

Cantonese, Please

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HONG KONG — I had always presumed that speaking to your child in your native tongue was the most natural thing in the world. Apparently not everyone thinks so. When we held a birthday party for our two-year-old daughter several months ago, I had a bit of a shock. The first sign came when a four-year-old Chinese boy looked annoyed and frustrated when I asked in Cantonese what snacks he would like from the table. “No, no, no!” he yelled in English. His mother promptly translated what I said into English.

This baffled me. The boy was born and bred here in Hong Kong, and his parents are both native speakers of the dominant Cantonese dialect, but they speak to their children only in their less-than-perfect English. It turned out they have a simple reason: They want their children to get into a prestigious international school. They worry that if their children speak Cantonese at home they will not learn enough English to pass the interview. The mother is delighted with her achievement. Her son has been accepted by an international kindergarten and her younger girl’s first words were all in English.

I quickly realized that she wasn’t the only one who thought like this. I noticed that several other parents at the birthday party were also speaking broken English to their children. “I will show you how does it work,” said one father in heavily-accented English, showing a toy train to his 19-month-old son. He admitted with slight embarrassment that his English pronunciation and grammar were not great, and trying to communicate with his toddler in a language he himself is struggling with has led to problems.

“One day I was trying to tell him this is how you button your shirt,” he said, switching into Cantonese. “But then I couldn’t say it in English, so I had to ring up a friend and ask.” I asked: Doesn’t he think it is better to talk to his toddler in the language he is most at ease in? “I think you’ve lived abroad for too long — you don’t understand what parents here have to think about,” the boy’s mother said. “Competition for international schools is fierce. If we don’t make sure he speaks English now, he won’t pass the interview.” I looked at her very cute toddler, who was busy chasing a ball on the floor, and felt a bit sad. The boy is not yet two, and he was still babbling away in baby words.

Yet in this competitive world, it is considered better for him to be exposed only to English, a language that his parents are not confident speaking but one they believe is more valuable than their native tongue. More and more, ambitious parents in Hong Kong are giving their children a head-start in English by putting them into English-speaking play groups, kindergartens and international schools. At these elite institutions, Mandarin Chinese is sometimes taught as a second language.

As for the local Cantonese dialect, who cares? I am saddened. What will happen to those age-old nursery rhymes our grandmothers taught us, the songs we sang at kindergarten, those Tang-dynasty poems that every preschool child was taught to recite? And surely the classic tales of the “Twenty-four pious sons” — the stories that the Chinese have used to teach their children about the Confucian virtue of filial piety since the 14th century — can’t have the same cultural resonance when translated into English.

Besides, Cantonese carries echoes of ancient Chinese that no longer exist in the official Mandarin. It is a lively language full of colorful expressions. It is our heritage, and if we don’t pass it on, who will? When these children are not taught to speak the language of their ancestors, a connection with their native culture is bound to be lost. And when they grow up, how will they see themselves? Will they still have a sense of belonging to Chinese culture? Will this society’s future elites be international in outlook, yet somehow rootless in culture?

Perhaps I’m being alarmist, but I wonder whether there will be a day when we in Hong Kong come to regret the decline of our language. By that time, it may be too late.

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