook]

I can't sleep  
No matter how I toss at night I can't sleep  
No matter how I cross my eyes I can't sleep  
No matter how I force and try I can't sleep  
I can't sleep, I can't

[Verse 1]

Unlike the rest of the city, I need to rest immediately  
I can't believe how people can get up eagerly  
In the morning just with three minutes of sleep  
After a feverish evening routine of staring at a screen,  
Preparing a killing spree? Ever so obscene  
And evidently it seems everyone agrees  
Yet the only lesson to me is that history repeats  
In my endeavour to be elite differently  
My friend's brilliant, she hasn't been asleep for days,  
Her eyes are glued to the pages of her student paper  
Truly studious, duteously elucidating  
Her absent excuses with dubious statements

## IX. Need for Sleep

[Verse 2]

The skyline brightens at night  
When the city comes alive and vibrant  
I can't acclimatise to this violent lifestyle  
Blinded by the bright sky and by the highlights'  
Leaving me surprised, now my mind's in a whirl  
It's like I'm lying in the other side of the world  
Was I obviously steaming, living a libidinous dream  
In which I'm British, buying pints for a girl?  
Am I reeling? Am I lost without meaning?  
Am I sleep-deprived? Am I even alive?  
Is this a momentary, minor psychedelic experience  
Or am I in some kind of cybernetic experiment?  
My entire subsistence consists of binary digits  
And confined in a mystic, drifting mindless existence  
Or am I reaching spiritual delirium to find  
That I've recently deceased in life? Is this the reason why

[Hook]

I can't sleep  
No matter how I toss at night I can't sleep  
No matter how I cross my eyes I can't sleep  
No matter how I force and try I can't sleep  
I can't sleep, I can't

## IX. Need for Sleep

[Verse 3]

See, it's gritty and dark inside an imminent part  
Of the city where a citizen is living apart  
From his intimate partner, that's his sleep departing him  
Beating weary a heart that evening after, since  
He's feeling insignificant, asking  
For a wish on a star for just a brilliant spark  
So that the feelings he harboured and the dreams in the past  
Can be written enlarged and revived like a kitten at large  
Enlivened with nine lives, thinking "Freedom at last!"  
It's high time to start seeking a laugh  
Dreams are a blissful escape  
For those who remain ever pitifully awake  
An artistic crusade to reclaim his faith  
To be creative, saved from the weight of the chains  
Instead he's only left with papers he had slaved to obtain  
Stressed, aimless, and staring vacant

[Hook]

I can't sleep  
No matter how I toss at night I can't sleep  
No matter how I cross my eyes I can't sleep  
No matter how I force and try I can't sleep  
I can't sleep, I can't sleep



## IX. Need for Sleep

[Verse 4]

I can't sleep, I have so many things to do tomorrow

Can't sleep, I see so much glee as well as sorrow

Can't sleep, I need to plan for a game of roleplay

Can't sleep, life spans the games we all play

I'd cast sleep on myself, cast the die, I'm a Bard,

But can't sleep on myself, can't sleep on my art

Can't sleep when it's bright, but I'm scared of the dark

Can't sleep when the lights flicker out with a spark

Can't sleep like Prince Hamlet and pray to be forgotten

Can't sleep in a hamlet, in a place that's been forgotten

Can't sleep cause sometimes I am forlorn inside

Can't sleep while my mind's on that song that I'd write

But I can't, see, all 'cause I'm bored and I'm tired

And I can't sleep, 'cause I'm too far gone, and I've tried

I can't sleep, recalling all that's lost in our lives

I can't sleep, I know that we have borrowed our time

Can't sleep on the future, can't sleep on the past

Can't sleep when I'm the dealer who's keeping the cards

Can't sleep when I'm the loser who's bleeding my heart out

Can't sleep until I suture these leaks and restart now

Can't sleep until I pass and succeed in my tasks

Can't sleep unless I lived every day as my last

Can't sleep late at night, 'cause I can't waste my time

Can't sleep 'til the end and I'm facing the lights

## IX. Need for Sleep

[Hook]

I can't sleep no matter how I toss at night

I can't sleep no matter how I cross my eyes

I can't sleep no matter how I force the rhymes

I can't sleep, I can't sleep, I can't sleep tonight

[Outro]

Can't sleep tonight

Can't sleep tonight

Can't sleep tonight

Can't sleep, can't sleep tonight



## CONCLUDING REMARKS

This has been my showcase. I hope it has been a fascinating ride.

My aspirations for rap lyricism sprouted as early as 2013, when I started watching Epic Rap Battle videos on YouTube. Back then, rap simply seemed like a cool concept. As I was interested in both music and English, those rap battles bridged the gap between these subjects and were incredibly engaging. This is especially so as these videos featured two or more historical figures debating and roasting each other with stylish insults. But while they were somewhat educational (for history knowledge), I had next to no knowledge regarding how to write raps and my early attempts were ludicrously terrible.

2015 was the first year I visited Dan Bull's channel when he appeared on ERB as a guest rapper. The battle in which he starred as Jack Ripper (vs Hannibal Lecter) was one of the best videos I have seen on that channel. Dan's flow was powerful as it was the first time an ERB verse featured intensive multi-rhymes. The whole battle was also visually and auditorily stunning – the fact that the contenders were serial killers were even more stunning as I had never beforehand considered truly how boundless the genre can be. That was when I started following Dan Bull (and later, a young fellow called Matteo on his channel, Mat4yo) on their channels and learning from their works; that was when a whole new world was opened up to me.

Dan's style was different to Matteo's. Dan's lyrics display a genius aptitude with sounds; he has an immense talent with conjuring and manipulating rhymes schemes and making them epic. Matteo, on the other hand, was more of a clever wordsmith who could rephrase expressions and rhymes at ease and inject so many creative ideas into them. I'm ashamed to admit that I can't even rap properly at times. From these masters I began to be convinced of the intellectual and creative merits of rap lyrics, and decided to try my hand at writing.

However, it would not be until 2018 when I first started writing rap lyrics, as I was still uncertain of the significance of this whole endeavour. I also had the HKDSE to worry about. The first "rap" I wrote in 2018 was more of an experimental writing exercise in which I attempted to extend a rhyme scheme for as long as possible while composing a somewhat coherent story. As I always had done with my stories and other writing, I asked my secondary school NET teacher, Ms. Bhowmath, who is a poet and debating coach, to read it. My secondary school has a weak literary tradition – there are no established drama or writing clubs, and no literature elective courses or teachers – except for Ms Bhowmath.

So Ms. Bhowmath read my unholy experimental creation and responded during our meeting that she had no knowledge in rap (even though she is interestingly a black woman originally from South Africa), and hence she could not offer much advice in that regard. She did, however, offered some feedback from a poetic perspective and as always, encouraged me on my venture. Most of the conversation on that afternoon deviated to other subjects (we spoke about slam poetry; I remember that she would invite me to a private luncheon after my graduation to catch up, which sadly never transpired: Ms Bhowmath had also already left the school two years ago).

And yet, her continuing source of inspiration and encouragement was what enabled me to persist in my lyrical ventures. As I grew older, I began viewing my earlier works with disappointment and contempt due to growing standards. Yet Ms Bhowmath, as prolific a writer as she is, never found fault with my inexperience and puerile tendencies. Her counsel on creative writing were not as profound as her encouragement: I was quite an independent learner. Throughout my years I have come to assert the view that creative writing is only half learning and inheriting the techniques and flairs from predecessors; one must develop and rely on his own creative ability. My father, who was the first inspirational figure in my life (Ms Bhowmath the second), knew nothing about English but have been encouraging me since a very young age. It was all because of their support that I eventually followed the path of literature and rap lyricism to which I am still passionately devoted today.

So after that meeting, I wrote a few more lyrics. The next (and last) lyric I sent her was Hilltop; when I finished my next lyric, she had left my school. But I carried on, and here I am today. I feel that my writing journey has gone a pretty long way, even if my experience with lyric writing hasn't been very long. I can't really say how I have developed as a rap lyricist, but as a writer, rap helped broaden my horizons and inspired me to be much more open-minded with everything. Like its rhymes and themes, one may feel free to break limits, or simply feel refreshed in coming up with creative alterations – thinking outside the box – within the given limits. Rap made me feel intelligent and satisfied my desire for originality and individuality, as with it, I could see myself as a different, special specimen to most other literary minds. It reminded me of where I started, and countless inspirations along the way.

And I feel that rap is such a special literary form: modern rap is such a unique, fresh breath of air – so different in style or language from sonnets and prose, yet its elements – music, rhymes, are yet similarly stemmed from traditional poetic forms – especially considering how mainstream hip-hop genre in the past had been contaminated with foul social histories.

**Fluidity between Existential Lightness and Weight:  
Kierkegaard in Milan Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being***

Lee Tsz Yan Grace

Supervisor: Prof. Eli Park Sorensen

1. Introduction

Men's search for their meaning of life has been a long journey ever since the times of ancient Greece. During post-war times, with a crippling sense of a socially constructed identity, people started to turn to within themselves when grounding their identity and meaning of life, thus a new branch of philosophy emerged, with Existentialists pondering on one broad life question: What is the meaning of existence?

Around 1840s, Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard proposed a 'stages of life' framework across his pseudonymous works, including two volumes of *Either/Or*, *Stages on Life's Way* and *Sickness unto Death*. With the framework, Kierkegaard attempts to address the complexity of human's being and existence.

Influenced by Immanuel Kant's philosophy, Kierkegaard extends from Kant's claim on human rationality, and claims that if an individual is to become an 'authentic self,' they have to work to move towards the religious stage, which the movement across different stages cannot be explained through logic or rationality, and only through one's '*Fear and Trembling*' in front of God would they submit to the absolute God and therefore become an 'authentic self.' Kierkegaard highlights the element of 'existential despair'<sup>1</sup> in his framework which is man's '*Sickness unto Death*.' Men would, by any means, try to lessen their

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<sup>1</sup> Existential despair, used in this essay, is a sense of uneasiness that stems from one's journey on searching for their individuality on metaphysical level, that is, when they consider elements such as the dialectic development of their soul. The term is mainly used to highlight the 'existential' element of the cause of such uneasiness.

‘existential despair,’ which the three stages in Kierkegaard’s framework are categorised with one’s distinct methodologies in doing so.

Milan Kundera is one of the most influential writers of existentialist novels in recent years, and influence from prominent existentialist figures are seen commonly in his works. Through his humour in novels including *Life is Elsewhere*, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, and *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, his many characters portray the countless possibilities of how one could live their lives, and the potential outcome such series of choices made by an individual. Instead of offering a definite framework and philosophical outline that explicates a certain ‘path to good life,’ Kundera takes inspiration from traditional existentialist philosophy by Kierkegaard and Nietzsche and extends them with literary renditions and depictions of the conceptual frameworks. Through his novels, he offers examples of how one can live their lives in forms of literary characters and imagine how their endings would be if they stick to a particular way of living, which provokes reader’s reflection on what constitutes their life’s meaning and essence. Through this Kundera attempts to address the gaps in between the existential stages proposed in Kierkegaard’s framework, spaces which have been much reduced and simplified as ‘leaps’ with a fluid form of existence.

In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Kundera begins by quoting Nietzsche’s famous thought experiment of ‘the eternal recurrence,’ questioning the meaning of life if such recurrence is absent. With every action experienced once and once only, they bear no weight and thus is ‘light’ in terms of existential weight. We cannot compare choices with previous or coming lives and is thus filled with existential despair with uncertainties of whether our choices would lead to a good life. Unknown consequences and the absence of guidance to

making a good choice makes each of them a burden. Is choosing lightness truly “splendid,” and is weight to be denied completely (Kundera<sup>2</sup> 5)?

“The heaviest of burdens crushes us, we sink beneath it, it pins us to the ground. The heavier the burden, the closer our lives come to the earth, the more real and truthful they become.

Conversely, the absolute absence of a burden causes man to be lighter than air, to soar into the heights, take leave of the earth and his earthly being, and become only half real, his movements as free as they are insignificant.

The only certainty is: the lightness/weight opposition is the most mysterious, most ambiguous of all.” (Kundera 5-6)

In the novel, Kundera explores the dynamics between lightness and weight through the relationship and interaction of two couples and examines how the tension between the two extremes contribute to one’s search of their existential meaning. He denies Kierkegaard’s concept of an ‘*Either/Or*’ choice to make when constructing one’s meaning of existence and focuses on filling the space of the ‘leaps’ with a sense of fluidity and ambiguity. Along the spectrum of absolute existential lightness and absolute existential weight, Kundera propose a fluid sense of existence: it is not the separated existential stages that Kierkegaard proposed that interests Kundera, but rather how the stages, as described in ‘lightness’ and ‘weight’ in his novel, interact, and how men respond to the tension in between. With both being inseparable elements of one’s existence, the two extremes interact as opposing pulling forces that affects how one construct their meaning of existence. The inclusivity of the two concepts leaves men in a liminal space, and it would be a lifelong task for one to find a position along the spectrum which they anchor their existence with existential weight, and at the same time

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<sup>2</sup> Unless specified, the unlabeled quotations from Kundera are all from the novel *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*.

embrace existential lightness. The way how every individual perceives their existential weight and lightness is unique in their form, content, and proportions, yet through addressing the struggle with a broad spectrum in the form of literary characters, Kundera offers a more fluid explanation on how one would find their exclusive meaning of existence. Rather than a definite answer, Kundera proposes a new methodology that extends on rigid definitions and offers a new perspective in how one could perceive their meaning of existence, opening new possibilities in interpreting one's existential meaning through illustrating a fluid sense of existence.



## 2. Stages on Life's Way

In Kierkegaard's framework, human existence can be roughly divided into three stages: the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious. The framework serves as a direction pointer for one's journey of searching for the definition of oneself, where through the through a development of the soul and a change in how one copes with 'existential despair,' one slowly moves closer to being an "authentic self" (Lee 94). Each existential stage is distinguished by how one interacts with their surroundings and responds to 'existential despair,' and a causal relationship is absent in between. One does not move on gradually from the aesthetic to the ethical, then to the religious; the transitions between stages is seen as 'leaps' without logical relation. Even with an innate inclination, it is not one's ultimate destination to arrive at the religious, one could absolutely live his whole life in the aesthetic according to Kierkegaard. It is also important to highlight the unidirectional movement from the aesthetic towards the religious, as according to Kierkegaard, one cannot unlearn what one has learnt on life's way, therefore there is no going back and forth between the stages. This chapter offers a brief overview on the prominent characteristics of the three stages.

### 2.1 The Aesthetic

"If, then, my thesis is true, a person needs only to ponder how corrupting boredom is for people... he needs only to say to himself: Boredom is the root of all evil."

(Kierkegaard 51)

The above passage from Kierkegaard's *Rotation of Crops* encapsulates the essence of an aesthetic existence in the framework: an aesthete sees boredom as "the root of all evil" and would use all might and strategies possible to escape from it (51). The only thing the narcissistic aesthete is concerned about is merely himself. Sensual excitement and immediacy occupy the aesthete, and with their fleeting nature, he must continuously switch between

choices to run away from the despair and boredom. An aesthete would not sacrifice choices to commit to one choice as it undermines his ability to escape boredom. The lack of consistent framework makes the aesthete choose everything and nothing at the same time, for commitment and repetition ultimately leads to boredom, which such choice would “lose itself in a great multiplicity” as it stands on the same ground with all other existing choices (Lee 72). Furthermore, an aesthete’s decision is “unconcerned about good and evil,” as long as it takes him away from boredom, he would make that choice (Westphal). In *the Seducer’s Diary* in *Either/Or I*, the seducer found the act of seducing and the anticipation involved in his “art” of seduction more worthy than the result, displaying a mentality which constantly seeks for novel pleasure and moves on from one event to another, for if he stayed longer boredom would eventually dawn on him (Kierkegaard 368). Thus, the aesthete commits to nothing and is unwilling to sacrifice anything for one choice, and consequently makes no true commitment and therefore can never develop true relationships.

## 2.2 The Ethical

It is clear, then, that it is the matter of choice that distinguishes an ethical from an aesthete. To choose oneself ethically requires one to acknowledge their choices and make related sacrifices in his “consciousness of responsibility for himself” (Lee 100). With his willingness to bear responsibility for his choices and make sacrifices, an ethical breaks free from the narcissistic mentality of the aesthete and commits to doing good for the good of other people, for instance, like how Judge William states in his reply to his “young friend” who is an aesthete, in marriage, one goes on to commit to their other half after passion and interest has faded, for he or she is responsible for such connection, and they would acknowledge prolonged pleasure beyond immediate excitement (Kierkegaard 66). The ethical sticks to a consistent set of rules and adheres to social norms and order, for they value the

collective more than individual satisfaction, and let their principles “be determined by that which is universal” in order to fulfil their ethical demand (Knappe 81). Kierkegaard sees this as a merge of one’s public and private life:

“It functions as the normative glue that holds both society and a person’s individual life together, that is, the teleological norms and values that secure an ordered society and promote a good life.” (Rosfort 202)

Civic duties and personal virtues that are expected to bring greater good to society through submitting to the universal, as Rosfort mentioned in the analysis of Kierkegaard’s ethical stage, includes “obedience, responsibility, courage, patience, honesty and transparency” (202). Such virtues curates a stable, orderly, and beautiful state of existence, which the ethical would find himself content living in. Therefore, commitment in the ethical stage is not solely committed to social welfare; it is in the bettering of his surrounding that an ethical considers his meaning and purpose of existence.

### 2.3 The Religious

While in the ethical one devotes himself to the bettering of society, in the religious stage one dedicates himself to something higher and transcendent: God. With “a leap of faith” one proceeds to embrace irrationality and absurdity, as he is “moved by his ‘fear and trembling’ in front of God” (Froel 19). The most significant example that illustrate the religious stage is Kierkegaard quoting the story of Abraham sacrificing his son to God, while unknown of the authenticity of God and acknowledging the violation of his action in terms of human ethics. Abraham had a ‘teleological suspension of the ethical’ and does as he is told by God. Such is an act that suspends one’s ethical commitments rooted in rationality, to embrace and execute the command of God that can be classified as inhumane and irrational in an ethical sense. Arguably, Kierkegaard states this religious stage of existence as one that is

more “elevated,” while being “characterised by ethical sin and existential suffering” for one might not know the legitimacy of “God’s” commands even after such theological suspension of human ethics (Froegel 20).

In this essay, the focus of the discussion is on the movement between the aesthetic and ethical stages, as the religious in Kierkegaard is portrayed as an uninhabitable position when considering the secular context Kundera’s novel is set in, alongside limited mentioning of religion. While religious existence is an important and complicated component in Kierkegaard’s original framework, it is less addressed in Kundera’s novel as it is hard to discuss existence outside social and ethical contexts (i.e.: such form of existence is absent in earthy lives), thus Kundera’s response to the religious stage of existence is not discussed in this essay.

### 3. The Light Aesthetic and the Weighted Ethical

As one of the founding figures of existentialism, Kierkegaard's philosophy influences many, and Kundera is one of them. Under the grand existentialist problem to search for life's meaning, Kundera, through his novel *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, explores possibilities of life through curating characters he sees as his "experimental [selves]" and unfulfilled possibilities of life ("the Art of the Novel" 31). Through analysing the "existential codes" of these 'selves' through sets of keywords, Kundera aims to explore ways to handle the existential despair which is an inseparable element of one's life through their acknowledgment and execution of their individuality ("the Art of the Novel" 31). The main characters of the novel showcases distinct ways of existence, though similar to Kierkegaard's stages of life, Kundera employs a 'lightness/weight' dichotomy to illustrate the ways one can face their existential despair. Such description adds ambiguity and fluidity in one's existence, thus opens possibilities to interpreting meanings of existence.

Unlike other oppositions like "light/darkness," or "fine/coarse" which a preferable choice is evident, the "lightness/weight" opposition, as Kundera approaches it, is the "most mysterious, most ambiguous of all" (5). It is uncertain which is better when both is inadequate: absolute weight will definitely crush men; yet absolute lightness seems to Kundera equally 'unbearable' as the novel title claims. Therefore, instead of a unidirectional movement in the stages of life as Kierkegaard has illustrated which hints at a fixed destination, Kundera does not see the development of the self as a journey from a position of aesthetic-like 'lightness' to one of ethical-like 'weight.' He views the dichotomy more ambiguously, and displays to readers the possibilities of existence in different positions on the 'lightness/weight' spectrum. Through the characters' interactions and Kundera's intervention into explaining his characters throughout the novel, he attempts to search for an answer to his question through introducing characters who make extreme choices in their life: he created

Sabina, a young Czech painter, who is willing to do anything to embrace the ‘absolute lightness’ of her life, resembling an aesthete in the Kierkegaardian sense; he also introduced Franz, a scholar, who seems to exist on the other end of the spectrum and embraces the ‘weight’ of his life, existing as a complete ethical, where the ending of both characters show the uninhabitability of extreme positions along the spectrum.

### 3.1 Sabina the ‘Light Aesthetic’: Betrayal, kitsch, and absolute lightness

Sabina, in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, illustrates what would a pursuit for existential lightness bring to one’s existence. Sabina’s strive for absolute lightness, however, as explicated in her tragic ending, seems to be a state that is ultimately “empty” and therefore “unbearably light” and therefore showing ‘absolute lightness’ as an uninhabitable position to take for one’s existence (Kundera 121).

Sabina employs the strategy of betrayal to refuse being defined and contained by social roles and responsibilities imposed upon her. She sees betrayal as the ultimate purpose of her life, her way to not be bothered by social expectation, the way to shed off existential weight and achieve absolute lightness. With ‘betrayal’ as one of the ‘existential codes’ Kundera gave Sabina<sup>3</sup>, her life can be summarized as a complete betrayal on everything she has: is told from young that betrayal is the “most hideous offence imaginable,” she employs betrayals as the medium for her to express her individuality through continuous offences, and sees “nothing more magnificent than going off into the unknown” through “breaking ranks” with successive betrayals (89). She betrays her father by marrying a second-class actor that is not to her family’s liking, then on her marriage to betray “her previous decisions,” turns away from her country to “not keep rank with the same people” and “same speeches,” and later on betrays Franz for her fear of their stable relationship, claiming that every betrayal opens up

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<sup>3</sup> See *the Art of the Novel*, p. 29-31.

broader possibilities for her life (Kundera 90-6). Sabina's non-commitment and refusal of bearing responsibility to her choices echoes Kierkegaard's characterization of an aesthete, who chooses all available and does not make 'authentic choices' for they are unwilling to sacrifice anything to commit to a single choice as that undermines their ability to escape from boredom. Sabina's constant betrayal on her previous decisions and on the social roles lead her to myriads of possibilities which she uses to escape from her entrapment in other's expectations, while her strongest strive for betrayals lies in her fear and hatred of 'kitsch.'

While kitsch usually refers to "art or design considered by many people to be ugly, without style, or false but enjoyed by other people, often because they are funny<sup>4</sup>", the word takes on a more serious meaning of an "aesthetic ideal" as explained in the following excerpt from the novel:

"...kitsch is the absolute denial of shit, in both the literal and figurative senses of the word; kitsch excludes everything from its purview which is essentially unacceptable in human existence." (Kundera 246)

Sabina's distaste towards kitsch lies in its extremity. While life means "seeing" for her, and borders of extreme light and absolute darkness blind her all the same, thus she considers extremisms as "veiled [longings] for death," which is a false passion (Kundera 92-3). Born and raised in Czech Republic during the Prague Spring<sup>5</sup>, political marches fill a broad timespan of Sabina's life, and she finds it disorienting and hard to join the marches for their extreme nature which attempts to wipe out all undesirable parts of human life and individuality, elements she considers inseparable from life. Therefore, she hides away during

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<sup>4</sup> See "Kitsch" in Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary and Thesaurus, Cambridge University Press, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/kitsch>. Accessed 8 May 2023.

<sup>5</sup> The Prague Spring is a period of social and economic liberalization in Czechoslovakia before Soviet invasion in 1968 (Bradley). It is a period of rapid transformation and loss of freedom for Czech residents after the Prague Spring, which an ideological vacuum is formed in Czechoslovakia, which is dangerous for it allows rapid invasion of communist ideologies with Czechs lacking a solid ideology to hold on to defend themselves. Sabina, born in this transitional period, is stuck in the gap between two ideologies that are both disorienting, thus from there born her hatred towards kitsch, political marches, and extremisms.

marches at school, for she fears her individuality would be eliminated if she is part of the “raised fists” and “shouting [of] identical syllables” (Kundera 99). What sickens her more is her discovery of the participants’ ignorance towards what they are marching on for. Those people merely show “an agreement with being as such,” in other words, are mobilized by the Communist party without understanding what they are fighting for (Kundera 246-7). To escape from this kitsch that celebrates life while wiping out individuality and from marches that fails to acknowledge the political pursuits of Communists lurking underneath, Sabina turns herself from the public majority, and ultimately from her motherland. She strategically mystifies her biography when she arrives in America and at last succeeds in hiding her Czech identity, thus avoids being identified with the kitsch that “people wanted to make of her life,” refusing to be defined with a single idea that potentially wipes out her individuality (Kundera 252).

But Sabina’s escape never has a destination, and she is in the end lost in the void of her existence filled with emptiness and ‘unbearable lightness.’ Betrayal is her tool to refuse committing to any responsibilities and escape from the roles put on her by circumstances, but on the way, Sabina loses her identity in this endless chain of betrayals:

“But if we betray B, for whom we betrayed A, it does not necessarily follow that we have placated A. the life of a divorcée- painter did not in the least resemble the life of the parents she had betrayed. The first betrayal is irreplaceable. It calls forth a chain reaction of further betrayals, each of which takes us farther and farther away from the point of our original betrayal.” (Kundera 90)

Sabina cannot define her identity as she never chooses anything to include in her life but only what to leave out through her aesthetic way of living. Her constant rejection of all potential commitments makes her only concerned about herself. In the end she has nothing left to betray on, for she had already betrayed her own betrayals, arriving at the end of the



road she took since young. In such extremity, Sabina is forced to confront existential despair directly for she had no escape anymore. She is finally unsure if such existential lightness and emptiness is the ultimate destination of her existence, but also finds herself unable to either turn back or go forward.

“The Unbearable Lightness of Being – was that the goal?” (Kundera 121) Sabina finally falls into an extremism which she had been trying to run away from all her life, into the void of complete ‘existential lightness’ with her complete denial of commitment which leads to her failure in grasping her individuality. Sabina sees her existential despair as social roles forced upon her, thus hopes to regain the definition of her existence through freeing herself from societal expectations. Yet her pursuit of complete lightness also takes away her ability to define herself, for she commits to nothing and thus makes her unable to ground her existence. Sabina feeling lost and incapable to construct her identity in absolute lightness denies the feasibility for one to live completely aesthetically or take on a position of absolute lightness along the ‘lightness/weight’ spectrum in Kundera’s depiction of existence.

From Sabina, we discover the importance of ‘existential weight’ in anchoring one’s existence, and commitment as a crucial source for one’s meaning of life. While on the other end of the ‘lightness/weight’ spectrum, a position of ‘absolute existential weight’ is also illustrated as uninhabitable in the novel through the characterisation of Franz.

### 3.2 Franz the ‘Weighted Ethical’: Universality, Devotion and Fidelity

The ‘existential codes’ Kundera put on Franz is ‘fidelity’ and ‘marches,’<sup>6</sup> two things that constitutes the existential weight he devotes himself to. He is a seemingly successful character: he has a stable career in academia and is married. Franz is drawn to order and repetition and fears randomness, as observed in his “homesickness” when confronting the

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<sup>6</sup> See *the Art of the Novel*, pp. 29-31.

“unorganized beauty of New York” during his trip with Sabina (Kundera 100). Such traits of him resembles an individual in the ethical stage of Kierkegaard’s framework, with his alignment of personal desires with the universal and hopes to curate a stable state of existence governed by norms and rationality.

But public life is too heavily influential for Franz, which makes him ignore his individuality while dissolving into the universal, heavily ‘weighted’ with he is compelled to stay within. Such form of existence made Sabina his only sanctuary, his only restricted zone of purity with his affection for her, as love to Franz, “[is] not an extension of public life but its antithesis” (Kundera 80-1). Their relationship is Franz’s attempt to hold on to the individuality of his existence. Though drawn to Sabina, a character of complete lightness, Franz is unable to let go of his existential weight in the form of societal norms and embrace the lightness Sabina brought into his life: while he enjoys spending time with her, he is torn between playing his social role of a good husband nicely and his affection for Sabina, and only visits her “as a friend” in Geneva, feeling that if he stays in the bed of two women, Sabina and his wife, in a span of a few hours, it would be a humiliation to all three of them (Kundera 79). He tries separating his public life and Sabina in a systematic way: they can be lovers only if they are not in Geneva. With Sabina lying on the edge of his organized life, he fears constantly that “his mistress was about to leave him” from the fundamental difference in the ways they live; but simultaneously he also fears to have his affairs discovered by others as it would be the end of his organized public life where he commits to marriage and, according to social norms, should stay loyal to his wife, Marie-Claude (Kundera 80-1). Such tension between his ethical duties and personal desires tears Franz apart, and his existence is more inclined to universal values, which increases the risk of him losing his individuality. His choices are not of his own, but of external expectations imposed upon him.

Marriage between Marie-Claude and Franz is not out of love, but of social function, and of Marie-Claude's threat that she would suicide if Franz does not take her as his wife. Though Franz is willing to commit to their marriage, it is not out of genuine care for Marie-Claude, but merely because it is a display of his public life, which he feels compelled to adhere to social obligations, for instance, the Geneva conventions which "husband and wife sleep together in the same bed" (Kundera 79). Thus, his commitment to marriage is rather a commitment to societal rules, different from how Judge William in Kierkegaard's *Either/Or II* claims it to be a willingness to commit to one's other half as one values pleasure that is "continuous in time" more than immediate and fleeting excitement (69).

While devoting his life to rationality and order, Franz, at the same time, is strongly attracted to the passion of political marches for their motivation in fighting for something that would bring greater good to the world as he perceives it:

"How nice it was to celebrate something, demand something, protest against something... He saw the marching, shouting crowd as the image of Europe and its history. Europe was the Grand March. The march from revolution to revolution, from struggle to struggle, ever onward." (Kundera 98)

Franz's passion for grand marches is rooted in his 'ethical duty' of bringing better good for humanity and fighting passionately for an ideal, yet he would eventually see through the illusions of totalitarian regimes that promises a seemingly brighter future, where he then "[resigns] himself to a sea of words with no weight and no resemblance of life" as he no longer sees the value in the parade (Kundera 102). He is drawn to Sabina partly due to her background from Czech, which he sees her as a "revolution" that proceeds beyond the faded "revolutionary illusion," a continuation of the 'grand march for better good' (Kundera 102). He later proceeds to join an expedition from Thailand to Cambodia, which claims to bring medical assistance to the country, which also through him taking part he imagines himself

affirmed by the “imaginary stare” from Sabina that recognizes the value of his participation in the grand march, thus offering meaning for his existence with his devotion to it. With his self-recognition grounded in his public life and the gaze from others (mostly from Sabina), Franz is crushed when his faith, in the form of “the Grand March,” is revealed to him nothing more than the publicity stunt of public figures, and the “exquisite noise of European history was lost in an infinite silence” and “the Grand March” thus bear no meaning and would not bring about greater good to history and society, and his anchor of existence loses weight, and his passion is therefore worthless and would not lead to ‘greater good’ (Kundera 265).

Franz’s existence is fragile for he places his meaning of existence outside himself, in his public life, in Europe’s ‘Grand March,’ but never in himself: once his surrounding changes, or worse, crumbles down, he is no longer able to construct his meaning of existence since he cannot define himself without an external gaze. He gives in to his “ethical duties” which causes him to be in a constant state of despair, for he is unable to fulfil them (Lee 95). He is burdened by extreme ‘existential weight,’ but such weight crushes his individuality which leaves him with nothing once his faith is proven false. Opposite to Sabina, Franz illustrates the impossibility to take the extreme position in ‘absolute weight’ and the risks of anchoring one’s meaning of existence completely outside one’s individuality.

Now we see Sabina, who gets rid of all possible existential burden in her life and finds it unbearably light and empty in the end; and on the other end we have Franz that takes on too much burden that exceeds his capacity and at last loses himself to his public life, unable to actualise his individuality. Both ends of ‘existential lightness’ and ‘weight’ are uninhabitable positions, like how Sabina said, a longing for the extreme is a longing for death itself; yet both are inseparable from existence. Sabina and Franz, while striving for extremes, lose their individuality on their way hoping to acquire it, and if extremes are not possible choices to make, how should we get around in between the two?

#### 4. Fluid States of Existence and the Rejection of a Unidirectional Development of the Soul

From Sabina and Franz, we see that an individual's meaning of existence must compose of both existential lightness and weight, and to gain one's existential weight is not to merge into the universal, but instead to find one's personal commitments not originated from external circumstances. It is through personal commitment that one does not fall prey to existential despair with an unreliable external situation. Thus, a sense of fluidity is seen in the form of commitment varying in every individual, which such sense of fluidity and pursuit of individuality is illustrated in the characters Tereza and Tomas, in whom Kundera attempts to extend on Kierkegaard's framework by filling the space of 'leaps' with a sense of fluidity.

##### 4.1. Between Kierkegaard and Kundera: on the Boundaries of Existential Stages

While Kierkegaard sees advancing from aesthetic to the ethical stage a step closer to being an "authentic self," being in the ethical one risks losing individuality when aligning his preferences with "the universal" (Rosfort 204). Orienting oneself solely in an impersonal framework is choosing to prioritize common good before the personal<sup>7</sup>, while such "universalisation" is to ignore one's "unique individuality" and assimilating existence into a larger common, detaching one from their "real existence" (Froegel 20-1). As 'real existence' is constituted by the individual's recognition of his "ethical responsibility" and "actualising his being," the imbalance of focusing only on development outside of the self and neglecting the development of one's soul hinders one in achieving their authentic self" (Elrod 10). With the irreconcilable conflict between the universal and the individual, existence is the continuous struggle to position oneself between the extremes.

If so, what is that struggle like?

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<sup>7</sup> See Either/Or II: the ethical self relates himself to the ideal and through such he sees his ethical duties as "the expression of his inmost nature," thus making it dangerous for one to only focus on achieving common good and overlooking his individual pursuits (Kierkegaard 259).

In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, the nocturnal butterflies that spiral up Tomas's and Tereza's rooms perhaps shed some light to our answer: to exist is to acknowledge one's inescapable existential gravity but attempts to defy it through spiralling upwards like the butterfly. While the fragile nature of the butterfly hints at the fragility of men: finding one's equilibrium in between is not an easy task, like when how the butterfly flies around, it constantly mingles between its own strength to stay afloat and the gravity that continuously pulls it down. The search for the equilibrium between seeking lightness and bearing weight is a repeating task that sustains through one's entire mortal life.

Different from Kierkegaard's unidirectional developmental framework, where the development of one's soul is simplified as inexplicable 'leaps' between stages<sup>8</sup>, Kundera describes existence as fluid and attempts to address the complexity and ambiguity in the dialectical development of the soul. In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Tomas and Tereza constantly struggles to find a balance between commitment, ethical responsibility, and individuality. Instead of a unidirectional move from aesthetic to ethical, it is through repeated internal negotiations and realizations that they find their own commitment as their own existential gravity and construct their true selves from within.

#### 4.2. Tomas: Gaining Existential Weight in Personal Commitment

Tomas's pursuit of individuality, though similar to a movement from the aesthetic to the ethical stage, does not anchor his meaning of existence in ethical duties but instead in his compassion and commitment towards Tereza, gaining his existential weight in their relationship. The process is not a straight-forward one, but rather repeated negotiations and

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<sup>8</sup> It is important to note, however, that motifs of repetition are also present in different stages of Kierkegaard's philosophy: the aesthetic "rotation method" to escape from consistency thus boredom; and the ethical's constant commitment to find content in stability. Kundera, in another sense, broadens the motif of repetition to a broader, intra-stage sense. The 'repetition' and 'recurrence' in this essay is mainly used to illustrate the development of the soul as a process that is not straight-forward, but instead a series of going back and forth between the two extremes of existential 'lightness' and 'weight.'

reaffirmations which finally leads to his contentment in his existence grounded in his personal commitment.

The journey of Tomas begins with him being narcissistic and describes his devotion to habitual womanising, in which he initially anchors his meaning of existence. Through his principle of “erotic friendship” he flees from responsibilities and commitment with a method similar to the rotation method stated in Kierkegaard’s *Either/Or* (Kundera 11-2). Tomas considers himself expert in the art of womanizing and coined the term “erotic friendship” which both individuals involved would not attempt to change one another, and he even develops a “rule of threes<sup>9</sup>” to avoid attachment that might grow in the process, and potential repetition that would lead to boredom thus a confrontation with ‘existential despair.’ His affairs continue after his marriage with Tereza. While acknowledging his infidelity would mentally torture her, he is unwilling to put that to an end. He sees Tereza as his possession, where he wants to “be able to watch over her, protect her” and “enjoy her presence” (Kundera 13) yet unwilling to alter his way of living, in other words, unwilling to commit to Tereza only and abandon his habitual womanizing.

But unlike a regular aesthetes who aim to escape from boredom, Tomas, through his affairs, is not interested in the “pleasure” the affairs bring, but the “possession of the world,” a longing to grasp the general existence that lies behind all women, and through his affairs it is as if he is cutting open the “outstretched body of the world with his scalpel,” and subsequently embrace all choices available through acknowledging the constant behind all variations of women (Kundera 197). He is drawn to the “unimaginable” part of women, a constancy behind all variation he encounters, of which he wishes to discover and “appropriate” (Kundera 196). It is a desire to conquer all, like how he sees his occupation as a

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<sup>9</sup> See *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*: Tomas either “[sees] a woman three times in quick succession and then never again,” or he would “maintain relations over the years but make sure that the rendezvous are at least three weeks apart” (Kundera 11-2).

surgeon his life mission, the cutting open of bodies as a way for him to explore the hidden constancy behind all human existence, and womanizing and surgery alike are the methodologies employed for his pursuit<sup>10</sup>. Such “lyrical” form of obsession, in the novel, is deemed ever disappointing with the absence of such ideal, the lack of a constant element behind all existence (Kundera 197).

It is not stated explicitly where Tomas’ obsession of conquering all possibilities of existence came from, but one part of his obsession perhaps can be traced back to his failed marriage that leads to his devaluation of commitment and the idea of love. His parents are disapproving of his divorce, and thus he does not get the custody of his children and can only visit his son through meetings scheduled by his divorced wife, which later evolves into him offering “expensive gifts” to bribe her to let him meet his son (Kundera 11). Such problematic experience makes him “fear women” as he claims, and therefore resorts to “erotic friendship” that is neither bounded by any ethical responsibilities nor the “aggression of love” (Kundera 11-2). Through such he attempts to escape from responsibilities and commitment from relationships that has been a major failure in his earlier life. He is unwilling to devote himself to one possibility and adapts an aesthetic way of living through his determination to address and appropriate the universality behind all women, hoping to free himself from the ‘undesirable weight’ of commitment from his son and divorced wife.

Tomas’ active embracement of an aesthetic mode of existence is challenged when he meets Tereza in a restaurant once while he was on a business trip, which afterwards through repeated instances he realizes commitment and “otherness,”<sup>11</sup> though causing conflict in his identity, are in fact inseparable parts that contribute to his meaning of existence. His attachment to Tereza seems laughable, but also inescapable.

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<sup>10</sup> See *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, p. 197.

<sup>11</sup> See “Strength of a Fragile Mind”: “Our identity, Kierkegaard argues, is constitutively fragile because our sense of self is constantly disturbed by an otherness that is part of who we are” (Rosfort 195).



“He had come to feel an inexplicable love for this all but complete stranger; she seemed a child to him, a child someone had put in a bulrush basket daubed with pitch and sent downstream for Tomas to fetch at the riverbank of his bed.” (Kundera 6)

This metaphor of Tereza as a child washed downstream in a basket to Tomas is first mentioned early in the novel and recurred several times throughout. Metaphors are deemed “dangerous” in the novel as it gives birth to love (Kundera 10), and Tomas’ attachment to Tereza has begun long before he realizes, when she enters his “poetic memory<sup>12</sup>” in the form of a metaphor. Six chance encounters made him conceive Tereza as an inseparable part of his life, and with the repetition of the metaphor, a sense of romantic fatalism prevails in the couple’s relationship. With awareness that he must be responsible for Tereza if he invites her to Prague, Tomas first hesitated, but in the end accepts her as she comes to Prague to find him<sup>13</sup>. While Tomas emphasises an “uncontrollable craving” to be alone after his affairs as he sees the women as “intruders” into his existence (Kundera 13), he subconsciously allows Tereza to repeatedly intrude his life: waking up holding her hand; comforting Tereza’s anxiety when she discovered his affairs by flipping through letters on his desk, as if he has feels the pain Tereza felt in her nightmare<sup>14</sup>.

Though subconsciously caring for Tereza, Tomas’s process of accepting his existential weight in the form of Tereza is not straightforward, and he gets a chance to return to his attachment-less bachelor life when Tereza could not stand his affairs and returns to Prague from Zurich. Without the need to choose, Tomas deems himself freed from the responsibilities of choosing, in which he feels a sense of relief and believes his love for

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<sup>12</sup> See *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*: “The brain appears to possess a special area which we might call *poetic memory* and which record everything that charms or touches us, that makes our lives beautiful. From the time he met Tereza, no woman had the right to leave the slightest impression on that part of his brain.” (Kundera 205).

<sup>13</sup> See *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, p.6.

<sup>14</sup> See *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*: “But instead of throwing her out, he seized her hand and kissed the tip of her fingers, because at that moment he himself felt the pain under her fingernails as surely as if the nerves of her fingers led straight to his own brain.” (Kundera 19-20)

Tereza is “beautiful but tiring,” and without burdens of commitment he enjoys this beautiful melancholy of their relationship while able to continue with his womanising (Kundera 29). A sense of “sweet lightness” conquers him, but it is not long before he feels the “painful weight of compassion” that he cannot escape, and he feels an inescapable need to go back to Prague to Tereza, only to regret again when he arrives and feels the “despair of having returned” (Kundera 30-1, 35). The back-and-forth negotiations and decisions show Tomas’ struggle to find his balance between existential gravity and lightness, and how would he position himself in between the two extremes. The process is therefore not a unilateral progression, but rather constant negotiations, regrets, and realisations which he repeatedly reassures himself “*Es muss sein!*” and then repeatedly doubts if “it really [has] to be” (Kundera 33).

The parallel between the “*Es muss sein!*” leitmotif in Beethoven’s music and in Tomas’s devotion to Tereza further illustrates the inescapability in his ‘existential weight’ which is also inexplicable. While Beethoven’s ‘*Es muss sein!*’ originates from a purse and escalated to something “solemn” after Beethoven revisits it in his other movement<sup>15</sup>, Tomas’s devotion towards Tereza, similarly, starts in a series of “laughable fortuities” and yet grows into an attachment in which Tomas anchors his existential weight in (Kundera 191). Tomas keeps asking himself ‘*Es muss sein?*’ in his relationship with Tereza and affirms himself with ‘*Es muss sein!*’ every time he decides to be responsible of his decisions, for instance, to leave Zurich and return to the politically unstable Prague just to be with Tereza, as he finds peace in seeing Tereza “alive” and “with him in the same city,” and that nothing else mattered to him (Kundera 216). The repeated happenings between him and Tereza that finally leads him to acknowledging that commitment is an innate part of his identity which is also a source of existential weight<sup>16</sup>, and only through embracing the whole of his identity is he able to be

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<sup>15</sup> See *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*: “‘*Es muss sein!*’ was no longer a joke; it had become ‘*der schwer gefasste Entschluss*’ (the difficult or weighty resolution)” (Kundera 191).

<sup>16</sup> See *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*: “We all reject out of hand the idea that the love of our life may be something light or weightless; we presume our love is what it must be, that without it our life would no longer

content when positioning himself between extreme existential weight and complete lightness. His attitude shifts from ignoring weight that comes with commitment to acknowledging and embracing the existential weight Tereza brought into his life, which allows him to anchor his existence and not be lost in existential lightness.

Though Tomas' development is similar to a progression from an aesthetic existence to an ethical existence, it is inaccurate to say he ends up in an ethical existence due to the personal nature of commitment he anchors his existence with. Tomas does not devote his existence to better social good but instead chooses to abandon his 'mission' as a surgeon and his social status in Prague to protect Tereza, and his individuality only begins outside his social roles. Tomas, though seeing surgery as his mission since young, with surgery and womanizing alike, he seems to be seeking things beyond his "mission," or "what remains of life when a person rejects what he previously considered his mission," in which he places Tereza (Kundera 192). As an intellectual in Prague, Tomas knows by signing a petition, he commits to better social good by voicing out and demanding political prisoners to be released from the totalitarian regime. Yet he is reluctant to sign as he foresees Tereza suffering from more stress, and he refuses for the wellbeing of hers is the "only one criterion" on which he decides whether to sign the petition or not (Kundera 216).

Alongside Tomas's inclination of caring for Tereza's wellbeing over social good as a sign indicating he does not progress to an ethical stage of existence, his refusal of his duty to sign the petition also lies in his realization of how his public article is misunderstood. His article, quoting the myth of Oedipus in his complicated argument, is over-simplified and misinterpreted: his ambiguous distinction between good and evil is taken as a clear-cut one, with an added connotation that he demands the totalitarian regime to be punished<sup>17</sup>. Tomas

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be the same; we feel that Beethoven himself, gloomy and awe-inspiring, is playing the 'En muss sein!' to our own great love." (Kundera 34)

<sup>17</sup> See *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, pp.173-4, 215.

realises his desire for social good does not fit into the that of the others: the regime wants the article retracted as it threatens their authority; people who already signed retraction declarations rejoice as he would join them in their cowardice<sup>18</sup>, and to strive for better social good, Tomas must betray his belief and give up on his opinion and individuality. Such loss of purpose in serving the society (for Tomas does not align himself with those universal values anymore) leads him to “[fall] prey to compassion” again, and seeks to gravitate his existence towards his commitment to Tereza, which lies on the opposite side of the ‘Es muss sein!’, his originally perceived ‘mission’ of his life to fulfil his ‘ethical duties’ as a surgeon and a Czech intellect (Kundera 236).

Tomas’ struggle of existence is thus a repetitive process between his negotiations of how much existential weight he recognizes, and in what, in whom should he anchor his existence in. His contradicting beliefs with the general society leads him to abandon his social status and take up the existential weight only in the form of his commitment to Tereza. His originally ‘light’ being gradually, through numerous struggles, found its designated existential weight, with which he is finally content in the end while Tereza, towards the end of their lives, apologizes to him for taking him away from his surgeon ‘mission,’ he simply replies:

“Missions are stupid, Tereza. I have no mission. No one has. And it’s a terrific relief to realize you’re free, free of all mission.

Tomas turned the key and switched on the ceiling light. Tereza saw two beds pushed together, one of them flanked by a bedside table and lamp. Up out on the lampshade, startled by the overhead light, flew a large nocturnal butterfly that began circling the room. The strains of the piano and violin rose up weakly from below.” (Kundera 310).

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<sup>18</sup> See *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, p.178.

Tomas at last is content with his existence grounded in his relationship with Tereza, while the nocturnal butterfly spiralling and staying afloat in their room encapsulates his journey to grasping his individuality: it is not a straight forward process, but instead repeated negotiations in fluid states of existence, in which he decides how much existential ‘lightness’ and ‘weight’ he will take up in his life, and what form would this ‘weight’ be in. Tomas, through responding to his fluid state of existence, succeeds in grasping the meaning of his existence in the end.

#### 4.3. Tereza: Gaining Lightness through Defining Individuality from Within

While Tomas gradually gains existential weight, Tereza, on the contrary, loses existential weight and slowly gains more lightness. She is a character who struggles with individuality and “vertigo,” also “weakness,” as Kundera states in an interview (Kundera, “the Art of the Novel” 29-31). From being bound by existential weight from Tereza’s external definition of her individuality, through her relationship with Tomas, she slowly shifts how she anchors her meaning of existence. Freeing herself from external definitions, she regains her individuality and thus embraces more lightness in her existence.

In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Tereza in the beginning defines her individuality with how her physical body is perceived, and sees her soul as something weak, where weakness is an undesirable quality of hers. A significant amount of her identity struggle is encapsulated in her negotiations with the “irreconcilable duality of [her] body and soul,” as stated in the opening paragraphs of section 2 of the novel titled “body and soul,” a duality which Tereza eventually attempts to ignore with the inability to unify them (Kundera 39). She has affection for neither her body nor her soul: she perceives her physical body as something similar to others in the way her mother devalues her own body, thus Tereza hopes to seek her value and individuality in her soul, but then finds it “sad, timid [and] self-

effacing,” and is one that surrenders to weakness and shame (Kundera 46). She despises her weakness, and therefore shifts her focus to her body when considering her individuality, which hopefully by declaring her body is unique, her soul will gain value eventually.

Thus, she escapes from her mother and goes to Tomas, from a world in which “all bodies are equal,” into one which through Tomas’ love she can ensure that her existence is unique also irreplaceable (Kundera 56-7). Instead of enjoying affection through intimacy, she hopes to erase the duality between her body and soul through screaming during their intercourse, as if by “crippling the senses, preventing all seeing and hearing” she is able to fool herself into believing her uniqueness she found from Tomas’ love (Kundera 53).

But in anchoring the definition of her individuality somewhere outside herself, Tereza risks being in a constant state of anxiety that stems from the uncertainty and contradictions in her surroundings. Tereza bets everything on Tomas as she sees him as her refuge and is eventually troubled by Tomas’ habitual womanising. Though she loves him, she fears losing her individuality, and is troubled by her nightmare which depicts a scene that rejoices the “solidarity of the soulless,” and her existence is completely determined by Tomas<sup>19</sup>. The way Tomas treats her in their relationship makes her feel fragile as she gets no reassurance of her uniqueness:

“But he, too, had drawn an equal sign between her and the rest of them: he kissed them all alike, stroked them like, made no, absolutely no distinction between Tereza’s body and the other bodies.” (Kundera 56-7).

Unable to seek individuality through her body, Tereza turns again to her soul, and finds herself again conquered by vertigo and weakness. She is forced to the edge of falling back into the abyss where she came from, to a world of soulless existences. She is unwilling

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<sup>19</sup> See *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*: “...while she marched around the pool naked with a large group of other naked women, Tomas stood over them in a basket hanging from the pool’s arched roof, shouting at them, making them sing and do knee bends. The moment one of them did a faulty knee-bend, he would shoot her.” (Kundera 55)

to fall, yet could not seek a sense of belonging or individuality from the world 'above,' thus is conquered with vertigo:

“What is vertigo? Fear of falling? ... No, vertigo is something other than the fear of falling. It is the voice of the emptiness below us which tempts us and lures us, it is the desire to fall, against which, terrified, we defend ourselves.” (Kundera 59)

Desperate to defend herself from falling, Tereza attempts to shift her anchor of existential weight to social commitment through her job as a journalist, which she again eventually realises the unreliability to do so. She believes through dedicating herself to photographing cruelty during the Prague Spring, she would gain purpose in her life in a form of social commitment through raising awareness in the West for the cruelty that filled Prague during the time. But she again loses this definition of her existence realizing Westerners are uninterested in the fate of the Czechs, and is instead drawn to more vulgar news stories, for instance, as seen in how the editor is “glad” that his colleague brings in news about the novel “nudist beach” that stops Tereza from defending the prominence of the Prague uprising (Kundera 67). The editors at the Zurich press never acknowledge the meaning behind her photos and instead suggests Tereza to take pictures of “cactuses and roses and things,” something completely irrelevant to her intention of being a journalist (Kundera 68). While acknowledging the good intentions of the editors, Tereza is once again disappointed upon the realization of the fact that the way she anchors her existential weight does not resonate with others: it is something that only she understands. When Tereza moves to Zurich with Tomas, she feels herself relying on him completely, which his continuous womanizing adds onto her anxiety endlessly. With realization that her individuality built on her career as a photographer is again worthless, Tereza escapes again back to Prague, somewhere she is more familiar with and only depends on Tomas only “when it comes to the heart,” hoping to regain some control

over her individuality as she slowly sees the danger in defining her individuality only with things outside her existence (Kundera 73).

It is then through Tomas' command of her to commit suicide and her surrender to her weakness that Tereza finally embraces the nature of her soul as fragile and weak, and does not run from it or ignore it anymore. As Tereza sees herself as why Tomas has given up prosperity in Zurich and fell back to Prague with her, she feels compelled to be responsible for him, which her way of being responsible is to obey all his commands and have him define her existence. Her epiphany of such misconception strikes her when Tomas orders her to commit suicide one day while the couple is taking a walk in the park. In front of the prosecutor, Tereza confronts death directly, when she finally realizes that she values her life more than her obedience towards Tomas and confesses that it "[isn't] her choice at all" on the brink of being shot (Kundera 145). While knowing this choice would disappoint Tomas, she chooses to live on. Thus, it is her epiphany that she realizes her individuality only roots in her own perception of her existence, never in how others or the social roles and environment define her. She also finally accepts weakness and her vertigo as integral parts of her identity, as her confession of committing suicide being not her own choice roots in her weakness and fear towards death, and it is this integral weakness of hers that allows her to recognise her existential value. By that, she is finally able to love Tomas in a form which she takes hold of her individuality. Their relationship is on an equal footing, they are responsible for and affected by each other. Earning her individuality, Tereza starts reflecting on her existence, still bounded by the thought of a unified body and soul, questioning if such thought is valid through an exploration of the idea of love.

As external definitions of existence fail Tereza again and again, in addition to her epiphany after her failed suicide attempt, she slowly turns to discovering and exploring the duality of her body and soul as a way to deal with her 'existential despair.' Through staring at



herself in the mirror she finds something that is “incorporeal” and “intangible” in the composition of her identity as Tereza, and that her “soul” is something detached from her physical body (Kundera 136). Then she follows Tomas’ footsteps and tries to conceive the idea of “love” and “love making” as distinct, and in the form of flirting she attempts to see the beauty and this meaning difference in the two (Kundera 140). While after a few tries she is still lost in this maze unable to assimilate Tomas’ conception of love into part of her identity, Tereza takes an ultimate attempt by engaging herself in an affair with an engineer who regularly visits the bar where she works at. Realising only her “body” is involved in the process and not her “soul,” she finally sees the duality between her body and soul, yet if she is to take on this form of existence, “her soul’s approval would have to keep mute,” making her unwilling to maintain such form of existence as it requires her to ignore her soul, very similar to how she would fall back into her mother’s world of ‘soulless existence’ (Kundera 152). Tereza, after acknowledging she is in control of defining her own existence, and after her attempt to take up a rather extreme position of completely dividing the soul from the body, realises the inability to arrive at a clear-cut definition of her existence. She is unwilling to let her physical dominate over and mute her soul, which after embracing weakness as part of her individuality, she explores the possibility to anchor her ‘existential weight’ in her soul by reflecting on how she interacts with other existences.

The behind-ness of Tereza’s soul in her body (as seen when she stares into the mirror as if to tell her mom to recognize that Tereza, instead of being something like her, is instead something different<sup>20</sup> ) mirrors her position in a backroom instead of being a photographer in the beginning. She sees her job is way for her to express her inner self, or her ‘soul’ directly, not through her physical body. Tereza’s mindset does not align with her job in the backroom, a position which she feels “not enough”: she wishes to be the photographer that that is in the

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<sup>20</sup> See *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, p.46.

front, rather than being in the background developing photos taken by others (Kundera 54). Her longing for being a photographer through her conversation with Sabina is also a longing for recognition of her soul and bringing it to the front. And through repeated experiments, Tereza eventually sees her existence as she herself taking initiative to give meaning and ‘existential weight’ to things and people, rather than passively taking up the weight others exert on her.

Tereza’s move from having others define her existence to defining it by herself shows a shift from her refusing to take responsibility of her existences and later becomes willing to bear the consequences of her own choices, bringing her away from an aesthetic existence in the Kierkegaardian sense. She finally sees herself as an active agent that can assert meaning to her existence, and even affect that of others, through the relationship with their dog Karenin, and later with Tomas. Karenin is a dog Tomas brought to her to keep her company, and throughout their journey to and from Zurich and finally to the rural village, Tereza never left Karenin behind. When Karenin is diagnosed with cancer, Tereza realizes her love for the dog is perhaps the simplest form of commitment, a kind of love that is “completely selfless” for she never needs to ask Karenin to “love her back,” but she simply loves Karenin and enjoys its<sup>21</sup> presence and accepted it for “what [it] was” (Kundera 293-4). Tereza’s love for Karenin allows her to acknowledge that commitment is not to wish for something specific in return, but simply to enjoy another’s company, which again frees her from her burden of valuing Tomas over herself in their relationship. Apart from her commitment to Karenin, Tereza further realizes her desire of being responsible or committing to a relationship through

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<sup>21</sup> The pronoun “he/his” is used to refer to Karenin throughout the book though the dog is actually biologically female. This is the result of its name originating from the husband of *Anna Karenina* which the couple believes would affect its perception of its own sexuality and is proven valid for when it is supposed to be drawn to Tomas more with its biological sex, Karenin chooses to love Tereza more. It is simplified as ‘it’ in this essay to avoid confusion.

her dream<sup>22</sup> towards the end of the novel. Tereza dreams of Tomas needing to report to a nearby airfield promptly, where Tomas, shot when they disembark the plane, crumbles down into a rabbit. Tereza “presses [the rabbit] to her body” like how she treats Karenin, and “[bursts] into tears of joy” (Kundera 302). For Tereza value her love for Karenin “better” than that for Tomas, it does not mean she does not love Tomas. Rather, she longs for commitment between Tomas and her that is like her commitment to Karenin: a “demand free” commitment that only requires the other’s company (Kundera 294). The dream serves as a metaphorical representation of Tereza’s desire to be responsible to Tomas in their relationship, while freeing herself from the burden of Tomas’ qualities which has brought her anxiety. It is the final epiphany of how Tereza grasps tightly onto her own definition of existence, in a form of demand-free commitment to Tomas:

“... She immediately found her room she had been given at the age of five, when her parents decided she deserved her own living space.

... The table had a lamp on it, a lamp that had never stopped burning in anticipation of her return, and on the lamp perched a butterfly with two large eyes painted on its widespread wings. Tereza knew she was at her goal. She lay down on the bed and pressed the rabbit to her face.” (Kundera 303)

Tereza finally finds her form of existential ‘weight’ in her relationship with Tomas, which a butterfly appearing in the scene where she is content in the room she used as a child in her dream serves as a metaphorical form of her fluid existence: while originally bearing too much ‘weight’ in letting external forces define her existence, Tereza lets go of such ‘weight’ by acknowledging that only she herself is responsible for her existence, and gains existential ‘lightness’ for she is no longer bound by external definitions and expectations, and

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<sup>22</sup> The section is not clearly labelled as a dream, but unrealistic elements suggest the scene to be either Tereza’s imagination or dreamscape.

is able to live a life she truly desires. The fluidity of her existence lies in how she searches for her own form of existential 'weight' to anchor her existence in, which she is at last content in her relationship where she places herself on the same level with Tomas rather than submitting to his commands.

## 5. Conclusion

In the end of the novel, both Tereza and Tomas is content with their forms of existence and found their ways to balance existential weight and lightness through their commitment to each other. They are, throughout their mortal life, stuck in the gap between extreme existential lightness and extreme existential weight. But is this in-between indecisiveness a curse? For Kierkegaard's 'stages of life' framework leaves blank the space between two extremes, Kundera responds to this gap with a fluid sense of existence, in which men is bound to explore back and forth on the spectrum of lightness and weight on their journey to finding their equilibrium.

Franz and Sabina illustrate how it is impossible to take only either 'weight' or 'lightness' in our existence, which leads to the analysis of how Tomas and Tereza struggles in between these two opposing yet inseparable forces in their existence in their unique trajectories. The moment Tomas and Tereza find their position on the spectrum respectively, the scene always ends a butterfly would spiral up the room. As Kundera states in the novel, humans cannot find happiness for their time "runs ahead in a straight line," and man's happiness roots in his "longing for repetition" (Kundera 295). The butterfly spiralling in the room mirrors the plight of Tomas and Tereza searching for their meanings of existence: it is only through repeated negotiations and realizations that one is finally able to balance between the two pulling forces that inevitably result in tragic death.

"...life in Paradise was not like following a straight line to the unknown; it was not an adventure. It moved in a circle among known objects. Its monotony bred happiness, not boredom." (Kundera 292)

Despite the repetitive nature of the journey, it is only within such repetition one sees the meaning and beauty of existence: it is the non-definite quality in one's position between existential lightness and weight that makes existence attractive with the possibility it holds; it

is the inescapability from either ends and the temporality of one's existence that gives value to all happenings and choices for all existence. There is no Nietzsche's eternal recurrence in the world which we exist, but Kundera argues that the meaning and beauty of existence is not deprived by its absence, for recurrence is found in other forms, in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, the back-and-forth searching for one's existential weight and lightness. The fluid nature of existence in Kundera's novels denies any definite answer to a single form of meaningful existence, but instead opens up endless possibilities for one to take initiative to search for and define their unique meanings of existence.

While this essay introduces a new perspective in dissecting Kundera's depiction of existence in his novels, it is not the only explanation with the myriads of elements and themes embedded in his novels, and existence itself more complex than something to be encapsulated in one argument. Further analysis from different angles, for instance, the construction of individuality through political identities, is needed to provide a more comprehensive understanding of Kundera's perception of his attempt to answering what is the meaning of human existence in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*.

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## Milk Teeth

Ma. Rosario Clarizza Catingan

Supervisor: Dr. Suzanne Wong

### Survivor's Guilt

you asked me if i remember  
i say *no* with a cat's courage,  
with shaking hands i grab the glass  
overflowing with vodka orange.

an opened bottle of Stoli—  
*Are you sure you don't remember?*  
Yes, I was on the train when snakes  
crawled their way out mama's mouth.

Mama tried to wring her body  
around my neck. slithers and hisses,  
fangs against the iambic pulse.  
the sharps sink. skin breaking like paper in rain.

What's worth forgetting? I don't remember.  
*Are you my daughter? You are not a mother.*  
Am I? Do I know? I tend to forget things—  
things the brain chooses to erase.

Will I forget the throat that was crushed?  
Maybe I'll forget how the cat sat in silence.  
Will I forget how the cat started licking me?  
Maybe I'll forget how the cat only had one life.

I told you I don't remember.  
The cat whispers in my ear: veins are blue.  
Mine are black and bruised.  
Mama, your fangs are stained with red.

The purring lives by my ear. Soft mews.  
It licks my wounds, warm tongue lapping away  
remnants of blood. *Wag kang umiyak.*  
I can't recall if I stopped crying.  
The cat and the snakes are reduced to ghost stories.  
I don't remember the myths anymore.  
*I don't believe they are real.*  
Please don't ask me if I can remember.

## New Year's Eve

the roof of my mouth is burnt,  
not from the scalding meal,  
but the taste of your words.

My mind transcends into a scatter  
as you say *We are better off as friends*,  
yellowing teeth saying hello from the dark.

I savoured your farewell like a curse—  
cast by a looming figure concealed  
by the silence that's empty and blurred.

If Earth were spinning in reverse,  
i'd go home to tend bruised knees  
Is this what they call the Absurd?

You say: *Breaking up has its perks*  
Does that include watching my pleas  
of fiery hurt and ego that's been burned

When we first met, the toxic patriarch  
disappeared within the dancing trees,  
within our souls that started to merge

Now you say, as we sit in this park  
amidst the smothering, drizzling breeze  
with your hollowed eyes and distasteful perm:

*You'll find someone better than me.*

the roof of my mouth is scorched.

## Untitled

i'll kiss the space between your eyes.  
the bow you stole from the planets' offspring  
but a whisper away from my fever-stricken skin.

you refuse to let me feel the pads of your rough-looking palms,  
leaving me on my knees, begging for your filthy soggy scraps—  
you remind me of a father's mahogany desk, a daunting obstacle  
you remind me of the quiet pause between condolences, nothing but a platitude  
you remind me of the light seeping through His stained glass, the one i call reverently pious

had i known your incisors would create a carved shallow valley down my back, i would've  
pulled your borrowed arrow when it first grazed my fingertips. but then again, i would have  
never felt the proximity of you

now i know why the moth was drawn to the brightness—

now i know why icarus flew too close to the sun—

now i know why the little match girl was so enamoured by the flame—

for it burned so brightly, forcing me to close my eyes, ceasing everything to exist. for it  
burned so brightly, the pain too much to bear, numbing me from the others. for it burned so  
brightly, my skin melting like your vacant promise, leaving only my skeleton in the closet.

and when the blaze of fire is put out by the waft of your incredulous giggle, i will go on a  
quest looking for its prized scalding burn.

## Beauty is Pain

saccharine smile that he claims to hate  
gave me a gift wrapped in tender and time.  
His silence is a present between trembling hands.  
I think I know what's inside. It's the tv playing—  
his wide back akin to white columns  
stolen from a shrine of forgiveness.

My closed eyes against the pulse in your neck,  
large palm on top of my cold quivering, remembering head.  
Our tiny makeshift home in Sai Ying Pun. The cold December  
icing raging hearts. I look up to you, like a slave sacrificing  
solitude for sovereignty. I think God has given me salvation  
through the form of you in black leather shoes.

dimmed Christmas lights.  
mellow red, green and blue.  
flashing through the silhouetted curtains.  
I am thinking: Pretty has nothing on the curl raven hair  
against unmarred porcelain skin.  
I swim in the calmer waters inside your eyes.

Until the summer came, when anger reintroduced itself into our home.  
I slammed to the floor, purple bruises forming deep enough  
to touch the bone. Through swelling eyes I see: powerful dogs  
cowering into a corner, shards of wood framing my fragile  
crown, your eyes, your eyes, caramel eyes raging a war against a battalion.

*You asked for that, you bitch.*

In the stillness, I hear the jingles of the Christmas tree bells.  
They crack under the weight of thundering fists, the fractures  
asking me: *is he still beautiful?* and I remember:

Pretty shoes lead to ruined feet.  
Beautiful flames burn.  
Smiles can be heavenly ugly.

So I decided, pretty is no longer for me.  
Men who are crafted to perfection sometimes  
hide the voodoo and hexes to get the girl.  
I am the girl. But now I am no longer that girl.  
And I do not beg forgiveness, I am not a slave  
That prays to empty columns. I give myself penance  
For the sins that were done unto me. My God  
Is the ugly moon of January and I watch tv shows  
About how to kill the beauty in men.

## Champion

childlike scribbles on walls,  
i think he used Aphrodite's rouge.  
cherubic smile, undaunted even by Zeus' thunder.  
cheek against the leather couch, tired from labour.

he writes as if magic was inspired by him,  
visions of colour and wonder passing his way,  
sunflowers, ivies and daisies  
forming and growing over his feet.

His childhood is marred by meals of only  
bread and water. He has no time to watch  
the beauty of bees buzzing, feet dancing  
And flowers swaying left and right.

Ares' oppression is something he refuses,  
pushing through metal doors,  
slipping under traps, breath gasping.  
he made it out alive.

he made it out alive  
helping keep me alive.  
holding my hand as if he was the one  
damned by the wrath of the Gods.

this love resurrects, he is not a foe  
But an evergreen friend— his hand sweats  
against mine in missions to the past and  
wars against sea monsters and one-eyed pirates.

did he not realise sometimes i see  
a glow of light surround him,  
decorating his summery soul, softly wrapping  
around his Greek greatness that touches like a plume.

we are both victors, but honesty forces me to admit  
he is the mastermind behind peace treaties.  
The unsung hero of my life.

according to whispers and hushes,  
Olympus saved a seat for a saviour.  
A champion who sings lullabies  
that silences even the flames of Erebus.

## Profanity is Helping Me Grieve

I know you are dead  
but why can I still hear you  
in the kitchen, scuffling around the dimmed refrigerator  
light looking for the reused brown-hued ice cream container.  
*Fuck, fuck, fuck*— you started cursing because it's nowhere to be found  
now your words only echo through the hallway.

I know you are dead  
but why can I still smell you  
spritzing your pungent perfume: notes of wood and pine.  
It covers up the aftershave scent that was left behind  
*Putang Ina*— you started cursing because you sprayed too much  
now the room smells like you.

I know you are dead  
but why can I still taste you  
leaving a bad aftertaste in my mouth after I had to eat Adobo for weeks.  
You knew it was my favourite; is that why you used up all the pork and soy sauce?  
*Ay! Sorry apo*— you started cursing because it gave me acid reflux  
now I'll never get to eat it again.

I know you are dead  
but why can I still see you  
laying down on the wooden bench in the living room.  
Mama told me it was an antique. It's older than me, almost as old as you  
*Shit naman*— you started cursing because your back hurts from the rigid surface now the  
bench will have more space.

I know you are dead  
But why can I still touch you  
with hesitancy. I don't want to touch your bandages,  
the red is seeping through the gauze.  
I'm trying to barter with Him. Knees black.  
The room is sweating— I am sweating.  
— you stopped cursing.

## Suicide Note

I was born a thief. I have stolen a life  
I do not intend to keep. When I walk  
the path to lecture, through the  
hushing trees of Campus North, I think  
about large spans of land that can bury  
bodies without grief. The body I carry  
Is a homewrecker. A curvy, fat body that  
was born out of a woman that stole a  
husband. This body puts mistakes and  
fuck-ups into a sack to weigh them in a  
barter market. one kilogram for one will  
to live. every mark of an F is a step closer  
to dying. The sharp shear in my pocket  
itches, it wants to connect with familiar skin:  
a long-lost lover with nineteen lines.  
But I wait. I wait until the deadlines are over.  
I wait until the musical birds are loud enough  
to shatter glass. I wait until the goodbye turns  
dry— wait until the children are dead.

This agonizing path in Campus North. Students  
gleam with Nietzsche and Turgenev. The realm  
of nihilism. The future spits at my feet, the birds  
shit on my things. *Persona non grata*. The ground  
beckons: we have ballistic worms but it is still. It is  
quiet. It is dark. It is suicide black.

But the sea... you can float as it asks for a kiss.  
Dangle your legs by the cliff in MLA format.  
Beyond the water, there is rock-bottom.  
If you wait, St. Peter will meet you there,  
open the gates back to Campus North,  
Just to die again and again and again.

## innocent

Your archaic nonsense is nothing  
But old news. Wings clipped,  
falling to the ground. Falling  
into my open mouth, yet it is you  
who chomp on the fruits of my efforts.

my tears of growing pains disappear  
into your mocking Cheshire grin. I chew  
on my hair. Scratch myself, drawing  
patterns of scarlet red that stains.  
Will it be harder to erase me now?

You feign sympathy— it makes me  
vomit into a bag filled with dolls,  
princess tiaras and shredded flowers  
picked from a garden of buried dreams  
and the glassy, empty eyes of a child.

Seven is such a low number  
compared to fifteen. Razor-sharp palms  
the span of an eagle's glide colonize  
my ivory thighs, my mouth and eyes.  
your easy white lies, do not apologize.

your talons dig out blood, the gore squirts fast  
faster than I could say: Stop. Stop. Stop.  
My Lord, your lamb has now been executed for its wool;  
turning into sheets dripping with savage red. The  
Ringing stopped. The screeching stopped. You stopped.

the bleeding did not.

the bleeding will continue.  
The bloodshed will rain down your empire  
of perversity and growing collection  
of nestling birds learning to take flight.

*You're pretty. Wanna be my friend?*  
In the wave of the silenced and scorched,  
I thirst salvation for those who are forced  
into battle without guns. The flesh left  
behind will adorn your damned lifeline.

*Let's go into the room.*  
Your talons will be cut off in a war  
against the sharpness of our tongues.



The youth has left our growing bodies,  
but your sins walk with your shoes, leaving  
a trail of borrowed bodies that cling courageously.

*I'll take care of you*

Screams muffled with dirty linens will ring  
through your skull, like a booming tower clock.  
time is ticking. time condemns those who sin, time  
condemns a man that vandalizes fully-furnished  
homes, scattering feathers that smell like a crime.

*We will stand in glorious victory.*

As you await on your knees, sweating under our  
ferocious gazes, no longer unarmed by the  
burden of innocence. We, I, am powered by  
matches and sticks. And amidst ash—  
we'll be crowned as queens by the audience  
of your finally burning, flaming corpse.

## Dementia

The room was never quiet.

Dark night clashing against the window frame,  
Lamp flickering, darting like flash between four white walls.

My father barged inside  
*"Papa please stop"*

He screamed  
*"I am not your father"*

My father said  
*"Please calm down"*

He whimpered  
*"I... coffee"*

The cracked mirror reflected  
an old greying man, trembling  
on shredded glass. He was once  
the son of memory— basking  
In the glory of masculinity and  
heydays of thumping patriarchy.

Now his mind screams for justice  
for the beauty of remembrance  
as he tries to remember the word for  
help. He is drowning in a lake of blank  
spaces and mismatched faces.

As my father drops to the knees,  
looking for his own father inside  
the body of an unknown, the love  
seeps out of trembling hands that  
yearn for the history that has been lost.

## The Truth

Truth can be found in a brown rusting box.  
It looks a lot like a stranger with  
hair blacker than the night and twinkle  
owl eyes that promise friendship.

Over time, the box dillapidates from  
the adventures across space. Oh friend,  
we've run circles around the sun. Remember  
our absent fathers, our mother's belted  
beatings, our conjoined childhoods?

Truth is, growing crawls. It enters lives  
like Eve waiting for the apple to drop. You  
became a woman, I turned into a woman.  
Short skirts and cropped tops are now  
collecting dust in the attic of our minds.

We pinky promised at 16.  
You, with cat eyes and attention-grabbing  
shadows, me and my teen magazine quizzes.  
*Let's move in together!* Girlish screeches  
filling up the space of empty promises.

At 21, we learned the truth.  
Time fast walks and leaves another behind,  
*I can't make it today, raincheck?*  
I now spend dinners with other friends donned  
in poker faces and white blouses.

We once met at a tunnel in Park Island.  
There we spoke about smoke that  
turns into cotton-candy clouds; debilitating  
detaching alcoholism and our part-time lovers.  
The truth sets: we have left behind 16.

In that tunnel in Park Island,  
We transformed into teens who live and love.  
We left as once writers, once dreamers, once sisters.  
I take the bus, you the train. The truth is not a curse.  
The truth is a dangling ripening fruit waiting to drop.

## Milk Teeth

The baby suckles on the mother's breast,  
chomping with gums down the  
irritated milking tip.

the first tooth grows, fevers  
pop up like mushrooms to  
say you're closer to dying now.

the second comes as the  
field of flowers tenderly tickles  
the child's button nose.

The third is a charm: building  
blocks made of bluish legos,  
Not suitable for kids.

The fourth, the fifth, the sixth.  
A symphony of whites, smiles  
flashing filled with ample mischief.

Seven, nine, eight—  
or eight, nine, seven? a child  
must have new ducks for a bath.

Ten. a decade of painstakingly  
growing into a woman who  
needs warnings to stay alive.

Dark and foggy streets. Malicious  
strangers. screeching waves of the  
ocean. Bloody sex. Pursuit of success.

Teeth fall out, as purity  
walks by with a heavy premonition:  
Save your innocuous goodbyes,  
the milk teeth have performed an Irish goodbye.

## In this House, Where My Friends Live With Me

There are times when,

I  
claw  
against the  
thumping pulse of  
my head. the pain injects  
like an untrained nurse. it shoots  
all over my system, every throb gathers  
accomplices. they look like good friends. they  
are intruders— dressed in black, soft feet creeping up  
behind me. I gasp for air. They are barbarians: slashing thr  
ough the spasming beat of my lungs, echoing through the body.  
The friends push their palms against my throat. Fingers clawing my  
swelling tongue. Last night's full course meal is now today's reminder. Now  
the flickering street lights whisper to me: you're alone.

<i>What do I do now?</i>		<i>Take the bus home.</i>
<i>Am I dying? Is this</i>	<i>Is</i>	<i>how death feels like</i>
<i>Home is where I</i>	<i>this</i>	<i>can eat warm food.</i>
I have no home. I	home?	live in my head. my
body is taken hos		tage by silhouettes
dripped in mud—	no.	they live right under
all the grime, they		live in the attic of my
mind. they knock on my door daily, hollowed faces with		
hard knuckles bang against wood. the banging echoes.		
splinters pool around my feet. the knob is coming apart.		
my heart thunders through my ears. our eyes lock right		
through the missing pieces of the deteriorating door. I		
see the bloody smile and I open		
	my	
	mouth	
	to	
	scream.	

**I Just Want to Keep the Goldfish with Me:  
A Capstone Project; Poetry Collection on 2022 Hong Kong**

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## **Introduction**

The Hong Kong streets may not seem emptier than it was before, but it can definitely be felt so as the word ‘migration’ manages to squirm its way through overheard conversations to the ears of Hong Kong people. The Hong Kong airport in midst of the pandemic with fewer happy tourists is filled with clouded gazes lingering on the wall labelled ‘Leaving Hong Kong’ (離港), where the person they just embraced disappeared into. The city is experiencing a new migration wave since last year and has fallen into aphasia after waves of social movements, drastic political changes and the pandemic. This project aims to explore the voices of Hong Kong hidden in cellophane sheets and pursed lips through a poetry collection. Written from the point of view of someone who is leaving the city, the poetry collection *I Just Want to Keep the Goldfish with Me* navigates through the past, the present and the unknown future of Hong Kong and its people in the current year of 2022. The project alongside the poetry collection does not attempt to provide an answer, but to offer another voice to Hong Kong and its relationship with the concept of home, while also contributing to the “small but enduring niche” of Hong Kong English writing (Moore and Xu, 2014). It aims to be a call and response to the city, written to and for the people as a voice that addresses the collective trauma and difficult times, and an attempt of connecting Hong Kong people who left with those who stayed through the diaspora.

## **Literature Review: On Hong Kong Literature in English**

Classified as place literature, Hong Kong literature plays the role to bring out “the richest description... to capture the local feelings, impressions, culture, happenings and underlying crisis and issues” of the city (Döring, 2008). As a post-colonial city once owned by the British empire and now ‘returned’ to China as the national narrative would describe, the mysterious question of identity and sense of belonging has been contemplated in the state’s literature scene, including the English-based scene. Ehrenwirth in 2014 wrote how she understands the main themes in Hong Kong literature in English as the city’s confrontation and negotiation with the notion of home and the ambivalence and in-betweenness of its identity, enhanced by the choice of language by the writers who choose to write in English about a city with a Chinese dialect as the majority language. Hong Kong’s unique cultural diversity brought by its demographic and historical background also inspires writers and poets to dive into the interactions within the city’s sundry population,

be it between family members, strangers or foreigners who look at Hong Kong from an outsider's perspective but are open to what the city has to offer. The socio-political situation in Hong Kong, especially the post-umbrella movement and post-2019 movement also changed the literature scene in Hong Kong drastically not only through self-censorship but also through new sentiments and political topics brought into the literature space, adding more complexity to writing about Hong Kong.

The purposes and reasons behind writing about the city in English vary for writers in Hong Kong literature in English community. One recurrent reason is to "explore the questions of what it means to be in, from, and of the Hong Kong of the past, the present, and the future" (Moore and Xu, 2014). Moore also wrote in the introduction for *The Queen of Statue Square* he edited collectively with Xu Xi that what makes Hong Kong a unique city to write about amongst the post-colonial cities is its "unusual political situation—it has never been an independent nation or city-state— gives rise to an Anglophone writing that departs from the usual colonial/postcolonial literature" (Moore, 2014). Besides the complicated sense of double loyalty between the Chinese regime, and the British Empire and the underlying desire for freeing itself from such struggles, writers of Hong Kong protest literature brought by the social movements of the past decade also see the act of writing about Hong Kong in English a way to regain agency in the city's narrative. The Bauhinia Project, who edited the 2020 protest poetry collection *Hong Kong without Us* based on the large-scale social movement in 2019 wrote in the collection's foreword that they wrote and edited the collection in response to the fact that "...it became clear that international media were failing to see Hong Kong on its own terms." Some also write about the city to connect the readers together in strength and heal the collective trauma that has accumulated in recent years.

Still, Hong Kong's English writing could be overlooked by some who refuse to dive deeper into the community. In 2020, Evelyn Fok wrote for *Electric Literature* an article titled "Where Is Hong Kong Literature When We Need It Most?", stating that the city lacks literature in English that is truly "our own stories". The piece caused an eruption of replies from various figures in Hong Kong literature in English. Names were listed, links to works were commented and rebuttals were made. Xu Xi, one of the prominent Hong Kong English language writers replied fiercely in her rebuttal:

Yes, agreed, HK literature in English isn't the most famous in the world, but we writers, poets, translators, publishers, literary activists, etc. do exist within and beyond the city... In short, we're not too shabby, eh? (Xu, 2020)

It is true, Hong Kong literature in Hong Kong is definitely diverse both perspective and genre-wise, and does not lack platforms to showcase their works. Many works have won awards and as Xu Xi mentioned in her rebuttal, there are literary journals devoting issues to Hong Kong's English writing scene. However, like many other Asian place writings in English as stated in 2020 by Alvin Pang, a Singaporean writer, Hong

Kong literature in English will have to face criticisms of being either not enough or too much, judged by its degree of local elements, the balance between tradition and modern, quality and quantity.

## Project Design and Inspirations

*I Just Want to Keep the Goldfish with Me* situates itself as a goodbye love letter to the city, the people and the close ones the persona in the collection left behind as she follows the 2022 migration wave. The persona treats the poetry collection as a hope chest, recollecting and recording Hong Kong and her moments in it, keeping a collection of what will sustain her wherever she goes. Setting the persona as an imaginary version of myself who is leaving the city, an adequately emotional imaginary context is established for the poetry collection. The setting is partially inspired by Belle Ling's 2019 poem "63 Temple Street" in which the poem wonderfully presents the message that the act of attempting to remember can be through the creation of art through the recollected memories of the famous Mido Café before its closure.

The poetry collection consists of 15 ekphrastic poems and photos of Hong Kong in response. The collection starts with the persona commuting by the MTR for the last time and ends with her eulogy to the self she is leaving behind as the plane takes off. Echoing the nature of poetry as a call and response, the ekphrastic element of *I Just Want to Keep the Goldfish with Me* plays a crucial role in providing space to explore different emotions brewing inside the persona in relation to the city through the conversation between the visual images and words. The photos also help to further ground the poetry collection in the context of 2022 Hong Kong. The inclusion of the ekphrastic element is heavily inspired by Madeleine Slavick's 2012 book of prose and photography *Fifty Stories Fifty Images* where she records her life in Hong Kong, interacts with and writes outside of the photo frames, attempting to find her place in the city.

## Research Methodology

During the creative process of writing, *I Just Want to Keep the Goldfish with Me*, research on the persona and topics of the poetry collection has been done through various methods. Multiple on-site visits to the harbour and the streets in Kowloon, Hong Kong Island and New Territories have been conducted for better observation of the city and the people who are the main subjects that the persona will be interacting with the poems. Situating myself as the imaginary persona, the on-site visits are conducted in a flâneur manner where I imagine the persona becomes a silent speculator, observing the concrete yet fleeting moments in the busy streets of Hong Kong, trying to burn the memories into her head and remember through reconstructing them into poetry. Photos are also taken during on-site visits as ekphrastic material for the poetry collection. Some of the photos used are also collected from generous friends who also have captured moments of the



city as their personal interest.

To create a more authentic persona and context for the poetry collection, I have also returned to my family anecdotes for sources of inspiration through reading past records in family photo albums, my diary entries and creative works from the past. I have also talked to people in the city, from my family members to strangers on the streets so that I can write with more authenticity based on these interactions. I have also joined a photography club gathering as I followed the members on their tour around Central, understanding the use of camera angles and how Hong Kong people like them view the city through their lens. Last but not least, I have returned to myself and explored the different versions of my life that I had imagined and incorporate them into the persona who also faces similar thoughts of the future and takes note of the emotions and thoughts the persona would develop consequently.

# **I Just Want to Keep the Goldfish with Me:**

## **A Poetry Collection on 2022 Hong Kong**

### **MTR in Sunset**

she counts all the last times as the grey carriage sways  
like a last dance;

a fading smear of orange outside the window,  
it's always a sunset never a sunrise  
they say I was always too late to open my eyes to see its birth  
only rushing into closing doors when it dies

I was never one with good memory, my parents do,  
they still remember the golden lemon drops,  
and they still talk about them everyday  
"don't trust the streetlamp posts, look, they are swallowed by the dark."  
and now we are leaving, running on the platform,  
before we miss another train.

the grey carriage jerks to a stop and legs stand up to leave  
I quickly occupy a seat, the metal heat is dying,  
but I will give it something else to keep warm  
before I leave, too

a friend asks me is this one of the last times  
I say yes,  
and ask her if she wants to change it.  
she tells me it's not up to her.



## **Walking up Central, Raining**

Escalators are faster in Central and Admiralty

    If not fast enough

        people will walk up the escalators

    As if their feet never know how to give up

they always try

    pushing themselves to climb the stairs

Even when the rain drops and water splashes to drench their shoes

    they walk up

with their instant cup noodle in hand

    and an umbrella on the other

        smiling

as they pass by

as if it was a success, instead of an attempt.

## Star Ferry

the wind plays with her hair  
unfolding white ribbons on its way  
the bow cuts through her skin  
white scars as it trails away

she promises to split,  
designed to bleed.  
it is carved in her destiny,  
if she is ever granted one.

but she throws us off:  
up and down  
front and back, our vision  
spinning;  
she mends herself,  
breaks herself,  
and one day,  
sends us to a destination called home.

## Monk jumping into the sea

submerge until we reach the bottom  
too heavy  
to swim

crack  
when the spoon hits us  
swirls us

our last breath,  
the mist in white  
the bubbles that declare witnesses  
rising  
falling

until all we see  
is ourselves  
yellow spilled and spread  
filling the cup  
until we can no longer find ourselves

cling

*\*Monk jumping into the sea (和尚跳海)*

*The nickname of the Hong Kong traditional Cha Chaan Teng drink poached egg in hot water. It's a cup of boiled water with a raw egg flavored with a dash of sugar. The nickname originates from how the raw egg yolk in the water resembles the bald head of a monk in water.*











## Kites

We used to fly goldfishes in the sky.

I would yank the goldfishes back with the strings  
and my father would stop me and say  
"If you want it to fly, you have to let go."

Sometimes the goldfishes would forget their way  
and crash into trees, becoming too far to save.  
Father would pat my head and say  
"It's alright, we can get a new one."

And I swallowed those words like a mantra,  
not knowing what else to do with them,  
and I swallowed the voice that wanted to say  
Father I just want to keep the goldfish  
with me.

**(w)hole**

I scrapped the walls bare/ the boxes moved out, on their way to the conveyor belt  
the next tenant wants to keep the old lamp, so it stays hanging, swinging, bidding  
me farewell/ a few days later they will smash the decor/ a few more days they will  
paint over the  
fresh colours  
I'll ever know  
to a lady who  
not knowing  
I'll close my  
wings lift me/ when I open my eyes, I will face another bare wall/ I'll dress her up with  
family photos, polaroids, and paint her skin creamy, like the walls I left behind/ then  
perhaps I would feel whole.

creamy walls with  
that I do not think  
I'll hand my ticket  
would smile back  
what will happen  
eyes, and let those

## Handover

A boy offered me his coat in a November night by the harbour.  
I declined,  
because his feet barely touch  
the ground he wants to take root in.

He told me he has been here for three months,  
and how the elders at Dai Pai Dongs would call him handsome and clever  
when they learnt that he studies at Xiang Gang Da Xue,  
how he hates shopping malls and prefers nature,  
and has barely been anywhere except his dormitory,  
what he studies in urban planning and how he  
wants to stay and design the future here  
to make it a more beautiful place.

He hasn't seen Chinese white dolphins  
over where the Lantau Tomorrow Vision will commence,  
hasn't bought fish balls from hawkers  
in Lunar New Year Flower Markets,  
hasn't visited elderly people who climb up stairs to their homes  
but refuse to move out,  
hasn't smelt white flowers  
in Causeway Bay that were hidden in backpacks

But he has the future in his hands,  
so I could not take his coat.  
Instead I stayed to teach him how to soften his voice  
and pronounce *Heung, Gong*,  
as the city lights witness in silence.

## **History Class**

My history teacher told us that the Brits once considered  
moving all of us to their land  
a new Hong Kong drenched in cold rain and blanketed by snow  
leaving the deserted city of skyscrapers  
to the new Hong Kong people that will emerge  
from the hard coat of seeds under scorching sun.



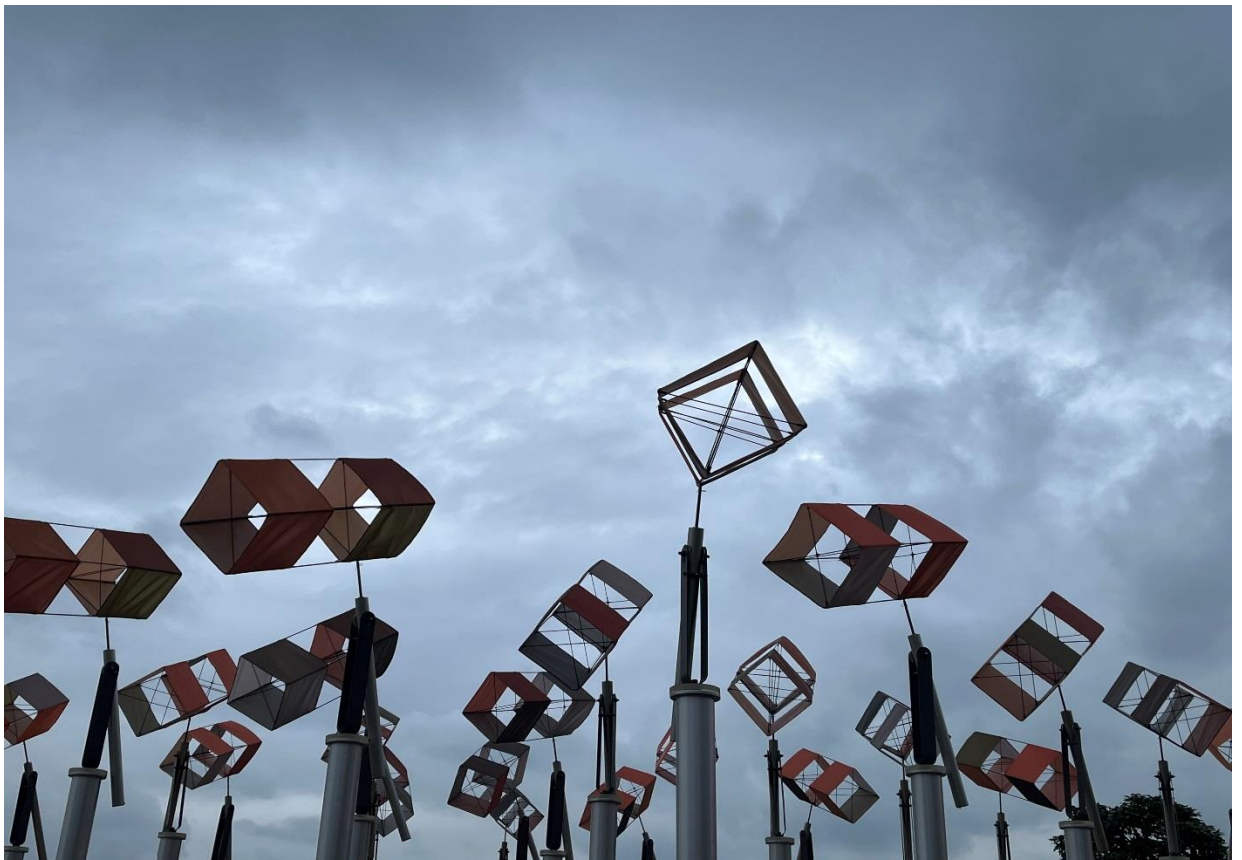












## **The Giant**

we dream underground  
in 1 metre times 1 metre tree pits  
in between the cruel curl  
of your toes, we live silenced  
and sing in our sleep  
our melody a trail of flashlights  
to the top of the mountain  
calling home.

## **Safety Island**

There are two types of people who would leave the safety island without safety guaranteed:  
one on the brink of the road,  
camera ready in action;  
and another sandwiched between a tram and a taxi,  
waving as he pushes his cart of paper boxes further into the sea of wheels

both are wearing black:  
a raincoat and a rubbish bag

I think they are both smart,  
because nowhere is safe anyways.

## **Snooze Alarms from the Future**

I woke up before you scramble into your clothes and run up to the concourse, footsteps behind you not allowing you to slow down.

I woke up before my eyes are widened by fingers to spill tears.

I woke up before they have cameras aiming for our heads.

I woke up before we run out of water, liquid slipping through the space between our fingers.

I woke up before you start crying in your sleep.

I woke up before my tongue twists into a dance, to music I never move my body to.

I woke up before I blink and lose my bet.

I woke up before my fingers start plucking strings to batons hitting on the beat.

I woke up before they cover another building in green cloth and the construction noise commences.

I woke up before I sit on the plane, looking down at mini figurines as you look back up at me.

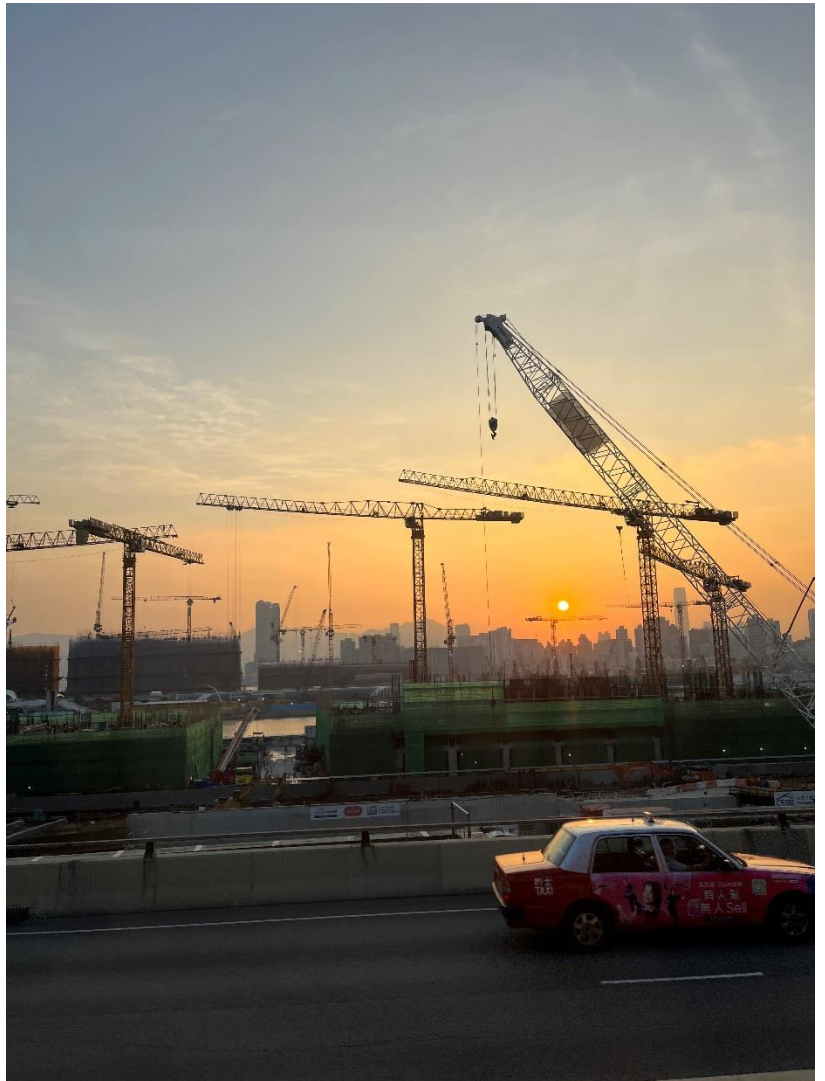
I woke up before the last petal falls.

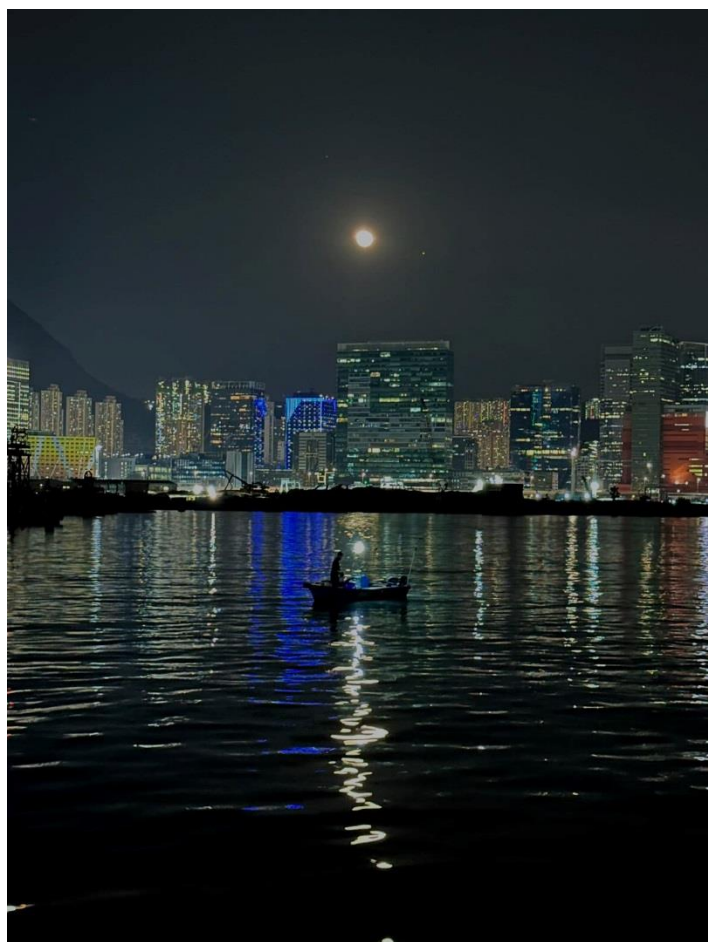
I wake up after my teeth sinks into the soft mashed potatoes, secretly missing the scent of steamed rice in your mouth.

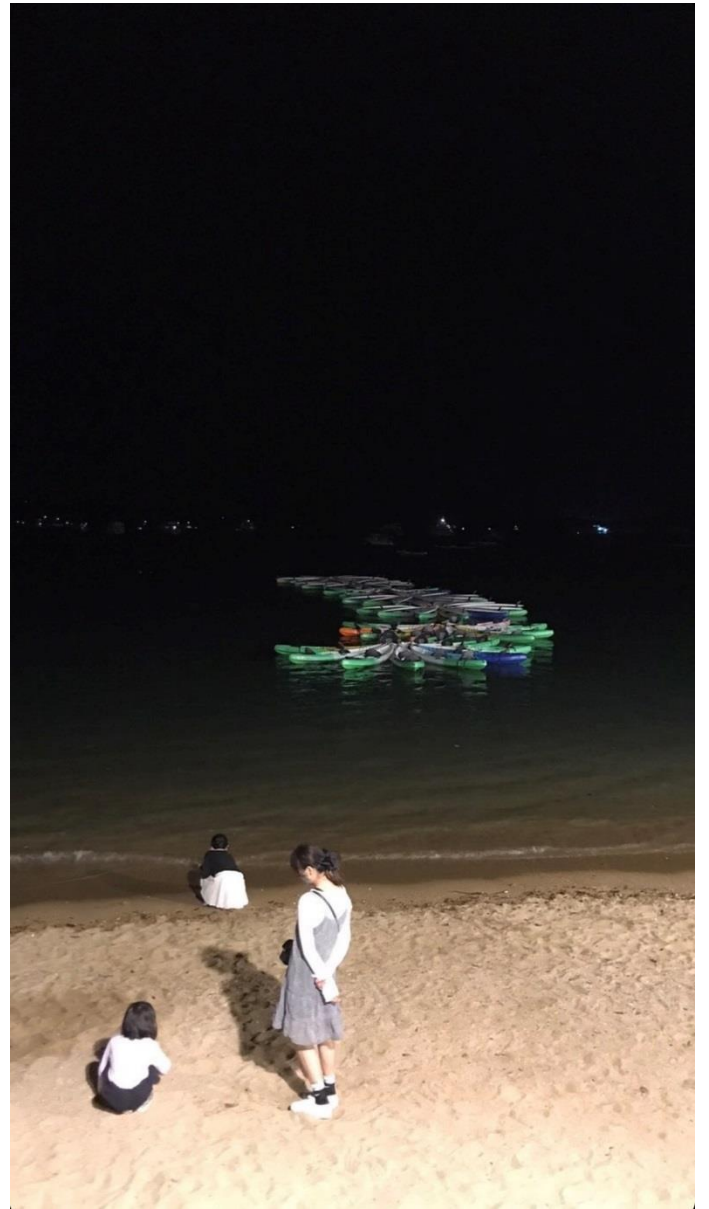












### **A family of three/ their last days (undecided)**

A teacher once asked us

"How would you write about your parents' last days?"

I asked my father what he would want me to write that night.

He slightly furrowed his eyebrows and refused to answer

A few hours later he tapped on my shoulder and said

"Write about me being happy."

Once a while when we visit the sea, mother would tell me

"Scatter my ashes across every ocean."

She would close her eyes to feel the wind as she swims in my vision.

I knew how I would write,

I would write

and erase

and write

and erase

Sometimes I would think about how our names define how we live:

my mother is a swallow

my father a river

and I am a coral who sings to praise the ocean.

## Miss or Wish

The buildings in our estate are placed in an open circle  
Children would stay near their bedroom windows  
waiting for the eagle to sweep into the whitened space  
ready to remember the wingspan of its brown wings

They would remember  
and later that night  
dream of wings that almost touched their cheeks  
almost touching the shadows they made  
with their hands the shape of an eagle  
flapping its wings

They would still remember after years  
one in a cafe writing her cat's eulogy  
one in a black suit running to the bus stop  
one in the snow tracing melted snowflakes in her hand  
and one in a trance wishing for her wings.

## Lights

I

"The night is brighter than day in Hong Kong,"  
A tourist I met on the streets told me, "I thought if it costs you  
nothing to keep the lights on in three at midnight  
Look, even this street is lit up like daytime!"  
He gestured for me to look at the streetlamps above us,  
cuing my response to laugh and praise his humor.

II

I wrote about the lights printed on postcards when I was in primary school  
with formulas of sentence structures they printed on the worksheet:  
"Each light lit is a Hong Kong person shining in the dark."  
I wrote it at home as my mother stayed in her office,  
the sound of her keys unlocking the door echoed in my sleep.

III

I made a pinky promise with my friend  
that we would move out from our houses and live together  
after we grow up.  
She warned me with a giggle that  
she likes to turn on the lights even in broad daylight  
since she "cannot afford to sleep."  
And she still turns them on at midnight  
because her eyes cannot wait any longer.

IV

The lights will still be on as we talk away her night.  
Before I even realise,  
her eyelids will become heavy as she sleeps with her arms folded  
like a pillow on her desk.  
I will not be able to cover her with a blanket through the screen,  
so I will stay and watch over her  
as the sunlight slowly seeps into my room and dances on my skin.

## To the Self I've left behind

To miss someone who would buy tong cung beng\*  
on her way home, who would complain about how  
difficult it is to type in Chinese but does so anyway,  
who would hug her grandma every time before she  
bids her goodbye, who would not cry even when her  
friend pats her head and tells her it will be alright, who  
would love the way the ferry splits water like a scalpel  
through the skin and loves it even more when the wound  
closes off, who would stay in a second-hand bookstore  
with sleeping cats that would not miss her after she left  
and the bells on the door behind her rang, who will die as this  
plane takes off but her ashes will remain inside here with me.

\**tong cung beng* (糖蔥餅)

*A traditional Cantonese snack. It is a wrap with hard sugar (candy and coconut) inside white wafer slice, usually found on the streets where hawkers (usually elderly people) keep the wraps in a transparent metal box to sell.*





## Evaluation and Conclusion

Looking back at the creative process from building the poetry collection from scratch until the final touches, it has been an amazing opportunity for me to delve into the process of creating a poetry collection throughout the thirteen weeks of the semester. As I read through the poetry collection, something that I have to acknowledge is that there will be flaws in it as there is always room for the poems to grow. The process of a poem developing from inspiration to the sole idea to its first draft, second draft, third draft and more until it reaches its final version can take months and even years as picked up from both literature and creative writing courses I have taken throughout the four years of study as an English Major. Still, there are components in the poetry collection that I would like to go back and make changes to. Craft-wise, I would like to explore more variations in one of the poems “Snooze Alarms from the future”. The poem is a list poem with every line starting with the phrase “I woke up before” until the pattern is interrupted by the last line starting with “I wake up after”. The use of grammar and time connectives to add a spin to a list poem can be explored further. The same goes for the variety of sentence structures in the poem as well. I would also like to develop the sounds and rhythm in the poetry collection more so that they can complement the mood and the themes better. While there are efforts put into the use of sound and rhythm through the diction and line breaks in parts of the poetry collection, I believe that there is more that can be dived into to enhance the poems.

I have also gained immense insight through the research conducted for a more inclusive and accurate portrayal of Hong Kong and its people through the poetry collection. Through multiple onsite visits around Hong Kong and stepping out of my comfort zone to interact and converse with different people in our community, I came to see the city I was born in through perspectives that I have not thought of. The meaning of Hong Kong to each person residing here can be very diverse and by exploring these points of view, I get to understand my home better. I have also looked further into my relationship with the city as I came to write the poems and inevitably touched upon some of the more uncomfortable and tormenting moments during 2019 and 2020 when the collective trauma of Hong Kong people occurred. As Nicolas Wong describes in his preface for the 2021 Hong Kong Anthology Writing in Difficult Times, “this is a masochistic process, but the result is always better than a painful one... laying bare this torment to the outside world allows us to understand ourselves and our creations.” Through recalling, reexamining and coming to terms with these moments in relation to Hong Kong and the people in it, as well as reflecting on how it all affected me as a person, I believe that the experience assisted me in understanding more about not only myself but also how and why I write.

During the process of building the poetry collection, I have also come to be more aware of the readers in my poetry writing. Instead of focusing on the purpose of poetry as a form of self-expression, I have begun to think more about how to convey emotions and messages to the readers. Being more aware that I am writing

not only for myself but also for readers outside who will read the poetry collection, I learnt to use different elements of poetry to enhance the work's connection with its reader. I become more conscious of how my poems sound when spoken, how the poem is presented through the imagery and rhythm and how to establish authentic context and relationships so that readers can immerse and follow the flow of the poetry collection better. The insight and experience garnered would benefit my writing submissions to literary journals and competitions after knowing more about what the readers and editors will be looking for in poems in order to feel and connect with them. It will also benefit my future pursuit of a postgraduate degree in creative writing.

Writing *I Just Want to Keep the Goldfish with Me* has been a joy and a deeply emotional experience against the backdrop of the current Hong Kong where many decided to leave the place. I sincerely hope that the voice I conveyed through the collection can contribute to the amazing Hong Kong literature in English scene and reach out to some Hong Kong people regardless of where they are. I would also like to take the last section of the report to thank my supervisor Professor Collier Nogues for her support throughout the creation of *I Just Want to Keep the Goldfish with Me*. Professor Nogues has been nothing but inspiring and reassuring during the writing process of the collection. I have learnt not to force the process of writing but to find ways and objects in daily life to write back to where I have lost focus or been stuck. Miss Wong's ENGE3370 Writing Hong Kong and ENGE3370 Writing Through the Arts has also introduced me to dive deeper into Hong Kong literature in English scene and honed my writing and editing skills in various ways. I would also like to mention the creative writing stream that has not only taught me to write better and introduced me to diverse writing styles and topics but also aspire me as a poet to continue writing and improving with the skills and knowledge I have garnered.

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# Reshaping for Beauty: Understanding Raymond Carver's *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* with its Editorial History and the Influence of Editor Gordon Lish

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## 1. Introduction

*What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* (henceforth *WWTA*) is known as Raymond Carver's (1938-1988) second short story collection and an iconic American minimalist work. Be that as it may, since Gordon Lish (1934-present) – the editor of this book – heavily edited the manuscript, *WWTA* reflects more of Lish's aesthetic concerns than Carver's. Carver antagonized with the “minimalist”<sup>1</sup> label and re-published several stories in their original volume later in *Fires: Essays, Poems, Stories* (1983)<sup>2</sup> and *Cathedral* (1983)<sup>3</sup>. Not until 2009, 21 years after Carver's death from lung cancer, was the manuscript of *WWTA* published by The Library of America as part of *Collected Stories*. The manuscript collection was titled *Beginners* because the story “Beginners” corresponds to the title story of *WWTA*.

Comparing *WWTA* with *Beginners*, it is clear that Lish's edit transformed Carver's stories from patently traditional fiction into radically condensed, largely decontextualized narratives. Carver's real voice is lost in the fragmentation of the stories. Departing from the author's intention, the editor gave the collection a new dimension. Instead of focusing on human connection as Carver preferred, Lish redirected the work to lost communication and love. Whether Lish is il miglior fabbro or not, his editing nonetheless augments

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<sup>1</sup> In Carver's interview with Mona Simpson and Lewis Buzbee, Carver declared “[i]n a review of [*WWTA*], somebody called [him] a ‘minimalist’ writer ... as a compliment [;]” however, “[t]here [was] something about ‘minimalist’ that smack[ed] of smallness of vision and execution that [he] [did not] like” (Simpson and Buzbee, “The Art of Fiction No. 76”).

<sup>2</sup> *Fires: Essays, Poems, Stories* includes the full-length version of “So Much Water So Close to Home,” “Distance” (titled “Everything Stuck to Him” in *WWTA*) and “Where is everyone?” (titled “Mr Coffee and Mr Fixit” in *WWTA*).

<sup>3</sup> *Cathedral* includes the restored “A Small, Good Thing” (titled “The Bath” in *WWTA*).

incomprehensibleness but accentuates the theme of the book – the unutterableness of thoughts, the heaviness of thinking and telling, especially on the topic of love.

From *So Much Water So Close to Home* (Carver's intended book title) to *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*, and to *Beginners*, the collection has experienced twists and turns, and so has the study of Carver. Before the publication of *Collected Stories* and Carol Sklenicka's *Raymond Carver: A Writer's Life* in 2009, little did the public know that Lish made substantial changes to Carver's manuscript and what *WWTA* presents is a distortion of Carver. Under *WWTA* are the complex writer-editor relationship and the problem of authorship and originality that intrigue scholars to probe. Fourteen years passed, Carver is still an iconic American writer, and *WWTA* is still published in Carver's name.

The editorial history of *WWTA* reveals the relationship between Gordon Lish and Raymond Carver and sheds light on the problematic issue of authorship. Lish, the bold and decisive editor of *WWTA*, edited the stories in an incisive but questionable way and altered the theme of the collection. *WWTA* is an involuntary collaboration on the writer's part.

In the following sessions, the relationship between *WWTA* and its manuscript, including the controversial writer-editor relationship beneath, and the narrative progress of the shifts in style and theme will be discussed. The significance of "Why Don't You Dance?" and "One More Thing" as the beginning and ending of *WWTA*, which little did the previous scholarship discuss, will also be explored. This essay will (1) talk about the relationship between Carver and Lish along with the editing process and publication of *WWTA*; (2) unveil, compare, and contrast the themes of *WWTA* and its manuscript (titled *Beginners*); and (3) discuss Lish's edit and Carver's original intention with "Why Don't You Dance?", "So Much Water So Close to Home," "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love" (manuscript title: "Beginners"), and "One More Thing."

## 2. Literature Review

Before meeting Gordon Lish in person, Raymond Carver worked with Lish as the Associate Editor of a double issue of 1967 *December*. In 1968, Carver and Lish met at a gathering night in Carver's house. It is the night at which Lish told Carver that he had read Carver's short story named "Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?", saying if he were the writer, the story would have a different ending. Maryann, Carver's wife at that time, replied: "Well, that [is] just the point. That is [not] your story. You did [not] write it" (qtd. in Sklenicka 147). It was also the night Carver and Lish discovered their offices were on the same Avenue. Carver, Lish, and Curtis L. Johnson, a textbook editor, met for lunch the next day. Johnson recalled the lunch and commented that "[n]ot only ... could Lish spot good writers, he apparently could also establish instant rapport with them" (qtd. in Sklenicka 151), including Carver. This lunch is what Sklenicka, the writer of Carver's biography, calls "the inauspicious beginning of a relationship that would change [Carver]'s life" (147).

Before *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* (henceforth *WWTAL*), Lish was the editor of Carver's first short story collection – *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* (1976). "Lish had work[ed] diligently [that book], shaping the individual stories to make a distinctive collection" (Sklenicka 282). So was how Lish worked on *WWTAL*, Carver's second collection published on April 20, 1981.

From 1980 to 1988, the final eight years of Carver's life, he applied himself to creating order in his life and art. "These years were less dramatic and less amusing to others than [Carver's] previous existence, but they were critical to his enduring literary reputation" (Sklenicka 352).

Carver quitted drinking in 1977 and started writing short stories for his second collection. For Carver, "[these] stories are central to his recovery from alcoholism" (Carver, *Collected Stories* 972). In 1980, "Beginners," the title story of Carver's second collection

(which was later renamed “What We Talk About When We Talk About Love”), was “submitted to *Antaeus* (it was rejected) and then to *TriQuarterly*, which took it for its winter issue” (Sklenicka 354). Later, Carver delivered the manuscript of his new book (referred to as version A) “directly into Lish’s hands at lunch in New York City” (Sklenicka 354). Carver’s working title – “So Much Water So Close to Home” – has the implication that everyone is drowning, not only in distant rivers but also somewhere close to home. At that time, Carver believed “the new stories, some of them, are different” (qtd. in Sklenicka 354).

Despite Carver’s confidence in his art, Carver was anxious when Lish was reading the manuscript (referred to as version A). On May 10, 1980, Lish informed Carver that he would like to publish the collection. Lish said that he would edit the stories and seek a contract from Alfred A. Knopf, an American publishing house for which Lish was working as a book editor. That same day, Carver wrote Lish an effusive letter and asked Lish to edit the stories as he wanted them “to be the best possible stories” (Sklenicka 355). On June 13, as Carver was packing for a summer trip in Alaska, an edited version (referred to as version B) of the book arrived from Lish (Sklenicka 355). Version B incorporated Carver’s typescript (version A) “with Lish’s editing in felt-tip marker running through and above the typed lines” (Sklenicka 355). Before receiving any replies from Carver, “Lish had already arranged to have version B retyped” (Sklenicka 355).

Carver believed the new title of the collection supplied by Lish, namely *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*, was “fine” (Sklenicka 355). The new title is a line Lish altered from the title story: “... [b]ut it ought to make us all feel ashamed when we talk like we know what we were talking about, when we talk about love” (Carver, *Collected Stories* 934). “Without making changes to version B, [Carver] mailed Lish a check for the typist who would make a clean typescript based on Lish’s copy of version B” (Sklenicka 355). Carver brought version B with him to Alaska and began waiting for Knopf’s offer of a contract.

As Carver returned from Alaska, his book contract from Knopf was waiting for him to sign. Carver “signed and mailed [the binding contract] back right away” without consulting an agent or an attorney (Sklenicka 356). Meanwhile, the check Carver had sent for retyping version B had bounced. On July 4, Carver mailed Lish another check. Carver was distressed when he knew that he had not yet received the revised collection (referred to as version C) that Lish had retyped when Carver was on the trip. On July 7, the final typescript (version C) based on Lish’s aggressive editing arrived. Lish reduced the overall length of the manuscript by more than half. Being unquiet, since receiving version C, Carver had been reading it until 8 a.m. on July 8. Carver compared version B and version C page-by-page and was astounded by the difference between the two versions. He was “awash with confusion and paranoia” (Sklenicka 357). Later in Carver’s note to the story “Where I Am Calling From,” he described *WWTA* as “a watershed book” for him, and it was a book he would not “duplicate [n]or write again” (Carver, *Collected Stories* 747-8).

So malcontent with version C, Carver still agreed to publish the collection. Before giving his consent to the publication, Carver typed a “four-page, single-spaced” letter to Lish (Sklenicka 357), begging Lish to do everything necessary to stop the production of *WWTA*. Along with lines to convince Lish to derail the publication (Carver offered to pay Lish for the time he spent on editing the manuscript and apologized for signing the contract before reading the final edit), Carver praised Lish as “a wonder, a genius” who was “better than any two of Max Perkins” (Sklenicka 357-8), and praised Lish’s edited stories as better works of art which would become classics. Apart from persuading Lish to cancel the publication, Carver had also tried to create a version D. Carver returned version C to Lish “with suggestions for changes,” “reinstating some of [the] things that were taken out in [version B]” (Sklenicka 361). However, Carver failed to convince Lish to make any changes to the final manuscript or cancel the publication. “Lish intend[ed] to publish [*WWTA*] in the spring of 1981” regardless (Sklenicka



358). Lish “convinced [Carver] that the changes [were] improvements, and production of the book [went] forward” (Carver, *Collected Stories* 972).

*WWTA* was published by Knopf, on April 20, 1981. It was a successful publication. Soon after the publication, on April 26, the collection received “a favorable front-page review by Michael Wood in *The New York Times Book Review*” (Carver, *Collected Stories* 973). Two stories in *WWTA* won awards: the title story was included in *The Pushcart Prize, VI*; “The Bath” won *Columbia’s* Carlos Fuentes Fiction Award.

Regardless of the success of the publication, “Carver’s trust in Lish had been eroded by the peremptory editing of’ *WWTA* (Carver, *Collected Stories* 984). When Carver was publishing his third collection (titled *Cathedral*) in 1983, “[he] insist[ed] on complete control of his stories, restricting Lish to standard copyediting” (Carver, *Collected Stories* 974). The professional and personal relationship between Carver and Lish ended abruptly that spring.

Whatever the exact editing process of *WWTA* was, the authorship of Carver is in doubt. “A generation of Carver scholars has already made the mistake of assuming that [*WWTA*] represents an extreme minimalist phase in Carver’s work” and that Carver “began to rebound in his next story collection, *Cathedral*” (Sklenicka 362). *WWTA* was the book that generated the minimalist label (Kleppe 797). Nescient that the stories in *WWTA* had been heavily edited by Lish, Carver was labeled the most influential minimalist and “credited with popularizing a minimalist style” (Rich, “The Real Carver”).

The controversy of *WWTA’s* authorship began as early as 1998 with D. T. Max’s article published in *New York Times Magazine*. It is an article about Lish’s influence on Carver. Max reported that Lish, since his retirement from *Esquire* and Knopf, “ha[d] been quietly telling friends that he played a crucial role in the creation of the early stories of Raymond Carver” (34).

Before Max brought up the problematic authorship of Carver's works, two scholars – William Leonard Stull and Maureen Patricia Carroll – “ha[d] long questioned whether [or not] Carver's published work was authentically his” (Rich, “The Real Carver”). They began examining the manuscript of *WWTA* (version A) since Lish had “sold his papers to the Lilly Library of Indiana University in 1991” (Rich, “The Real Carver”). In 2006, long-time Carver scholars – Stull and Carroll – raised the issue in academia. Stull and Carroll wrote an article titled “Prolegomena to Any Future Carver Studies,” in which they pointed out the questions that must be answered in future Carver studies:

Who was Raymond Carver and what did he write? To what degree do the stories attributed to him represent his original writing, his editor's alterations for publication purposes, or Carver's unconstrained intentions with respect to stories published in multiple versions? (Stull and Carroll 15)

This article by Stull and Carroll was not only a prolegomenon to future Carver studies, but also a prolegomenon to the book they were editing – *Collected Stories* (2009). In this book, the manuscript of *WWTA* (version A) would first be published in the name of *Beginners*. However, the project of reconstructing the original version of *WWTA* “passed largely unnoticed until late 2007, when a *New York Times* article by Motoko Rich gathered international attention on the issue” (Monti 37). In the article, Rich assembled opinions on the publication of version A. Rich reported that Tess Gallagher (the widow of Carver) supported the publication of version A since she wished “to restore Carver's legacy [,]” and Gary Fisketjon (Carver's later editor from Knopf) appalled by the idea of restoring *WWTA* (“The Real Carver”). As Knopf holds the copyright to *WWTA*, Max Rudin, “publisher of the Library of America, a nonprofit publisher,” promised to “get permission from Knopf” to publish *Beginners* together with *WWTA* “as a historical document” (Rich, “The Real Carver”). Meanwhile, for Lish, “[t]he Carver matter [was] a dead letter with [him]” (Rich, “The Real Carver”).

Fast forward to 2009, when the manuscript of *WETA* (entitled *Beginners*) was first published as part of *Collected Stories* by the Library of America. Kleppe described 2009 as “[a] [w]atershed [y]ear in Carver [s]tudies” (795). Now still, “little archival evidence of the differences between versions B and C has become available to scholars” (Sklenicka 356).

In the years after “Prolegomena to Any Future Carver Studies,” the questions Stull and Carroll listed have gradually been discussed. Tim Groenland, the author of *The Art of Editing: Raymond Carver and David Foster Wallace* (2019), wrote about the roots of the Carver controversy and the making of *WETA*, and concluded that critics incline “to focus on the difference between version A (*Beginners*) and version C (*WETA*) without examining the intervening stage” (66).

“[W]ith more empirical evidence for Lish’s influence on Carver’s early fiction” (Groenland 38), critics began to integrate new findings into their appraisal of Carver’s oeuvre. Critics of Carver’s work were “often divided on the ethics and value of Lish’s edits”: some scathed of Lish’s influence while “others argued that [Lish’s] interventions had improved the stories” (Groenland 39).

In the past two decades, “Lish’s editing of Carver has gone from being an obscure literary rumor to a readily available archetype of editorial interference” (Groenland 37). Lish claimed that “Carver and his stories were his creation, a marvelous literary hoax built upon the foundation of Carver’s magazine stories” (Sklenicka 297). The ambiguity *WETA* carries due to its baffling editorial process, and the relationship between *WETA* and *Beginners*, have much to be explored. Critics like Michael Hemmingson,<sup>4</sup> Enrico Monti,<sup>5</sup> and Randolph Paul Runyon<sup>6</sup> compared some of the stories in versions A and C. However, none has chewed over the shift of theme under Lish’s edit and how putting “One More Thing” at the end heightens

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<sup>4</sup> See Hemmingson, “Editing Carver’s TELL THE WOMEN WE’RE GOING.”

<sup>5</sup> See Monti, “From ‘Beginners’ to ‘What We Talk ...’: Variations on a Carver Story.”

<sup>6</sup> See Runyon, “Beginners’ Luck.”

the theme of *WWTA*. This paper aims to move towards a fuller account by revealing the difference between the themes of the manuscript and the edited versions and examining how “One More Thing” amplifies the theme of *WWTA*. The following session will unveil how the editorial process mirrors the shift of the collection theme with several stories in their edited and manuscript versions, viz. “Why Don’t You Dance?”, “So Much Water So Close to Home,” “What We Talk About When We Talk About Love” (manuscript title: “Beginners”), and “One More Thing.” Lish’s edit made upon his idea and Carver’s original intention will also be discussed.

### 3. Analysis and Interpretation

As we see from the publication history of Raymond Carver's second short story collection, there is a shift of the control over the book – *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* (henceforth *WWTA*). *WWTA* is an involuntary collaboration on the writer's part. Carver's editor – "Gordon Lish [–] shortened [the manuscript] to less than half its original length in two rounds of close line-editing" without Carver's consent (Carver, *Collected Stories* 990). Nonetheless, the fragmentation of the original stories augments incomprehensibility but accentuates the theme of the collection – the unutterableness of thoughts, the heaviness of thinking and telling, especially on the topic of love. It is the theme Lish redirected the book to with his aggressive edit.

This session will chew over several stories in their edited and manuscript versions, scrutinizing how they are different and how Lish's edit reshapes the theme of Carver's second short story collection. Selected stories include "So Much Water So Close to Home" (same title in the manuscript), "Why Don't You Dance?" (same title in the manuscript), "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love" (manuscript title: "Beginners"), and "One More Thing" (same title in the manuscript). All selected stories demonstrate the distinction in themes between the two versions, i.e., version A and version C. "So Much Water So Close to Home" is selected for conveying Carver's original message. The manuscript version of "So Much Water So Close to Home," Carver's intended title story, reveals the original theme Carver wished to present in his second collection – the shed of light in the hazy dark reality, or to say human connection. The other three stories – "Why Don't You Dance?", "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love" (manuscript title: Beginners) and "One More Thing" – are selected for revealing how Lish made the short story collection into an impeccable piece of art with a new theme. "Why Don't You Dance?", the first story of *WWTA* sets a grayish tone of the whole collection and foregrounds the theme of it. "What We Talk About When We Talk

About Love,” the title story of the edited version, highlights the theme of the book – the unutterableness of thoughts, the heaviness of thinking and telling, especially on the topic of love. “One More Thing,” the last story of *WWTA* echoes the ending of the first story and underscores the theme anew.

### 3.1. “So Much Water So Close to Home”

“So Much Water So Close to Home” was Carver’s intended title story for his second collection. This story presents the notion Carver wished to show the public through and through because it is his intended title story. On this account, the comparison between the manuscript version and the edited version of “So Much Water So Close to Home” denotes the profound influence of Lish’s edit on the theme of Carver’s second collection. The manuscript presents another dimension of the story that the edited version does not, *id est*, the bond and warmth between people.

The manuscript “So Much Water So Close to Home” is not a light-hearted story as it touches on the brutality and coldness of humans. The phrase “so much water so close to home” has the implication that everyone is drowning (Carver, *Collected Stories* 869), not only in distant rivers but also somewhere close to home. Yet, this story as well speaks of sensibilities and loving-kindness, the warmth between people.

The title “So Much Water So Close to Home” is from a line by Claire: “[s]o much water so close to home, why [does] he have to go miles away to fish” (Carver, *Collected Stories* 869)? Claire wonders why her husband Stuart has to go miles away to Naches River to fish instead of going to Everson Creek, which is much nearer to home. Naches River is a place in which a homicide of a girl has happened. Stuart, Claire’s husband, is implicated in the homicide. It is an “unidentified girl eighteen to twenty-four years of age” (Carver, *Collected Stories* 867). Rape is “a possible motive [,]” and the “preliminary results show death by strangulation” (Carver, *Collected Stories* 867-8). Her “body [has been left] three to five days in the water”

(Carver, *Collected Stories* 867). Stuart and his friends are there when her body is afloat in Naches River. As Claire narrates sarcastically, “[s]omeone thought they should do something to prevent the body from floating away” because “[s]omehow they thought that this might create a problem for them if she floated away during the night” (Carver, *Collected Stories* 866). “One of the men, it might have been Stuart,” ties the girl to tree roots in the shallow water with her face down, “all the while the flashlights of the other men [play] over the girl’s body” (Carver, *Collected Stories* 866). They might not have raped the girl, but they have not truly thought of helping the girl. None of them calls the police. To the men at the scene, the girl is simply dead; but Claire can see that the girl “need[s] help” (Carver, *Collected Stories* 864).

Claire, in the manuscript story, presents love-kindliness. Even though Stuart is desperate to get rid of the homicide and reminding him of the homicide infuriates him, Claire still wishes to admonish her husband. Claire has a deep connection with the girl whom she has never met. This connection reaches deep into Claire’s memory and heart. The homicide and the violence against the girl remind Claire of her own experience. When Claire was a girl, there was a similar homicide of a girl named Arlene Hubly who “went to the same high school” as Claire (Carver, *Collected Stories* 870). The Maddox brothers “killed ... Arlene Hubly near the town where [Claire] grew up, and ... threw her into the Cle Elum River” (Carver, *Collected Stories* 870). Maybe Claire is not able to bear the fact that her husband is involved in a brutal homicide, she slaps Stuart before she realizes. Instead of responding to her with violence, Stuart leaves her a note signed “Love” the next morning (Carver, *Collected Stories* 871). Stuart might not be as kind and affectionate as Claire, but he is not a man with mere indifference and cruelty.

Something similar happens by the end of the story, after a quarrel involved sexual acts and violence between the married couple:

Last night, around midnight, Stuart breaks the lock on my door. He does it just to show me that he can, I suppose, for he does not do anything when the door springs open

except stand there in his underwear looking surprised and foolish while the anger slips from his face.

... I say, It doesn't matter, Stuart. Really, I tell you it doesn't matter one way or the other.

I love you, he says.

He says something else and I listen and nod slowly. I feel sleepy. Then I wake up and say, For God's sake, Stuart, she was only a child. (Carver, *Collected Stories* 882-3)

So much water so close to home. The Cle Elum River, the Everson Creek, and the Naches River. So much callousness so close to home. Violence, vulgar language, extreme emotions, empathy, love, and warmth mixed in one place. Stuart has no control over his own words, actions, or emotions. Stuart is irresponsible in the sense that he does not want to take any responsibility for the death of the girl. He is aware of his indifference to the girl, and his ferocity to his wife, but he is unable to confront that. Claire, though she is aware of her husband's violence and immaturity and is the victim of his irresponsibility, she still sees his soreness, powerlessness, and helplessness. She can empathize with him. Claire knows Stuart does not want to hear anything about the homicide that bothers him, and there might be another sudden temper tantrum if he hears anything about the homicide. Yet, Claire chooses to tell Stuart that she truly pities the girl. Unlike what is in the edited version, as for the original Claire, her empathy wins over the unresponsive reality. "[The girl] needed help" (Carver, *Collected Stories* 864). "[S]he was only a child" (Carver, *Collected Stories* 883). This human connection, this warmth, is what she believes in. "People [may] no longer care what happens to other people," and "nothing [may] make any real difference any longer" to Claire and her husband (Carver, *Collected Stories* 871). Yet, Claire and Stuart still have feelings and love in their minds and hearts. Husband and wife "need to lock [their] fingers together" (Carver, *Collected Stories*



870). Husband and wife “need to help one another” (Carver, *Collected Stories* 870). These two declarations manifest Claire’s belief in love and marriage, a bond between people.

The “27-page manuscript [was] cut by [seventy percent] for inclusion in *WWTA*” (Carver, *Collected Stories* 1001). Regardless, the plot of the edited story is similar to the manuscript in the sense that Stuart and his friends, who have gone to the Naches River to fish, have left the girl in the lurch. As Claire describes, they are “decent [,]” “family men ... who take care of their jobs” (Carver, *WWTA* 68). They “[have] nothing to hide” and they are not “ashamed” of what they have or have not done for the girl in the Naches River (Carver, *WWTA* 68-9). Tying the girl to a tree to ensure her body will not be drifted away by the current is the best the “decent [,]” “family” men can do (Carver, *WWTA* 68). They fish, drink coffee and whiskey, play cards, cook potatoes, wash dishes near the girl’s body, and leave her in the water with “terrible coldness” (Carver, *WWTA* 69). The men do not call the police until they are done with their weekend fishing trip. Yet, they are not ashamed of anything. In contrast, at least, the original Stuart knows what he has or has not done for the girl is “a shame” (Carver, *Collected Stories* 864). The brazenness of the men is displayed subtly in the edited story. Indifference and brutality are played down with the seemingly insouciant narration.

Unlike the original version, which portrays a dirty reality yet plays up the warmth of connection between people, the edited ending shows no tenderness between the characters:

He drains his glass and stands up. He says, “I think I know what you need.”

He reaches an arm around my waist and with his other hand he begins to unbutton my jacket and then he goes on to the buttons of my blouse.

“First things first,” he says.

He says something else. But I don’t need to listen. I can’t hear a thing with so much water going.

“That’s right,” I say, finishing the buttons myself. “Before Dean comes. Hurry.”  
(Carver, *WWTA* 74)

None of them broaches anything about the dead girl. She is dead, and there is nothing more to talk about. Their lives simply go on. It seems that the dead girl has nothing to do with them. Unlike what is in the manuscript version, the characters in the edited version are less sentimental and less empathetic. Claire and Stuart, as a married couple, should have a close relationship. However, their hearts seem to be apart. Stuart thinks he knows what Claire needs, but, in fact, he knows nothing but his desire. The deadpan narration communicates that Claire does not care about what her husband says, nor does she care about her feelings or her needs. Although Claire hears the water of the Naches River going so close and the water is drowning her, she still neglects her feelings and thoughts (about the girl and her husband) just as neglecting the dead girl and her husband. “So much water so close to home” (Carver, *WWTA* 70). The river drowns Claire’s compassion, leaving only indifference to herself and others.

In short, the manuscript version of “So Much Water So Close to Home” is a story that represents the original theme Carver wished to present. One tiny clue reveals the general trend. The comparison of the manuscript story with the edited version indicates the changes Lish made to the story. This juxtaposition reveals the shift of the book’s theme from human connection to disconnection.

### **3.2. “Why Don’t You Dance?”**

Lish fragmented the original narrative and cut away the emotional connections between the characters implied in their lines. The lost human connection (lost communication) becomes the theme of *WWTA*. The lack of human connection, the dearth of mutual understanding, and the grayish tone of *WWTA* are set in the first story. “Why Don’t You Dance?” the first story of Carver’s second collection is about a young couple who met a middle-aged man in his yard sale. The storylines of the manuscript version and the edited version are fairly the same, but

the sentiments portrayed are different. The man and the boy have their names in the manuscript story, videlicet, Max, and Jack. The man has moved all his furniture and home appliances to his yard. The young couple bought the man's TV, his bed, his desk, and his record player. They drank and danced in the man's yard and the driveway. In the original ending, the failure of getting thoughts into words is written conspicuously:

... She kept talking. She told everyone. There was more, she knew that, but she couldn't get it into words. After a time, she quit talking about it. (Carver, *Collected Stories* 756)

The girl knows she wants to say something more, but she cannot put her thoughts into words. However, instead of the bleakness of failing to communicate the thing in her heart to others, the focal point of the original ending is the girl's attempt to speak prolixly to communicate a human connection, a warmth. What the girl wishes to show the others is a serendipitous connection she has with Max. The girl and her boyfriend Jack have spent their night in Max's yard. "Once [the girl] woke up [,] [the guy] was covering [Jack and her] with a blanket" (Carver, *Collected Stories* 756). "[A]n unbearable happiness" the girl has felt in the yard when she "[holds] herself to Jack" (Carver, *Collected Stories* 755). What the girl wants to communicate to others is the unspeakable warmth the second-hand blanket gives her.

In contrast to the manuscript version, the edited story has an unfathomable and seemingly meaningless ending though the final lines are similar to the manuscript version:

Weeks later, she said: "The guy was about middle-aged. All his things right there in his yard. No lie. We got real pissed and danced. In the driveway. Oh, my God. Don't laugh. He played us these records. Look at this record-player. The old guy gave it to us. And all these crappy records. Will you look at this shit?"

She kept talking. She told everyone. There was more to it, and she was trying to get it talked out. After a time, she quit trying. (Carver, *WWTB* 8-9)

Unlike the delightful ending of the manuscript, the edited ending is rather somber. Instead of “an unbearable happiness” (Carver, *Collected Stories* 755), what is articulated in the edited version is an unnamed, ambiguous feeling the girl has towards the man. No one knows why the girl still wants “to get it talked out” repeatedly weeks after they have left the yard (Carver, *WFTA* 9). There is nothing but a frivolous monologue in the ending part of the edited story. The girl wants to tell everyone something, something more than what she tells them. However, she fails to do so. She fails to communicate the thing in her mind to others. Besides, unlike the manuscript version, there is no sentiment expressed. There is no way to learn why she keeps trying to tell others something about the man. One pointer is that before the girl and her boyfriend leave the man’s yard, the girl has hugged the man and said to him that “[y]ou must be desperate or something” (Carver, *WFTA* 8). The girl might intuit that the man wants to let go of everything, everything of his past, everything of him, or even, let go of himself as the man has said “[e]verthing goes” (Carver, *WFTA* 7).

Feelings are too subtle to be described. Thoughts are inexpressible. Everything goes. There is nothing one can do but let go of the unspeakable thoughts and feelings. This is the message the edited story conveys. The opaque tone of the edited collection sets as so.

### **3.3. “One More Thing”**

“One More Thing,” the final story in *WFTA*, echoes the ending of the first story. As aforementioned, the edited ending of “Why Don’t You Dance?” talks about the girl knowing that she wants to talk about something yet fails to turn her thoughts into words. Meanwhile, “One More Thing” talks about a man (L.D.) who wants to say something to his wife (Maxine) and daughter (Rea), whom he has a broken relationship with, yet he knows not what it is or what it could be. He thinks there is more to say, and he wants to get it talked out. However, he fails to do so. Not only does he fail to communicate, but he even fails to figure out what is on his mind:

He said, "I just want to say one more thing."

But then he could not think what it could possibly be. (Carver, *WWTA* 134)

The "7-page manuscript [was] cut by [thirty-seven percent] for inclusion in *WWTA*" (Carver, *Collected Stories* 1003). Like "So Much Water So Close to Home," the part cut by Lish is the sentimental part, the sentimental attachment the original L.D. has to his wife (Maxine) and daughter (Bea). In the manuscript story, L.D. tries hard to express his love to his wife and daughter along with the goodbye:

"I just want to say one more thing, Maxine. Listen to me. Remember this," he said. "I love you. I love you no matter what happens. I love you too, Bea. I love you both." He stood there at the door and felt his lips begin to tingle as he looked at them for what, he believed, might be the last time. "Good-bye," he said. (Carver, *Collected Stories* 952-3)

L.D. tells his wife and daughter that he loves them, howbeit, Maxine does not think what L.D. has towards them is love. "Is this what love is, L.D.?" (Carver, *Collected Stories* 953)? Maxine questions L.D., or she is questioning their marriage. What answers L.D.'s confession is Maxine's insensitivity. Maxine's reaction shocks L.D. Yet, L.D. knows he can do nothing but accept and remember this separation as it is. L.D. fixes his gaze into Maxine's eyes which are "terrible and deep" "as long as he could" (Carver, *Collected Stories* 953). The focal point of the manuscript story is not on the failure of expressing love, but on the sentiment and feeling L.D. has in this separation. Even though the marriage is broken, and the couple does not share the same feeling, nor do they share the same definition of love, their feelings could still be expressed via vocable and body language. Even though the marriage is irreparable, and the expression of love is incommunicable, the thoughts and emotions of the characters still flow in their minds and their non-verbal interchange. To sum up, what the manuscript version of "One More Thing" verbalizes is that people may not share the same thoughts and emotions, and the

thoughts and emotions may not be expressible, their sense and sensibility are unimpeachable withal.

On the other hand, as for the edited version, Lish deprived the chance for characters to express their feelings in this scene of separation. No word nor sentiment is voiced. Silence is what ends the story and the collection. The focus of the edited “One More Thing” is on the inability to communicate one’s thoughts. In other words, the highlight of the edited story is that not only does L.D. fails to say anything meaningful in this goodbye, but he also fails to figure out what he wants to communicate. Viewing the edited story from another perspective, considering Lish is not cutting words away but leaving a lacuna for readers to fill, the silence that ends the story can be seen as an assertion of a broken and irreparable relationship. By replacing pale words with silence, Lish directs readers to focus on the apathy and blankness instead of the emotion and connection Carver wished to present.

May one’s brain be what starts everything, including “[d]iabetes,” “[e]pilepsy [.]” “[c]ancer” (Carver, *WWTA* 131), and thoughts and dialogues, one’s brain is also what ends everything if what is on one’s mind is incommunicable. Thoughts can be unutterable and puzzling out one’s sentiment is onerous. The edited version of “One More Thing” follows the foregoing story, namely “What We Talk About When We Talk About Love,” and conveys the message that sentiment is not something (easily) utterable.

### **3.4. “What We Talk About When We Talk About Love”**

Whereas “So Much Water So Close to Home” is a representative example of the theme Carver wished to focus on in his second collection, “What We Talk About When We Talk About Love” is a representative story of

the theme Lish addressed as a high-handed editor. While the first and final stories of *WWTA* set the grayish tone of it and display the theme of the collection, “We Talk About When We Talk About Love,” the title story of the edited version, highlights the theme of the collection as decided by Lish – the unutterableness of love.

“We Talk About When We Talk About Love” is a story about two couples – Mel McGinnis and Terri, and Nick (“I,” the narrator) and Laura – drinking and chatting in a room, talking about their viewpoints on the subject of love. The “33-page manuscript [titled “Beginners” was] cut by [fifty percent] for inclusion in *WWTA*” (Carver, *Collected Stories* 1003). In Lish’s first editing, he “cut the last five pages” of this story (Carver, *Collected Stories* 1003). In his second editing, he “changed the title from “Beginners” to “What We Talk About When We Talk About Love” and deleted the names of the old couple [named] Anna and Henry Gates” (Carver, *Collected Stories* 1003). The phrase “what we talk about when we talk about love” is “not only as a microcosm of Lish’s editing techniques but as emblematic of his work on the collection as a whole” (Groenland 70).

The title of the story is from the line of Mel when he is telling a story about the old couple which Mel believes is a “good example” of “what real love is” (Carver, *WWTA* 120). As Mel describes, this is an example of love that “ought to make [people] feel ashamed when [they] talk like [they] know what [they are] talking about when [they] talk about love” (Carver, *WWTA* 122). Mel McGinnis “is a cardiologist” who has “spent five years in a seminary before quitting to go to medical school” (Carver, *WWTA* 114). Mel’s background seems to “give him the right” to talk about love (Carver, *WWTA* 114). As a cardiologist, Mel is a professional in the mechanism of the human heart, the symbol of love, and the cure for it. As a former student in a seminary, Mel should be a valid spokesman for godly love. Terri, Mel’s second wife considers “Mel always has love on his mind” (Carver, *WWTA* 115). However, having love does not mean understanding love. Mel does not know what love is or what it should be. Nonetheless,

Mel knows the love he tries to talk about is not what Terri believes as love, the “kick-me-so-I’ll-know-you-love-me” kind of love (Carver, *WWTA* 115). Mel believes love should not be something violent. Howbeit, the “kick-me-so-I’ll-know-you-love-me” kind of love is one of the beliefs or myths on the subject of love (Carver, *WWTA* 115). Mel describes this false belief as the “romantic” school of love (Carver, *WWTA* 115). Meanwhile, “real love” (Carver, *WWTA* 120), as presented by the old couple, is the till-death-do-us-part kind of love. Howbeit, “Mel’s story ends with hospitalization and failed connection, and [readers] are shown the calamity rather than the human connection that comes in its wake” (Groenland 68). “[I]t is killing the old fart just because he [cannot] look at the fucking woman” (Carver, *WWTA* 127). This is the line that ends the story of “real love” (Carver, *WWTA* 120).

Mel has spent lines talking about what love should be, using the old couple as an example of what “real love” is (Carver, *WWTA* 120). May the love between the old couple be tender, the account Mel provides the other three with is indelicate. The four of them have spent hours discussing the topic of love. However, they cannot conclude what love is or what it should be. They believe there exists love, they can love, and they have love. However, they do not “really know about love” (Carver, *WWTA* 120).

They experience love but they do not know what love is. They speak words about love, but the words do not render meaning. Pages are spent on the story of what we talk about when we talk about love, but till the end of the story, there is no conclusion made on what we talk about when we talk about love. The story merely portrays a group of people drinking and telling their love stories. May that be a miniature of what we talk about when we talk about love, the story is anti-epiphany. After all, when we talk about love we talk about something, but we do not know what love is.

The edited title story of the collection ends as follows:



I could hear my heart beating. I could hear everyone's heart. I could hear the human noise we sat there making, not one of us moving, not even when the room went dark.  
(Carver, *WWTA* 129)

The cardia beats. Everyone has a heart that beats. Everyone has a heart, and everyone can love. However, this is a mere "human noise" (Carver, *WWTA* 129). With the sun going down and the room going dark, the "human noise" goes on as they go on babbling (Carver, *WWTA* 129). The love they have been talking about is merely a noise they make, a noise that does not render any meaning. Or, the meaninglessness carried by the word "noise" has already conveyed a meaning that "[l]ove [is] an unknowable and unapproachable mystery" (Carver, *WWTA* 129; Groenland 70). "Physical love," "[c]arnal love and, well, call it sentimental love" (Carver, *WWTA* 120). Sexual, sensual, and flesh, the "human noise" (Carver, *WWTA* 129). The love we talk about is not something divine but something human. It is "a 'human noise' made in the dark rather than an ideal to be struggled for" (Groenland 70).

The noise may not be something to be struggled with, but making such a noise is also something strenuous in Lish's edited version in contrast to Carver's original version. On the other hand, love in Carver's "Beginners" is expressible and substantial, as shown by the ending of the manuscript version of the title story:

"Terri, sweetheart," Laura said to her tenderly. "It'll be okay, you'll see. It'll be okay."  
Laura raised her eyes to mine then. Her look was penetrating, and my heart slowed. She gazed into my eyes for what seemed a long time, and then she nodded. That's all she did, the only sign she gave, but it was enough. It was as if she were telling me, Don't worry, we'll get past this, everything is going to be all right with us, you'll see. Easy does it. That's the way I chose to interpret the look anyway, though I could be wrong.  
(Carver, *Collected Stories* 948)

Words and movements, tender and warm. They are safe and sound in love. May there be a misinterpretation, but for “I,” love is expressible and comprehensible. Instead of darkness and motionlessness, what ends “Beginners” is light and the search for it:

The shower stopped running. ... The blue layer of sky had given way now and was turning dark like the rest. But stars had appeared. ... I stood at the window and waited. I knew I had to keep still a while longer, keep my eyes out there, outside the house as long as there was something left to see. (Carver, *Collected Stories* 948)

As if every shower will stop running, every misery has an end. The sky may turn dark, but stars will appear. There is always something to look forward to. May there be so much water so close to home that can drown people, there is love in every person, and there is a bond between people. This is the warmth, the human connection, the shed of light in the hazy dark reality that Carver wished to present to the public in contrast to what Lish redirects the collection to.

In a nutshell, while “What We Talk About When We Talk About Love” exhibits the unutterableness of love and the meaninglessness of the attempt to talk about love, “Beginners” vividly portrays the tenderness of love and bond.

### **3.5. Reshaping Carver**

As we see from the above comparison between the manuscript and edited versions of the four stories, Carver is silenced in the edited version of his second collection. Along with the control shift over the book publication from the writer to the editor, Lish redirected the theme of the collection, altering its original path and guiding it to a gloomy route.

As aforementioned, *WTA* is Carver’s second collection published in 1981. The publication of Carver’s first collection of stories (*Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?*) is five years before the publication of the second collection. “Carver’s life changed” in those five years (Carver, *Collected Stories* 990). He stopped drinking in 1977. His “first marriage [with

Maryann Burk Carver] ended in separation” the following year (Carver, *Collected Stories* 990). In 1979, “Carver began living with Tess Gallagher” (Carver, *Collected Stories* 990), his second wife. For Carver, “[the] stories [of his second collection] are central to his recovery from alcoholism” (Carver, *Collected Stories* 972). The stories of the second collection have a far-reaching personal meaning for Carver. Lish violently discombobulated the meaningful engagements between the characters. The edits Lish made were entirely alien to Carver’s sensibility. What readers see from *WWTA* is not the original Carver but the reshaped Carver.

The editing of Carver’s second collection reveals “Lish’s ... aims and editing techniques” (Groenland 40). While the phrase “what we talk about when we talk about love” is presented in Carver’s original in almost the same form, Lish isolated and repurposed the immanence of language in itself “to achieve sonic and tonal effects that subtly affect the reader’s experience of the narrative” (Groenland 71). As Lish believed, “the instant [one] offer[s] an explanation is the instant [he/she] [has] sentimentality” (Callis, “The Gordon Lish Notes”). Lish removed the background details and cut down the dialogue between the characters to minimize the emotional appeal to readers. As shown in the manuscript version, for Carver, love may not be mutual or communicable, but love is expressible and the effort to love and convey love is never futile. In contrast, as shown in the edited version, for Lish, the attempt to convey love means making mere “human noise” (Carver, *WWTA* 129), something almost meaningless. With Lish cutting away the lines in which the characters explain their thoughts and acts, Carver’s second collection is altered from an extensive tale to a deadpan narrative labeled ‘minimalistic.’

“[T]erms like ‘Minimalism’ and ‘Dirty Realism’ are intertwined with Carver’s early work” (Groenland 40). Howbeit, the minimalistic style, which is created by Lish’s editing, is “a departure from [Carver’s] ... aesthetic” (Groenland 40). As Carver declared in an interview in 1983, “[t]here [was] something about ‘minimalist’ that smack[ed] of smallness of vision and

execution that [he] [did not] like” (Simpson and Buzbee, “The Art of Fiction No. 76”). The same year Carver published his third short story collection titled *Cathedral*. For this publication, Carver “insist[ed] on complete control of his stories, restricting Lish to standard copyediting” (Carver, *Collected Stories* 974). Carver might not like the style of *WWTA* and how Lish took control of the content and publication of his second collection; nonetheless, Carver could not deny that *WWTA* is a successful publication. Lish’s edit did make Carver’s second collection into a succinct piece with an explicit theme that attracts readers.

As Lish questioned: “[w]hich has the greater value [:] [t]he document as it issues from the writer or the thing of beauty that was made” (qtd. in Sklenicka 360)? As how Carver agreed with Ezra Pound, the editor of T.S. Eliot, “[i]t [is] immensely important that great poems be written, but it makes not a jot of difference who writes them” (Max 57). A hundred flowers blossom and a hundred schools of thought contend. Instead of thinking either the manuscript or the edited version has a higher value, we may consider there is beauty in the symbiosis of the original work and the edited work. Though Lish might believe “[w]hat remains is [nothing but] an artifact of power” (qtd. in Sklenicka 360), for readers, what we have are remarkable stories depicting the expressed or the unuttered human sentiment and love.

Lish might be an ingenious editor who made Carver’s second collection into an impeccable piece of art. However, the changes Lish made to the original stories were inappropriate because Lish neglected the sentiment of Carver and overstepped the line between writer and editor. Lish did not give enough respect to the original writer and his stories. Carver might not have the legal right to supervise the publication process since he had signed a binding contract that restricted his authority over his book, but he should have the moral right to prohibit the editor from over-aggressively altering the content of his work. Because of Lish, for decades, the Carver readers see in *WWTA* is not the bona fide Carver, but a hollowed-out writer reshaped by the editor.

#### 4. Conclusion

I have never been an avid reader of English literature. For the past literature classes and essays, time was too short for fully indulging in reading and writing. This capstone project is a chance for me, as an English major and as a reader, to study and enjoy a book thoroughly. As someone who is going to study for the Postgraduate Diploma in Education (PGDE) and become a primary school English teacher, neither can the edited version nor the original manuscript be suitable teaching material because they contain sexual and vulgar elements. My future career planning is not quite complete yet. Nonetheless, the process of gathering data and completing a capstone project on my own is a precious opportunity for me to train in critical thinking and logical thinking, as well as to develop integration skills and a sense of responsibility as a university student.

This dissertation presents a dialogue between the writer and the editor with the two versions of the same short story collection. May the writer-editor relationship between Raymond Carver and Gordon Lish be “ultimately poisonous” and Lish’s edit be a “baleful influence” on Carver’s second collection (King, “Raymond Carver’s Life and Stories”), *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love (WWTA)* is nonetheless a work of art that was all the rage in the late twentieth century. Two decades after Carver’s death, *WWTA* and its manuscript (version A, or *Beginners*) were published by the Library of America “as a historical document” (Rich, “The Real Carver”). For the first time, readers worldwide can read both the manuscript and edited versions of Carver’s second collection that established Carver as a significant American writer. Tess Gallagher, Carver’s widow, awaited the publication of *Collected Stories* (2009) for the reason that she no longer wanted to hear any readers asking her the question, “[d]id Gordon Lish write all of Raymond Carver’s stories” (qtd. in Rich, “The Real Carver”)? Lish might brag that Carver “was his creature [,]” and he might have “infallible taste in fiction” (Sklenicka 147, 359). Yet, it is definite that Lish did not write all of Carver’s stories, and Carver

is not Lish's creature. However, *WWTA* is not Carver's personal work. Studying the manuscript (version A) and edited collection (version C) offers an engrossing window into the complex relationship between the writer and the editor. Understanding the notion Carver wished to present in his second collection expands readers' sense of Carver as a writer and an individual.

Lish might be *il miglior fabbro*, the better craftsman who could present the collection as an emblematic work of the unutterableness of human thoughts and sentiments. Or, Lish was a villain who cut out the emotions and connections that Carver wanted to express as someone applying himself to a new order in his life and art. Lish might be telling a story of the inability to convey love with his edit. Or, he was degrading the fleshly love inside one, degrading the earthly love among people. For Carver, love might be difficult, but it is meaningful. For Lish, love is an unanswerable conundrum, an unspeakable subject. In *WWTA*, a book about love, people are not connected with warmth; instead, they are unconnectable. Love is nothing but mere human noise. What we talk about when we talk about love is darkly hilarious in the sense that it is meaningless for Lish and his editing. As we see the dissimilarity between the manuscript and edited versions of Carver's second collection of short stories, *WWTA* is not a personal work of Carver but an involuntary collaboration on the writer's part. Lish, as the first decipherer of *WWTA*, is he a good reader of Carver? It is a question we may ask as succeeding readers of Raymond Carver.

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