

**Bad and banned language: Triad secret societies,
the censorship of the Cantonese vernacular,
and colonial language policy in Hong Kong**

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ABSTRACT

The language of Chinese secret societies ("triads") in Hong Kong can be studied by relating triad language to anti-languages, to taboo language, and to the status of the vernacular in sociolinguistic theory. Also examined here are the laws in Hong Kong concerning triad language, and the attitudes of government agencies charged with policing the media. One striking feature of the Hong Kong situation is that the use of triad jargon can in some circumstances constitute a serious criminal offense. However, triad language also appears to be a source of innovation, through the popular media, into mainstream Hong Kong Cantonese. Research on triad language is relevant to the relationship between colonialism and language control. (Cantonese, Hong Kong, colonialism, triad secret societies, censorship, vernacular, taboo language, criminal slang)*

This article is concerned primarily with official perceptions of "bad language" - what is harmful, and why - considered in the context of Hong Kong,¹ where a ban on such language is enforced by censors of the Television and Entertainment Licensing Authority (TELA). In particular, we wish to analyze official policy toward "triad language," i.e. the language of Hong Kong street gangs and secret societies. The focus of our sociolinguistic argument is the claim that triad language is a source of innovation for Hong Kong Cantonese. As part of the background to this study, we have conducted extensive research into vernacular Cantonese over a period of four years. This has included the study of Cantonese slang in the popular media, questionnaire research into swearing and taboo language among school children, and a series of interviews with younger triad members. Other interviews were

also conducted with a serving magistrate, the Hong Kong censor, and a senior member of the Triad Research Unit of the Royal Hong Kong Police.

The term "triad society" is commonly used to cover a wide range of criminal and secret organizations, from teenage street gangs to powerful crime syndicates.² In colloquial Hong Kong Cantonese, people speak of *hàk-séh-wuih* 'black societies'.³ The term "triad language" can be understood as referring to the street slang of teenage gang members, as well as to the language of ritual and esoteric knowledge (drawn from poems, legends, secret signs, cryptic writing etc.) The questions of who is a triad and of what constitutes triad language are sociologically complex. They cannot be separated from the complex interaction between official categories and policies, from representations of triads in popular culture, or from the actual behavior of these legally proscribed groups.

In the guide to the control of triad language produced by the The Television and Films Authority (the predecessor of the TELA) the following definition is given (Hong Kong Government 1978:2):

Triad language is a system of code-words and jargons [*sic*] developed through the years and used by local underworld societies for communication among their own members. The origination of the system dates back to the Manchu Dynasty during which underground organizations were formed to "overthrow the Manchu Dynasty and restore the Ming era." Due to the underground nature of their work, the Triad members gradually evolved a system of communication whereby they could exchange message [*sic*] with no fear of information leaks. During the latter part of the 19th century, the Triad society began to disintegrate and slowly developed into decentralized criminal organizations connected with all kinds of illegal activities. The Triads' vocabulary is hence enriched with the addition of secret code-words and jargons related to their trades.

This definition places the emphasis on secrecy, a key metalinguistic concept in accounts of triad language. Whether secrecy is the primary rationale for subgroup languages, however, is open to question.

TRIAD LANGUAGE AS ANTI-LANGUAGE

One way of approaching triad language is to see it as a form of anti-language, in the sense of Halliday 1976. For Halliday, anti-languages (the languages of anti-social subgroups) are not primarily secret codes for the pursuit of conspiracies; they are vehicles of social transformation or resocialization. They transform the individual from a member of society to a member of an anti-society (575).

The processes of *resocialisation* . . . make special kinds of demand on language. In particular, these processes must enable the individual to “establish strongly affective identification” with the significant others. Conversation in this context is likely to rely heavily on the foregrounding of interpersonal meanings, especially where, as in the case of the second life, the cornerstone of the new reality is a new social structure – although, by the same token, the interpersonal elements in the exchange of meanings are likely to be fairly highly ritualized. [*italics in original*]

In the case of triad societies, initiation is traditionally accomplished through an elaborate ritual. This ritual is described metaphorically as death followed by rebirth, a renunciation of the kinship ties which constitute a person's primary identity in society. To ask someone “Have you died yet?” (*néih séigwo meih?*) is to ask whether he or she has undergone an initiation ceremony. The initiate enters not simply a new reality, but rather a reality based on an oppositional identity. As Halliday points out (*ibid.*): “An anti-language . . . is nobody's ‘mother-tongue’; it exists solely in the context of *resocialisation*, and the reality it creates is inherently an alternative form of reality, one that is constructed precisely in order to function in alternation. It is the language of an anti-society [*italics in original*]. This is not to say that the boundary between the language and the anti-language is always clear-cut. As Halliday remarks, “it is not the *distance* between the two realities but the *tension* between them that is significant.” Halliday illustrates this tension by pointing to the phonological and lexical transformations that the anti-language often effects on the original language, giving examples from Elizabethan England, from Bengali (Mallik 1972), and from Polish prison slang. He also compares anti-languages to the humorous linguistic contortions of comedians. However, phonological distortion and relexification are not absolutely necessary features of anti-languages. Such languages are “the limiting case of social dialect” (Halliday, 582), comparable to the languages of mysticism and literature: “an anti-language may be ‘high’ or ‘low’ on the diglossic spectrum” (583).

For Halliday, the study of anti-language can show us where the speakers of a subgroup language draw a boundary around the mainstream social dialect; i.e. it can help us map the domain of ordinary speech. In this article we wish to look primarily at how that line is drawn by the representatives of conventional society, but we also offer data to show that triad language is a source of innovation for Hong Kong Cantonese – evidence supporting Halliday's observation that the distinction between language and anti-language is not an absolute one. What makes this topic interesting is precisely the tension between language and anti-language to which Halliday points – a tension which, it can be argued, gives triad language an innovative power in Hong Kong Cantonese.

TABOO LANGUAGE AND THE STUDY OF THE VERNACULAR

The study of linguistic taboo, of the "bad" and the "banned" in language, raises many complex theoretical and practical issues. Within linguistics, these issues include anthropological questions about the nature and source of the power of bad language; sociolinguistic issues of politeness and decorum; theoretical linguistic issues such as the causes of language change; sociological issues of class, generation, and gender; and language planning issues about the control and censorship of language by governments, religious authorities, legal systems, language academies, teachers, and others. A set of complex questions can be asked about linguistic knowledge: Who knows what words mean, and who is in a position to judge? How do the authorities know or decide what a word means? What linguistic beliefs and rationalizations do the censors and the police bring to their account of linguistic meaning? The Saussurean distinction between synchronic and diachronic, which was introduced to break the link between usage and etymology, collapses when we look at lay linguistic beliefs and explanations, i.e. lay metalinguistic behavior.

One important context for the study of taboo language is that of the sociolinguist's concern with "vernacular" languages. The term "vernacular" has been used in a number of partly distinct, partly overlapping ways by different linguists. It can be used to make a contrast with standardized or official languages (thus Coates 1993:62 defines the vernacular as "non-standard varieties"). It can also designate an unmonitored speech style, the most informal register of a particular speaker. Labov (1972:208) apparently conflates these two senses of the term when he argues that the most consistent form of the vernacular can be found in the speech of adolescent peer groups in the age range of 9 to 18 years. Given that the speech of these groups is generally full of taboo language, it seems that Labov is locating bad language at the heart of the linguist's and sociolinguist's concerns. As Labov also concentrates mainly on young male speakers, to the exclusion of young women and girls, it seems clear that for him the vernacular is largely a male language.

It is a commonplace of sociolinguistics that female speakers are more conservative and more conscious of linguistic norms, and for Labov they are more inhibited and less "natural" in their speech habits than his core of male speakers. In the case of street gangs, we seem on the surface to be dealing with an exclusively male culture. Outside the gang are the "lames," i.e. those who do not hang out on the street, and who are therefore "plainly not members of the vernacular culture" (Labov 1972:274-85). Chin (1990:120) states categorically of Chinese street gangs in New York that "gang members are all male," and he gives the age range as being 13 to 37; the ordinary members on the street are teenagers, with leaders in their early 20s. Cheung (1985:69) gives statistics on triad-affiliated cases handled by youth social workers in Hong Kong. These involved males in 88.7% of cases; the core age group

consisted of 14–17 year-olds (61.3%), while 10% were in the age range of 10 to 13. It is also noted by Yuen (1981:ii) that “policemen speak more jargon than policewomen.” However, Milroy & Milroy 1978, in their study of Belfast, show that in one community, Clonard, the women score higher for variables associated with the vernacular than the men, and show a greater level of network density. These findings also suggest that some new prestige variants are being introduced into Belfast speech by younger women (cf. Coates 1993:179). If we define the vernacular in terms of network density, then there is no absolute correlation between male speech and vernacular usage. Nor is the link an absolute one between conservatism and women’s speech (Coates 1993, L. Milroy 1987, Milroy & Milroy 1978); as Coates remarks (104), it is important “to examine the conditions of people’s lives at a very local level.” Jay 1992 presents a wide range of material on the use of taboo words by men and women in the United States.

From Labov’s position on the non-standard vernacular, it follows that those who recoil from bad language and find it shocking are recoiling from the very heart of language. Trudgill (1974:30) speaks of continuing widespread “double-think” about taboo words, which he compares directly to superstition: “there is still, however, something that very closely resembles magic surrounding the use of taboo words in English.” People who react with “apparently very real shock and disgust” to television programs containing bad language are displaying “an irrational reaction to a particular word, not a concept.” The orthodox sociolinguistic view thus seems to be that, if we fear bad words, we surrender to the power of word magic; to fear bad language is to fear language itself.

In a sense, a work like Grose’s pioneering dictionary of English slang (1785) can be seen as a distant ancestor of Labov. Grose associates the vernacular with energy, with freedom from social control, and hence with a nationalistic discourse about English earthy naturalness, set against foreign restraint and artificiality. In the introduction, he links the vitality of English slang to the freedom of thought and speech permitted in “our constitution,” giving “a force and poignancy to the expressions of our common people not to be found under arbitrary governments, where the ebullitions of vulgar wit are checked by the fear of the bastinado, or of a lodging during pleasure in some gaol or castle” ([1785]1992:7).

Whether or not fear of taboo words is irrational, and whether or not one accepts Labov’s idealization of the vernacular, it is clear that the question of taboo language is not trivial or incidental to the study of language and culture. Baker (1991:55), in a study of obscenity and punning in Hong Kong Cantonese, suggests that vulgar ‘sandwich puns’ (*kit hauh yuh*) are merely “linguistic curiosities.” We argue that, on the contrary, the study of taboo language is central to any full understanding of linguistic beliefs and linguistic behavior.

CRIMINOLOGICAL LEXICOGRAPHY

The documentation of slang has an extensive history in the West, and many studies concentrate on language drawn from the criminal underworld. In 1819, James Hardy Vaux published a collection of Australian convict slang, termed "flash" language. More recent examples of the genre include Partridge 1949, McDonald 1988, and Morton 1989. In the US, Maurer collected extensive glossaries of the sub-cultures of con men, gamblers, drug addicts, moonshiners etc. (1974, 1981). An important study of the language of the Bengal underworld was carried out by Mallik 1972 (see discussion in Halliday 1976). Very often it has been official agencies which have carried out criminological language studies, with the aim of facilitating the control of social groups perceived as a threat to law and order. An early European example is the *Liber vagatorum*, published in 1510 after a roundup of social undesirables in Basel, which contained a vocabulary of underworld slang. The Wittemberg edition of 1528 has a preface by Martin Luther, linking Jews to the criminal underworld and its language (see Thomas 1932). A Hamburg police inspector wrote a four-volume work on the German criminal underworld (Avé-Lallement 1860-62) which deals, among other things, with the German criminal argot termed *Rotwelsch* (see Katz 1986).

Within the British empire, many colonial officials (and also the occasional missionary) undertook studies of secret societies. Sherwood's 1820 research into the rituals and language of Thugee (the language is termed *Ramasi*) in India inspired an army officer in Bengal, W. Sleeman, to transfer into the civil service in 1812. Sleeman's research (1836) convinced him that Thugee was a national conspiracy, and he was subsequently put in charge of the government's campaign against it (Annan 1967). Chinese secret societies were likewise an object of intense scrutiny by colonial administrators and policemen. For example, William Stanton served in the Hong Kong police, and wrote an account of triad societies after being dismissed in a corruption scandal in 1897 (Stanton 1900). W. P. Morgan, the author of the Hong Kong government's official guide to triad societies (1960), was also an inspector in the Hong Kong police force. The historians of Chinese secret societies in Malaysia, M. L. Wynne and W. L. Blythe, were both police superintendents in the Straits Settlements (Wynne 1941, Blythe 1969). G. Schlegel, a pioneering author in the field of triad research (1866), was a junior Dutch official in Java (see Comber 1961:3, Mak 1973:5).

THE GOVERNMENT, THE LAW, GOVERNMENT AGENCIES,
AND THE CENSORSHIP OF LANGUAGE

The Hong Kong government and control of triad societies

From the very outset, the colonial authorities in Hong Kong have been pre-occupied with the control of Chinese secret societies. Ordinance 1 (Hong

Kong 1845) was "An ordinance for the suppression of the Triad and other secret societies" – enacted, as Morgan points out, less than three years after the Treaty of Nanking under which Hong Kong was ceded to Britain (1960:59). The association of triads with political unrest, labor disputes, and riots is more or less coterminous with the history of Hong Kong as a British colony, as is concern over triad infiltration of the police (Morgan 1960:63, Lethbridge 1985). In Malaya, the Penang riots of 1867 were an early example of public order problems being linked to anti-triad legislation.⁴

In postwar Hong Kong, the key point of departure for official concern with triad societies is the 1956 riots (see Hong Kong Government [HKG] 1956). H. W. E. Heath, who became Commissioner of Police in 1959, wrote, in the preface to W. P. Morgan's official handbook on triads (Heath 1960:ix),

In 1956, a political disturbance in Kowloon was developed by Triad members into a period of anarchy and bloodshed which necessitated the use of firearms by the authorities before it could be brought under control.

Morgan mentioned 1956 as the beginning of "a special drive by the Hong Kong Police Force against the societies" (1960:xvii-xviii). Heath clearly associated triads, above all, with a political threat to British rule in Hong Kong (1960:x).

The societies are not however totally disorganised even though the bulk of active members do appear pre-occupied with their own individual schemes. A nucleus capable of reform and reorganisation still exists, and such is the potential strength of a unified society within Hong Kong that outside interests may well be tempted to assist or encourage such reorganisation for their own purposes. Possible reorganisation is a danger which we must acknowledge and prevent with all the means at our disposal.⁵

In spite of the police rhetoric that characterized the triad member as a degenerate criminal long detached from former patriotic ideals ("a run-of-the-mill hoodlum masquerading in the name of a long-dead giant," Heath 1960:xi), it is important to note the fear of political disorder that underlay the control of triads – in particular, a fear that they would rediscover their traditional role of opposing foreign rule within China.⁶

While it seems to be generally accepted that these riots were exploited and amplified by pro-Kuomintang triad societies (i.e. those allied historically with the Nationalists in China, and opposed to the Communist regime installed in 1949), the tone of Heath's and Morgan's remarks found little echo in the government's official report on the riots. As the Commission stated, "there is no evidence whatsoever to suggest that the riots were planned beforehand ... What is certain is that from a very early stage the disorders were exploited for their own purposes by gangs of criminals, hooligans and Triad societies" (HKG 1956:ii). The conclusion of the report was that "the rioting in Kowloon

was instigated and fanned by criminals, for criminal and not political or other ends" (1956:52). Nonetheless it is clear that, in the minds of at least some police, these "Triad riots of 1956" (Annieson 1989:115) demanded concerted action (see Morgan 1960:86-88 for an account of the police crackdown).

The *Report on triad societies in Hong Kong* (HKG 1964), written by staff of the Triad Societies Bureau (itself set up in 1956), states that triad initiation and promotion ceremonies, common before 1955-56, had by then virtually ceased. Few new recruits underwent any initiation "other than muttered nonsense in a staircase, back alley or rooftop, devoid of witnesses or proper ritual" (1964:4). In other words, with this "degeneration of ritual and ceremony," triads had become street criminals and hoodlums. Such was the perceived success of the attack on triad ritual that an amendment was needed in the legislation directed against triad societies (the Societies Ordinance of 1949); in effect, the definition of triad member, which required evidence of ritual initiation, was weakened, making it an offense to "profess" or "claim" to be a triad member or to belong to "any organisation which uses Triad title [*sic*] or nomenclature" (ibid.) The emphasis in policing organized crime was on breaking up larger groupings into smaller ones (into "unconnected criminal gangs and 'Teddy boy' type associations," Morgan 1960:91; cited in HKG 1964:2), and on dealing with the resultant "new breed" of juvenile street criminals - as Morgan himself pointed out (91), a classic case of "divide and conquer."

The ironic consequence of the success of police action following the 1956 riots was that gang members could no longer be prosecuted under the Societies Ordinance as formulated in 1949, since they had not been initiated in the anthropologically correct ritual manner. More ironic still is Morgan's dismay at the "appalling ignorance" of many society members of their rituals and practices and their "misuse" of hand signals (1960:167).⁷ However, triad rituals have not, it seems, disappeared completely in Hong Kong. A 1986 government discussion document states, with regard to triad rituals, that "there is evidence that on a few occasions, in the last twelve months, up to 60 persons have attended and the ceremony has lasted about two hours," noting that "the more a society adheres to the traditional Hung Mun [triad] ritual the better organised it appears to be" (HKG 1986:3, 4).

The ordinance was amended in 1961 to offer a more comprehensive definition of office bearer.⁸ In 1964 the offense of simply claiming to be a triad member was added.⁹ The Societies Ordinance section 18(3) currently states: "Every society which uses any triad ritual or which adopts or makes use of any triad title or nomenclature shall be deemed to be a triad society"; section 20(1) states that "any person who is or acts as a member of an unlawful society or attends a meeting of an unlawful society . . . shall be guilty of an offence"; and section 20(2) states that "any person who is or acts as a member of a triad society or professes or claims to be a member of a triad

society or attends a meeting of a triad society ... or is found in possession of or has the custody or control of any books, accounts, writing, lists of members, seals, banners or insignia of or relating to any triad society ... shall be guilty of an offence ...” Thus it is an offence to follow the ceremonial and linguistic rituals of a triad society, but it is also an offence simply to claim to be a member of a triad society. The law takes the performance of certain ritual acts and utterances of the nature of “I am a triad member,” and criminalizes them.¹⁰ Much legal argument has been focused on the exact nature of this offense (see Findlay & Howarth 1992:480–518).

The law and censorship

The legal situation with reference to the censorship of language in Hong Kong is somewhat complicated. It currently involves several pieces of separate legislation, the recent adoption of the Hong Kong Bill of Rights in 1991, the promulgation of the Basic Law of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (People’s Republic of China [PRC] 1991), and the roles of a number of interlocking governmental and quasi-governmental organizations.

The relevant legislation relating to the censorship of language includes the Control of Obscene and Indecent Articles Ordinance (Hong Kong 1987), the Telecommunications Ordinance (Hong Kong 1963), the Film Censorship Ordinance (Hong Kong 1988), and the Television Ordinance (Hong Kong 1964). The Societies Ordinance (enacted in 1949) is also of direct relevance. Throughout its history, the colonial government of Hong Kong has not been noted for its desire to promote the free expression of ideas and public debate on the sensitive issues of the day. The Post Office Ordinance (Hong Kong 1900) and the Sedition Ordinance (Hong Kong 1914) both were aimed at limiting public debate, particularly political debate, including that relating to the growth of anti-colonialist sentiment in India in the early 20th century. Hong Kong’s laws still have not thrown off their colonialist past; in the words of Ghai (1992:370), “rooted in their colonialist origins, they tend to equate freedom with mischief.”¹¹ Indeed, the *de jure* legislative powers held by the government to censor the media in Hong Kong are wide-ranging, if not draconian, in scope. Subsidiary legislation to the *Television (standards of programmes) regulations* (HKG 1964) states firmly (para. 4):

Programmes broadcast by a licensee shall exclude material which is likely – (a) to offend against good taste or decency; (b) to mislead or alarm; (c) to encourage or to incite to crime, civil disorder or civil disobedience; (d) to discredit or bring into disrespect the law or social institutions including any religion; and (e) to serve the interest of any foreign political party.¹²

The Control of Obscene and Indecent Articles Ordinance aims to uphold “standards of morality, decency and propriety that are generally accepted by reasonable members of the community.”

If one examines the letter of the law, one can see that very extensive powers are still retained by the government, even if they have been rarely invoked in recent years. Government practice since the 1970s has generally followed a largely non-interventionist, classically "liberal" approach to the enforcement of such regulations; consequently, in Hong Kong, "the result of somewhat illiberal laws and somewhat liberal practice is a reasonably open society" (Ghai, *ibid.*), with fairly free and open media. But this, it should be emphasized, is largely the result of benign administration, rather than of permissive statutes.

The corpus of legislation relating to censorship has recently been extended by the adoption of the Hong Kong Bill of Rights (Hong Kong 1991) and the promulgation of the Basic Law (PRC 1991). Article 16 of the Bill of Rights states that everyone should enjoy the right of freedom of expression – including the freedom to seek, secure, and impart information and ideas of all kinds, across frontiers, orally or in print, in the form of art, or through other media of his or her desire. In the Basic Law, freedom of expression is protected in a number of its articles: Article 27 safeguards freedom of speech, of the press, and of publication; Article 30, the freedom of privacy and communication; and Article 34, the right to engage in academic research and literary and artistic creation (see Ghai 1992).

The effects of both these pieces of recent legislation, however, have yet to be felt in Hong Kong. The implementation of the Bill of Rights has been extremely partial with reference thus far to case law proceedings, and the Basic Law will not come into effect until June 30, 1997. Of more direct relevance to the current censorship of language in Hong Kong are the ordinances already mentioned and the work of government agencies such as the Obscene Articles Tribunal, the Broadcasting Authority, and the Television and Entertainment Licensing Authority.

Government agencies

Before the early 1970s, control of censorship was seen as a duty of the Royal Hong Kong Police Force; however, with the advent of commercial television, it was decided that a separate agency should be established to enforce government policy, and TELA was created. Among the most important organizations concerned with the censorship of language in Hong Kong are the Film Censorship Authority, the Obscene Articles Tribunal, and the Broadcasting Authority. Although these are separate government agencies, their work is co-ordinated and directed by the most important agency of all, TELA, which functions as "the territory's arbiters of good taste and decency" (Dykes 1993:20). In the world of local entertainment, the work of TELA covers a vast area, including the licensing of theatrical performances, trade promotions, film censorship, books and magazines (including comic books), television and radio censorship, and even the licensing of mahjong parlors

(originally a function of the police). The Commissioner of TELA also serves as the official censor in Hong Kong. That office holds vast responsibilities, covering the interpretation and implementation of government policy; the formulation of policy with regard to expanding technological horizons (e.g. satellite and cable television); the monitoring of (and response to) public opinion and complaints; liaison with the local film and television industry; the referral of items to the Obscene Articles Tribunal; and, on occasion, assisting in the coordination of police raids against shop owners suspected of dealing in obscene articles.

A report to the Hong Kong government Fight Crime Committee (HKG 1981) deals with a number of issues related to bad language, and especially to triads and their language. Like many observers, the writers comment on the looseness in use of the term "triad" (150). Few youth aged 7 to 15 years are "genuine triad members"; more accurately, one should speak of "groups of young people with borrowed triad jargon, gestures or rituals as simply gangs" (1981:153). The report discusses concerns expressed by social workers that the adoption of triad titles and language "means that they [young people] no longer regarded such things as disreputable," and widespread worries that the media are exercising a bad influence on the young through a trend "to glorify 'bad' heroes and the use of triad language" (156). There is, some critics say, "a proliferation of triad and other distasteful language" (167). TELA is quoted as defending itself against charges that standards have been allowed to fall, arguing that "only those words or phrases which have been accepted as virtually everyday usage are normally allowed to be used" (1981:156, 167, 168-69).

The general approach of TELA is avowedly liberal and non-interventionist. Rita Lau, commissioner of TELA, emphasizes (1993) that the Hong Kong government chiefly follows a "reactive" policy in responding to public opinion in such areas as the censorship of books, film, and television. Since the 1990s, the public consensus view, e.g. in the form of responses from District Boards and public opinion surveys, has clearly demonstrated that most Hong Kong people want the mass media to remain largely free from censorship, at least in the case of designated "adult viewing."

As far as language is concerned, Hong Kong people display a range of attitudes toward language. In a sense, Lau argues (p.c.), the public in Hong Kong expects the language of some media directed at adults to be racy, slightly risqué, perhaps full of slang and puns; nevertheless, the "gratuitous" use of *chòu-háu* ('bad, foul, vulgar language') has frequently shocked and outraged some viewers.¹³ Generally the attitude toward language in films has been more tolerant, for various reasons (e.g. the limited audience, the films' censorship classifications, etc.), but "quite strict" when applied to television (ibid.) In fact, because the reach of local television stations is so extensive, one of the major tasks of TELA is the censorship of material that is

unsuitable for a mass television audience. The Broadcasting Authority (HKG 1993) sets out in its *Code of Practice* a number of considerations, including the requirement (of relevance to language) that "no programme may contain any matter which is . . . indecent, obscene, vulgar, or of doubtful propriety . . ." (para. 4).

In the same document, the Broadcasting Authority later addresses the question of "standards" of language in quite some detail, arguing in favor of some limits on complete "linguistic liberalism" in the question of television language (para. 6).

Many viewers are offended by bad language on television. Scriptwriters and producers often resort to bad language to reflect certain types of characters in a programme. There is no absolute ban on such language, but its use must be defensible in terms of the context. Writers must take care to avoid the gratuitous use of language that is likely to offend. Bad language should not be used in programmes specifically designed for children or likely to be watched by a large number of young viewers. Some hitherto unacceptable expressions have been absorbed into our daily language. There is no objection to their use on television, but producers should ensure that such expressions are employed with discretion. Expressions not so widely accepted, which may be considered offensive by some people, should not be used within the Family Viewing Hours . . . At other times they should be presented with discretion and in moderation. Downright offensive expressions are prohibited on television.

Lau states (p.c.) that there are essentially two types of language that TELA is concerned to censor: The first is essentially *chòu-háu* (largely made up of sexual taboo words). The second she identifies as "triad language," the secret jargon of triad societies. She asserts that this type of language is "totally banned" from television, although she also admits that there may be a less distinct, intermediate variety of "triad-associated" language which is more difficult to identify and less easy to control. The banning of triad language is enforced both by TELA and through the Societies Ordinance. This particular concern with triad language marks this control of language in Hong Kong as an interesting case of specialized language planning.

Finally, in Appendix I to the *Code of Practice* (HKG 1993), "language standards" are set out with reference to viewing times and types of audience:

(a) Family viewing: Expressions not so widely accepted, which may be considered offensive by some people, should not be used.

(b) Selective viewing: Expressions likely to be considered offensive shall be presented with discretion and in moderation. Their use must be defensible in terms of content and authenticity.

(c) Late night viewing: Crude expressions with sexual connotations, more explicit adult jokes, and other offensive language may only be used after 11:30 p.m. where they are defensible in terms of context.

What interested us as sociolinguists, when we first saw this document, was the taxonomy of language in paragraph 6 of the *Code of Practice* and in the table from Appendix I, which uses categories such as "Hitherto unacceptable expressions ... absorbed into our daily language"; "Expressions not so widely accepted, which may be considered offensive ..."; and "Downright offensive expressions ..." We consider this categorization particularly interesting for several reasons, and especially because of the almost exact correlation with the categories of language discussed in some of the other official documents we examined in our research.

Censored language - The bad and the banned

In 1990, when our interest in this topic was beginning, we came across a number of lists of so-called triad language that had been used by TELA since the late 1970s (HKG 1980). The precise provenance of these lists is uncertain, but we believe that they originated in the Royal Hong Kong Police Force at a time when censorship was still handled by the police. One possibility is that they were drawn up after the 1956 riots in the context of concerted official action against triad societies, but this is conjecture on our part.¹⁴ It is noteworthy that these lists actually contain very little foul language, and none of the core, obscene *chòu-háu* characters. Containing about 400 items, they focus almost exclusively on "triad" or "triad-associated" language. Lists A and B contain language which is acceptable to varying degrees in different contexts, but the items in List C are totally banned.

The lists broadly correspond to the categories of censorship laid down in the Obscene Articles Tribunal (to be distinguished from the film classification system employed by the Film Censorship Authority). Category A, shown in Table 1, contains (previously unacceptable) "expressions already absorbed into the language." Most of these items would actually be regarded as Cantonese "slang" rather than "bad language" or "triad language." The expressions (1) *chyun*, (2) *giu gài*, and (5) *màh-làt-lóu* seem to have passed into daily use in some varieties of Hong Kong Cantonese. Many might argue these are somewhat racy, if not vulgar; but most people, particularly young people, would accept them as part of everyday slang and the culture of the popular media. Judgments on these matters vary. Five of these items, however, stand out as being or having been a type of triad or triad-associated language, particularly in Hong Kong films and television dramas: (3) *kàu-néui*, (4) *lèuih-hei*, (6) *pek-paau*, (7) *tiuh néui*, and (8) *wòhng-hei*.

If this perception is true (and there seems to be some evidence from police sources that it is), then this is extremely interesting from a linguistic point

TABLE 1. *Expressions of Category A*

No.	Yale Transcription	Literal Meaning (Where Applicable)	Gloss
1	<i>chyun</i>	inch (measurement)	arrogant, proud
2	<i>giu gài</i>	to call a chicken	to hire a prostitute
3	<i>kàu néui</i>		to pick up girls
4	<i>lèuh hei</i>	thunder air	loyalty
5	<i>màh lát lóu</i>		bloke, guy, dirty old man
6	<i>pek páau</i>	to throw down the pistol	to quit (a job, a task)
7	<i>tiuh néui</i>	classifier (thin, elongated) girl	a chick, girlfriend
8	<i>wòhng hei</i>	Royal air	Hong Kong police

of view. In our interview with Lau, we were informed quite clearly that “triad language” was totally banned. Yet here it is in Category A. These items, in spite of their triad associations, are now acceptable in some measure for inclusion in films and television programs.

Ex. 1, *chyun*, is a case in point. For some young people this word has no triad connotations whatsoever. Its primary meaning would be perceived as ‘proud, arrogant’. If pressed, a speaker may give the dictionary meaning ‘inch’. Indeed, in Cantonese slang the lexical loan from English, *inch*, is sometimes used to replace *chyun* (*néih hóu inch* ‘you’re very stuck up’). However *chyun* ‘proud’ may also be another word of triad origin, from the core triad vocabulary. It can be used as a verb meaning ‘to challenge’, and calling someone *chyun* can be contextualized in a serious confrontation that will lead to violence (Lau, p.c.) Certainly organized crime specialists in the police consider this word to be of triad origin, with the meaning ‘ten’ in the secret number system of triad societies.

The second TELA group is Category B, shown in Table 2. It contains expressions in the process of being absorbed. Some of these may be considered offensive, and their use according to the Broadcasting Authority’s Code of Practice should be tempered “with discretion and moderation.” Again, the bulk of this vocabulary seems to fall into the category of “triad-associated” language, of the kind presented in the popular media. Many of these items are already familiar to the Hong Kong public, and their use in television and films is permitted – especially when the viewers constitute an adult audience, and the subject matter involves the description of street-level crime. Cantonese native speakers to whom we showed these lists knew many or all of the items in lists A and B, and some were puzzled as to the distinction. This suggests that the categories have failed to keep up with changes in the general acceptability and currency of the items involved, an example of a “fossilized” official taxonomy.

TABLE 2. *Expressions of Category B*

No.	Yale Transcription	Literal Meaning (Where Applicable)	Gloss
9	<i>dáa dán</i>		to hang around
10	<i>gám sáu jí</i>	gold finger	informer
11	<i>gú yéh jái</i>	young brother-in-law	a ponce
12	<i>kai daih</i>	younger foster brother	male homosexual, male prostitute
13	<i>lam yáuh</i>	to knock out someone	to kill someone
14	<i>ngáauh fán</i>	to bite powder	to take heroin
15	<i>tín máhn tòih</i>	the Royal Observatory	a lookout
16	<i>yih ngh jái</i>	two five boy	traitor, turncoat

 TABLE 3. *Expressions of Category C*

No.	Yale Transcription	Literal Meaning (Where Applicable)	Gloss
17	<i>baahk jí sin</i>	white paper fan	triad society advisor (triad rank)
18	<i>chóu háaih</i>	grass sandal	triad society intermediary (triad rank)
19	<i>deih páaih</i>	earth license	mother
20	<i>tín páaih</i>	sky license	father
21	<i>gúng sí</i>	company	triad society (generic term)
22	<i>lóuh chiuh</i>	old Chiu	Chiu Chao (ethnonym) gang
23	<i>tiuh sei</i>	classifier (thin, elongated) four	14K triad society
24	<i>jiú</i>	red	one (number)
25	<i>gát</i>	lucky	seven
26	<i>sàam hòh</i>	three rivers	water

Finally, Category C (Table 3) deals with "objectionable" language that should be excluded from all television programs. The rubric for this category reads as follows: "Expressions which are specifically triad jargons or crude in themselves or have a sexual connotation. They are considered objectionable by an average person." A number of points emerge from this list. First, in spite of the rubric, there are only a few expressions that might be considered sexual taboo words or *chòu-háu*; the everyday obscenities heard on the streets of Hong Kong are entirely absent. Only five expressions in a list of 287 items refer to sexual activity or sexual organs. One of these, *choi* (lit. 'vegetable'), is glossed as 'broad, prostitute'. This usage, while far from polite, is part of mainstream Hong Kong slang: It sits rather uncomfortably alongside technical drug language such as *yahp lóuh-gòu* ('to take drugs by firing the ack-ack gun, i.e. by placing a few granules of heroin at the tip of a cigarette') and triad prison slang such as *tín-sàn* (lit. 'sky mountain',

glossed as 'punishment block'). Again this suggests the fossilized nature of these categories and the role of triad and triad-associated language as an innovator in Hong Kong Cantonese. The vast majority of items on list C are tokens either of secret triad language or of specialized drug addict jargon.¹⁵ If there is a core of triad usage, these items presumably belong to it. Very few of these expressions are known to the general, law-abiding public. They represent a "core" secret language, knowledge of which is presumably restricted to the triad societies themselves, the police, and the various agencies of the Hong Kong government.

The ban on triad language, though it may partly be grounded in government lists and in the advice of experts, is also enforced against any fictional representations of that language, even where that language is not even "real." Presumably an attempt to show a triad ritual on television would be banned, even if the actual ceremony bore little relation to the "real thing" (since the average viewer would not know the difference). Paul Fonoroff, in a discussion of the film *Gangs* (directed by Lawrence Ah Mon, 1988), praises this film as offering an antidote to films glorifying the triad life-style, and he criticizes TELA in the following terms (Fonoroff 1988:307): "Unfortunately, *Gangs* also demonstrated the growing heavy-handedness of the Television and Entertainment Licensing Authority (TELA), Hong Kong's censors, who insisted on nearly thirty cuts in the film, mostly on the grounds of 'triad-related language', though a number of the phrases removed were inventions of the script writers."

In broad terms, what seems to have happened in recent years in Hong Kong is this: because of the sustained popularity of triad characters in feature films, television dramas, and comic books, the triad anti-hero (and his stock female counterpart, the embattled nightclub hostess) has become something of a cultural icon for Hong Kong people as they struggle with employment pressures, high-density housing, and political uncertainties in a rapidly changing Asian city. The language of the Hong Kong anti-hero has also become popular, partly through its media exposure, and partly because of its status as a core male vernacular in-group language. However, triad language does not exist in a linguistic vacuum; its use on the street and in the media overlaps with the use of swear words (*chòu-háu*), and is also located in the greater acoustic space of the spoken vernacular of Hong Kong Cantonese. We attempt a simple schematic representation of these factors in Figure 1, which depicts the relationship between triad language and *chòu-háu* for gang members, and the role of this language as a source of innovation for Hong Kong Cantonese. On a rather simple level of illustration, we trust that this diagram is self-explanatory, as we have already discussed the links between popular culture and innovation in Cantonese. This diagram should not be taken to imply that all speakers who use *chòu-háu* also use triad slang. One would expect, however, that all speakers of triad slang will also use

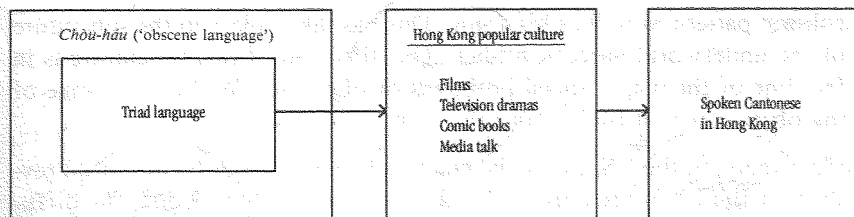


FIGURE 1: Bad and banned language as a source of innovation in spoken Cantonese.

chou-hau. Our inclusion of *chou-hau* here as a perimeter wall to triad language is in part motivated by the apparent links in the minds of the censorship authorities (TELA), and also by the testimony of a senior triad expert in the Hong Kong police who explained graphically that "triad language swims in a sea of *chou-hau*" (Peter Ip, p.c.)

The notion that triad language is a source of innovation fits well with observations of marginal or stigmatized groups as sources of innovation in a number of cultural contexts. One obvious instance is London working-class speech as a source of innovation in varieties of Southern British English, and even the prestige accents of RP (Coggle 1993). Other examples of this process, more clearly related to the language of the criminal classes, are cited by Maurer 1974, 1981, who worked on the language of the underworld in the US. Maurer notes the diffusion of moonshiners' argot into Appalachian country music (1974:108), and associates this form of diffusion with the breakdown of the sub-cultural microsystem in question (1981:387).

When large numbers of words escape from the subculture, this may be an indication of subcultural diffusion and suggest that assimilation is underway with a consequent deterioration of the microsystem. We have good examples of this in the subcultures of the jazz musician and that of the criminal narcotic addict. Words from both these subcultures are now the basis of the slang vocabulary of millions of young people, and neither subculture is nearly so exclusive as it was some forty years ago.

For Maurer, the breakup of traditional criminal sub-cultures seems to represent a cultural loss more conventionally associated with the extinction of tribal or pre-modern societies. But it also poses a threat to the dominant culture (ibid.):

... we have seen within the last two decades the mass invasion of a definitely criminal subculture by teenagers (and sometimes preteens) from the dominant culture – an invasion that has played havoc with the criminal's

cultural pattern as well as his argot. This has taken place in the subculture of the underworld narcotic addict. The diffusion of this subculture is in fact one of the major social problems of our times. Within the range of my observation, it is without precedent.

Undoubtedly, in the US, the social changes brought about by the social revolution of the 1960s are part of the picture here; in Hong Kong, the diffusion of triad culture through the media might similarly be linked to the collapse of traditional social barriers and taboos, and the development of a society with both increased upward mobility and greater disaffection (hence a society with more "winners" and more "losers").

LANGUAGE CONTROL AND COLONIALISM

In the title of this article we made a distinction between bad language (which we can identify with *chòu-háu*) and banned language. The extremes of *chòu-háu* are largely banned from the public media, though a certain amount of this language does appear in recent films of the gangster genre. Cantonese comics portraying criminals and gangsters use graphic euphemisms of various kinds to represent the core *chòu-háu* characters. But the category of language which is categorically banned, or which is intended to be categorically banned, is that of triad language. As a secret language, triad language exercises the powerful attraction created by the setting up of any taboo. In Cantonese comics, films, and to some extent television, there are strong elements of criminal language drawn from the gray area between hard-core triad usage (not known to the general public) and "expressions which have been absorbed into the language." It is clear that both these varieties of taboo language are largely (though not exclusively) male varieties, with a specific social and contextual base; this takes us back to the earlier discussion of Labov and the nature of the vernacular.

Anthropologists talk about belief in taboo as belief in a contagious or infectious force. Douglas, in this context, talks of "uncleanliness" or "dirt" as "matter out of place" (1991:40). For the censor, bad language is contagious, and damages the social body. It is bad in and of itself, and can only be tolerated in a diluted form in some limited contexts. However, the more one represses a kind of language, it might be argued, the greater power one bestows upon it. The more it is forbidden, the more attractive it becomes to precisely those groups who use it to identify out of mainstream Hong Kong (even though, following Labov, these speakers may be the mainstream as far as the "authentic" use of language is concerned). If everyone knew the secret language of the triads, then what would be its value to them? The censor might say that this language may lose its value for triad societies, but at the cost of the corruption of the whole society. This seems to be implied in what

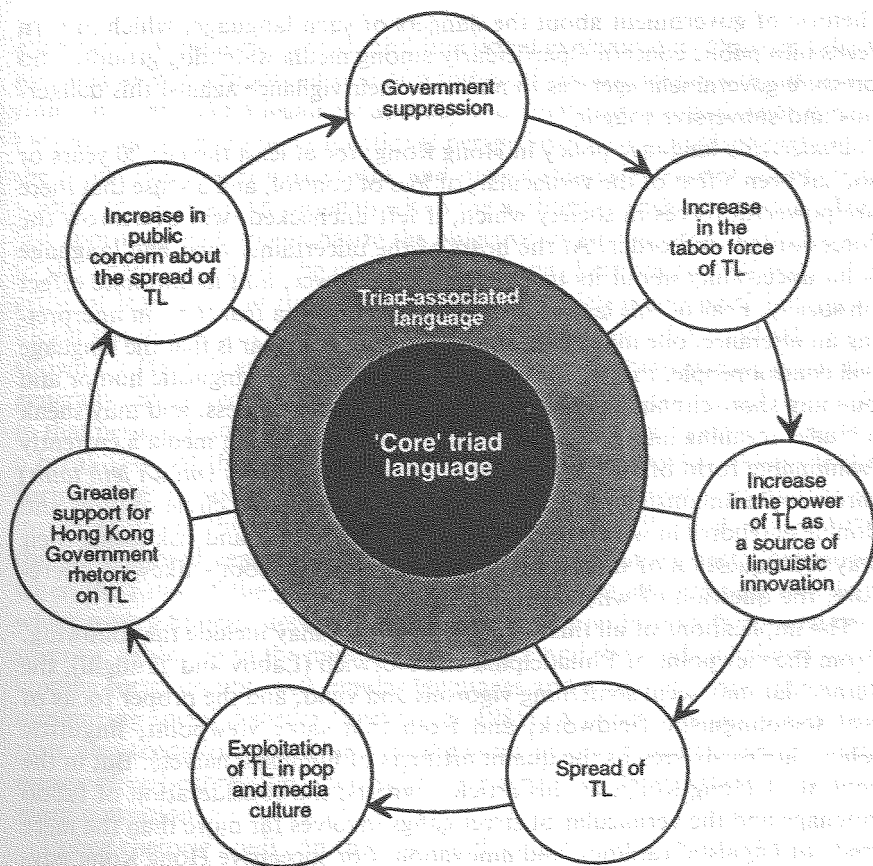


FIGURE 2: Triad language, public opinion, and government policy.

Maurer says about the diffusion of drug culture in the US. Currently, however, the censor is engaged in a conscious effort, only partly successful as we have noted, to suppress all triad language and ritual in the media. The relationship among triad language, public opinion, and government policy is illustrated in Figure 2.

Although Figure 2 is, again, a rather simple presentation of relationships, we suggest that it works in the following way. Government suppression (particularly through TELA) is routinely exerted on triad language (TL); this pressure increases its taboo value (and may create it in some instances, too); this then increases the power of TL as a source of innovation. TL thus spreads, "leaking" into pop and media culture, and in some ways is "exploited" by the media industry. This may then lend greater support to the

rhetoric of government about the dangers of such language, which in turn feeds into public concern – particularly among media watchdog groups, who pressure government agencies to maintain their vigilance against this dangerous and subversive tongue.

Underlying language policy in Hong Kong, for at least the last 20 years or so, has been a fear of the vernacular, of loss of control, and a sense that there are powerful forces in society which, if left unchecked, will overthrow the forces of law and order. At the heart of the uncertainty over bad language is an uncertainty about its true meaning, its power, and its ultimate effect on society. Fear of this language comes in part from a fear that, in interpreting an utterance, one may discover an obscenity. The fear is that the language will control people, that it will seduce or corrupt them. Linguistic humor and punning short-circuits the linguistic censor in consciousness, and may sneak a “rude” meaning into a “proper” word. In the Hong Kong media a currently fashionable form of “nonsense speak” and linguistic play (*mòuh lèih tàuh*) throws open linguistic meaning, and draws people into a circle of puns and double entendres in which they can become disoriented and risk losing their way. The question of what *mòuh lèih tàuh* means is moot – likewise, therefore, the question of whether it is obscene.

The implications of all this for sociolinguistics may include the following. From the viewpoint of Philadelphia and Norwich (Labov and Trudgill), the vernacular may seem something vigorous and vivid, and the proper focus of real sociolinguistic fieldwork; and from that same viewpoint, linguistic taboos are easily seen as the quaint artifacts of linguistic naïveté. But in the context of Hong Kong, as this article suggests, the consideration of taboo language and the vernacular of street gangs involves far more than the mere study of linguistic variation and innovation. For successive Hong Kong governments, this language has been perceived as not simply something “bad,” but as a discourse associated with riots, revolution, and resistance to the colonial administration. In the setting of colonial Hong Kong in the 1960s and 1970s, it was inevitable that such language would be “banned.” To permit its use would only have displayed weakness; it was thus felt to be imperative that the government, through control, should display its strength. As Morgan put it (1960:92): “Bold action by the authorities and good public relations can destroy the myth of a united and all powerful Triad society. Weakness can perpetuate that myth and may encourage the reformation of a centrally controlled, fear inspiring brotherhood of blood.” It is unlikely that those now in charge of Hong Kong’s policies on triad societies and language censorship would see their task in such stark terms. However, it also seems evident that present policies owe their form at least in part to events of the 1950s and 1960s, and to what Mak (1973:48) refers to as “colonial fear.”

One can take many approaches to issues related to social and legal taboos; and from a sociological perspective, the situation in Hong Kong permits a

wide range of political, social, and functional explanations. One can take a moral stance in support of one or another of the participants in the situation. One can take a legalistic approach to what is moral and what is not. Or one can adopt a purely functional perspective, which involves examining the forces that give rise to, create, and sustain those elements of society (linguistic, ritual, or organizational) which the authorities wish to eradicate. This last approach tends to emphasize the objective social conditions that give rise to the phenomenon. In the case of Hong Kong, Lethbridge 1985 talks of a crisis of legitimacy in the 1960s, a period in which police participation in illegal syndicates was widespread. The "colonial fear" of a triad takeover, shown by Heath's and Morgan's lurid language, read strangely, given the generally recognized symbiotic relationship between the police and the triads in that period. Rioting in this context does represent a crisis, since it suggests a breakdown of the functional ecology of control that exists alongside the formal rules of society. The riots of 1956 and 1966 might thus be seen as instances where this symbiotic relationship collapsed.¹⁶ Similarly, in 1977 the police rioted against the Independent Commission Against Corruption when the rules of the game changed so as to focus attention on practices which were a hitherto accepted part of police culture. From a functional perspective, again, up to the mid-1970s the police and the triads inhabited overlapping social groups, with similar languages and with a common interest in minimizing social disorder (Lethbridge 1985). A functional perspective on riots also tends to look at the social groups involved, their access to legal means of self-expression, their subjective sense of powerlessness, and their marginalization.

Police rhetoric tends, on the one hand, to emphasize the triad problem, since that argues in favor of resources and increased police powers; yet, on the other hand, it tends to play down the threat and strength of the conspiracy.¹⁷ Mak (1981:1) suggests that documents on secret societies produced by official agencies "may tend to exaggerate the mysticism of secret societies," and secret societies "may tend to produce records which will reflect these exaggerated beliefs." Part of the attraction/repulsion relationship between police and triads may also lie in the fact that many policemen were and are Freemasons (see Ward & Stirling 1925-26 for an account of the similarities between freemasonry and Chinese secret society ritual).

The interaction between triad ritual and the Societies Ordinance is an excellent example of the complexities of policing: changes in ritual are criticized by police officers for being, in effect, illegitimate. The police have a vested interest in the stability of triad ritual and language (since they can offer expert evidence about its nature), as well as a contradictory need to show that they have been successful in combating (i.e. changing) it. What then arises is a dual focus: On the one hand, street gangs are derided as imitation triads, not the real anthropological thing. Yet the legislation which has been enacted

against "real" triads is adapted so as to include them. While the fragmentation of street gangs is a sign of successful policing, it also raises complex problems of control, since the establishment of a symbiosis is much harder and the centers of power are much less clearly identified. There is therefore, in many police accounts, a clearly discernible "nostalgia" for the anthropologically correct triads of old.

CONCLUSION

The chief sociolinguistic claim of this article is that triad language is a source of innovation for Hong Kong Cantonese. Native speakers are able to identify terms in Cantonese slang that have loose gangster associations, and government lists and categories demonstrate that undesirable expressions from the criminal milieu are constantly being absorbed into the everyday language. The question of taboo language also poses problems of meaning. One obvious question is: What makes bad language bad? This issue has been tackled elsewhere (Davis 1989, Andersson & Trudgill 1990, Huang & Tian 1990), and is not one that we wish to address specifically here. A second question, which we do want to raise in the present context, is: Who is the authority on the meanings of bad language? Is it the speakers themselves, the general public, or the censorship agency? The authorities are inevitably involved in ad hoc decisions, since they must apply distinctions to the gray areas of the vernacular culture, which has no supervisory body or language academy. Many pop songs in the West are alleged to have hidden meanings relating to drugs or sex; some have been banned by government agencies and broadcasters in Britain and the US. Others have sometimes slipped through the net: "I want you to play with my ding-a-ling," sang Chuck Berry, and the Rolling Stones extolled the virtues of "Brown Sugar." The listener may be drawn into inadvertent collusion with the performer in the negotiation of the taboo or obscene.

The second major area of concern is the sociology of language, in particular the sociology of the vernacular in Hong Kong. This topic can be approached from many points of view. We began by looking at government policies toward censorship, and this led us to consider Hong Kong's history, in an attempt to find the source of the particular concern with triad language and ritual. This concern turns out to be as old as colonial rule in Hong Kong itself; but, more specifically, it grew in importance for the authorities after the riots of 1956, and the consequent police crackdown on triad societies. Labov's equation of the vernacular with marginal street gangs, while it can be seen as a form of glamorization, also raises important questions about the locus of innovation and energy in Hong Kong society. A functional soci-

ological perspective suggests a complex symbiotic relationship between (a) the energy of bad and banned language, and (b) the fact that it is unacceptable and stigmatized. Repression is not a simple business. The rhetoric of fear and corruption exists alongside a working relationship (partly acknowledged) between the police and the triads, and between the censorship agencies and the media. (The fact is that the film industry in Hong Kong is partly triad-owned, and produces films which often glamorize the triad lifestyle.) Other parallels might be drawn with the policing of drugs and prostitution.

It is not enough to say that fear of bad language is irrational; bad language really does offend some people, just as some people really do get "chopped" by triads or imitation triad hoodlums. It is perfectly rational for the shopkeeper to fear the person who professes membership in a triad society. The language which the law seeks to criminalize in this context is genuinely offensive. Similarly, we cannot deny that swearing in some contexts is genuinely offensive to some people. After all, it is often intended to be just that. Discussing problems in the control of triad language in the media, the Television and Films Authority (an early form of TELA) stressed the difficulty of drawing a line between the acceptable and the unacceptable, and went on to discuss the causes of public outrage (HKG 1978:3).

The problem [of defining what is acceptable] is perhaps further complicated due to the emotional rather than rational nature of the objection against its [triad language's] use. In other words, people object to many of the expressions not because they are connected with sexual or excretory activities, not because they are obscene, blasphemous, vulgar, crude; but because they imply all sorts of different connotations (presumably unpleasant ones) for different people. Irrational as it is, the objection does exist; and some kind of control is needed in this area.

Whatever one makes of this statement (and there is much to be said about it), it is clear that the government feels it cannot simply deny responsibility for the fears and beliefs of ordinary citizens. By contrast, when linguists dismiss lay linguistic beliefs as irrational, this is done in a vacuum. It threatens to obscure the complexities and dilemmas that surround the issue of linguistic taboo. The life of the vernacular is sustained by a network of symbiotic antagonisms; it is not an autonomous life-force coursing through the veins of society. Counter-cultures of all kinds have complex forms of investment in the status quo. Pornographers have an interest in censorship, just as drug dealers have an interest in anti-drug laws: They make their products more valuable. Censorship in this context can be seen as the semiotic taxation of the vernacular, a levy on the inappropriate, an adjustment to the accounts of linguistic bargaining and consensus. The repression of bad language helps lay the social foundation of its badness.

NOTES

* An earlier version of this article, with the title "Bad and banned language: The control of Cantonese in Hong Kong," was presented at the 4th International Conference on Cantonese and other Yue Dialects, held December 17-19, 1993, at the City Polytechnic of Hong Kong. The authors thank Ms. Cynthia Mok and Mr. Wesley Wong, of the University of Hong Kong, for their invaluable assistance over the past years. We also express our gratitude to Chief Inspector Peter Ip of the Royal Hong Kong Police for discussing Hong Kong triads with us; however, except where indicated, none of the views expressed in this article should be understood as reflecting his opinions as to matters of fact or official policy. Suzanne Romaine provided many helpful comments and suggestions.

¹ Hong Kong is a British Crown Colony, situated on the south coast of China; parts of it have been under British administration since 1841. Hong Kong will become a Special Administrative Region of the People's Republic of China on July 1, 1997. An estimated 98% of the population is Chinese, and Cantonese is the principal Chinese variety in use. English and Chinese have an increasingly complex coexistence in government, law, education, business, and the mass media.

² The term "triad" in English is derived from the society's symbol of a triangle, enclosing a Chinese character derived from the character *hühng*. This symbol is said to represent the triangular unity of heaven, earth, and man.

³ The Yale transcription used here to transcribe Cantonese is one of many competing systems. The version used in this article recognizes six tones: high (*màn*), mid-rising (*mán*), mid-level (*man*), low-rising (*máhn*), low-level (*mahn*), and low-falling (*màhn*).

⁴ For details on government control of triad activities in Singapore and Malaysia, see Blythe 1969, Mak 1973, 1981.

⁵ Commissioner Heath's abiding concern with triads and political revolt is evinced in the government report on the 1966 Kowloon riots: A meeting of police was recorded (chaired by the Commissioner) to review the threat of political or triad interest or participation: "No evidence of organized political or triad organization was disclosed but it was considered that a potentially dangerous situation was discernible, which could develop into disturbances and rioting if demonstrations by teenagers and youths continued" (HKG 1967:25).

⁶ Morgan wrote (1960:83-84):

In a British Crown Colony such as Hong Kong, any illegal society which can muster over 300,000 members cannot be allowed to operate as a cohesive movement for, if criminally inclined it could wreck the peace and security of the Colony or, if politically inspired would obviously be aimed at wresting control from the Crown. It is from the politically inspired reorganisation that the main danger lies since, even if no political aims are achieved, the establishment of any type of effective central authority over the Triad societies could result in a criminal organization of such magnitude that the local Police Force would be unable to combat it. This side effect of political interference must always be borne in mind, for on at least three different occasions since World War II attempts have been made by political factions to re-organise the societies in Hong Kong, and there is no reason to suppose that further attempts will not be made in the future.

(For details of these political conspiracies, see Morgan, 84-86.)

⁷ A fall from grace, from a past honorable tradition, is a common theme of much commentary on triad societies. Schlegel (1866:5) wrote that "The [Hung, i.e. triad] league, however, degenerated into a band of rebels and robbers, that seemed to have lost every notion of the proper spirit of its association." Lo (1984:18) speaks of the degeneration of contemporary triad culture in which "traditional norms" are no longer maintained.

⁸ Before 1961 it was an offense to be a member of a triad society, and an offense to be an office bearer in a triad society; an office bearer was defined as a chairman, secretary, or treasurer. According to a police report on Triad societies (HKG 1964:3), "this restricted action against Triad office bearers who are designated by numbers, i.e. '415', '426', '432', and whose duties did not fall within the definition of Chairman, Secretary or Treasurer. This led to office bearers being charged with the lesser charge of 'Membership of a Triad society' and receiving lower sentences than their rank deserved."

⁹ The Commissioner of Police's annual report for 1964-65 (HKG 1965:33-34) states:

There was little evidence of forcible recruitment during the year and ritual Triad initiation ceremonies appear to have ceased. In their place a haphazard system of quick verbal initiation has arisen through which recruits accept Triad membership or promotion without proper ritual. To make provision for this contingency an amendment to the Societies Ordinance was passed during the year making an offence to "Profess to be a Triad member or Office bearer." This offence is particularly prevalent amongst the younger generation many of whom adopt Triad title or rank to impress or frighten their associates or victims.

¹⁰ Wacks (1992:2) notes that the Societies ordinance is one of six ordinances which conflict directly with the Bill of Rights, a state of affairs which will be permitted to persist for two years: "The government is clearly under an obligation to amend or repeal these ordinances to comply with the terms of the Bill of Rights."

¹¹ For discussion of laws on freedom of speech and civil rights in the context of Hong Kong, see essays in Wacks 1988, 1992. Clark 1990 is a discussion of the crime of sedition in the context of article 23 of the Hong Kong Basic Law, which requires the post-1997 Hong Kong Special Administrative Region government to enact laws against sedition and subversion. Yong 1991 discusses curbs on the press under British rule in Singapore.

¹² A BBC film concerning the life of Chairman Mao has recently been authorized for viewing in Hong Kong by the TELA, even though it apparently offends the Chinese government. Whether the local television company (TVB) will actually go ahead remains to be seen. These powers of censorship have, however, been used in the past to censor materials likely to offend the government of the People's Republic of China.

¹³ *Chòu-háu* (lit. 'coarse mouth') can be defined as a type of language consisting of, or relying on, a range of explicit sexual obscenities (e.g. references to body parts, sexual acts, unlikely sexual couplings, etc.)

¹⁴ The Television and Films Authority guide to the control of triad language gives the following background to concern with triad language in the media (HKG 1978:1):

In 1975 action drama became very popular on television in Hong Kong. Producers of crime series and cop-and-robber drama, with the aim of more realistic and effective portrayal of crime in mind, began to introduce underworld jargons into local productions. In 1976, the widespread use of Triad language in television entertainment caused general concern of parents and teachers who were worried about the possible adverse effects it might have on the young. The television stations, advised and urged by the TVA, agreed on the principle that the use of Triad language in local productions must be controlled. Triad language expressions are not to be used in variety productions, but should not be categorically excluded from drama programmes.

¹⁵ These terms are, however, available for the general reader interested in Chinese secret societies. For example, in English they are found in Timothy Mo's *Sour sweet* (1982), in Comber 1961, and, of course, in the official Hong Kong government guide to triad societies (Morgan 1960). Mo consulted both Stanton's and Morgan's work in writing his novel. References to works in Chinese on the history, rituals, and customs of Chinese secret societies can be found in Comber 1961 and Mak 1981.

¹⁶ A complicating factor was the ethnic division in the police force during that period between the ranks of station sergeant and below (Chinese) vs. officers (predominantly British). Elliott, a vocal critic of official corruption in Hong Kong, describes how senior officers were at best indifferent to complaints about police graft (1971:80-88). Policemen were often referred to as "licensed rascals" (*yáuh pàaih ge laahn-jái*). Commenting on the government inquiry into the rioting of 1966 (HKG 1967), Elliott writes as follows (1971:87):

the so-called "Riot Inquiry" of 1966 did nothing to improve the situation [of police corruption]; it simply confirmed to the dishonest police that they had the full support of the Government for their illegal activities, and they could get away with the framing of honest citizens. Since then there has been a rapid leap in crime and a mushrooming of teddy-boy activities, many of whom operate with police protection.

Mak (1981:109-22) argues that in some contexts a corrupt police force will lead to less triad activity than an honest one, since a corrupt police force will establish its own protection rackets, and will then be able to shut out triads from much of their business. An honest police force takes triads off the streets, but it cannot offer 24-hour protection to every business. Triads are therefore more likely to be active, and the situation much more unstable, when they are pitted against a reasonably honest police force.

¹⁷ The Commissioner's report for 1958-59 states, for example (HKG 1959:23-24):

The widespread belief that Triad leaders are powerful men in command of thousands of followers against whom the police are powerless, represents a major obstacle to Police investigations. The fact that this belief is wrong cannot easily be brought home to the general public. To help dispel this picture, and to encourage the public to come forward with information, a number of interviews took place towards the end of the year, between police officers and representatives of the press, at which the former answered freely and factually questions put to them about triad societies. The resulting articles and insignia published in the Colony newspapers have done much to destroy the aura of mystery surrounding the triads, and to show the triad members in their true light as criminals battering on the poorer sections of the community, and generally profiting from all aspects of vice including trafficking in narcotics.

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