



## The complexity of family language policy decisions: The case of Cantonese and other regional Chinese varieties

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**Abstract.** This paper explores the beliefs, attitudes, and efforts of parents with regard to the use and preservation of regional Chinese varieties including Cantonese in the region of Guangzhou, China. The study relied on a sequential mixed method approach, involving 771 parents who completed a parental questionnaire in an online survey on Chinese parents' language ideology, practice, and management in the home domain, followed by semi-structured interviews of 10 of the surveyed participants to gather detailed data related to the questionnaire results. The study identified inconsistencies in the participants' beliefs and actual language practice in the survey, revealing mediation by sociolinguistic complexities, national language policies, and socioeconomic conditions on family language decisions and practices. These remind us that the survival of regional Chinese varieties or linguistic varieties without official recognition requires conducive socio-political conditions, including relevant national language policies. The results also suggest that researchers should be particularly concerned by the decline of regional Chinese varieties other than Cantonese, which are not backed up by the national language policy but enjoy a similarly prestigious status to Cantonese in the region.

**Keywords:** Cantonese, Chinese dialect, Family language policy, Language policy

### [zh] 家庭语言政策的复杂性：以粤语方言与其他区域性方言为例

**摘要：**本文探讨了中国广州地区家长对方言（包括粤语方言）持有的信念、态度以及使用所付出的努力。本研究采用混合研究方法，先通过网络问卷的方式调查了 771 位家长在家庭语言使用中体现出来的语言信念，语言实践和语言管理方式，再对其中十位家长进行访谈以获取与问卷相关的补充信息。通过对所收集的数据进行分析，研究发现研究参与者的信念和语言实践有许多不一致的地方。这些不一致体现出复杂的社会语言环境、国家语言政策和社会经济条件对家庭语言决策和实践有着深刻的影响。这些发现也意味着如果没有政策性的认可和合适的社会政治条件，地方方言很难继续存活。研究的有关发现也提醒研究者需要特别关注广东地区那些非粤语方言的地方方言的将来，因为它们没有粤语方言那么有地方优势，也缺少相关政策的支持，更容易消失。

**关键词：** 粤语；中国方言；家庭语言政策；语言政策

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## 1. Introduction

The maintenance of bilingualism or multilingualism is no easy task for any individual or society as it requires concerted efforts at multiple levels, including supportive national language policies, favourable socioeconomic conditions, management of language use in the family domain, and individuals' investment in multiple languages (Curdt-Christiansen, 2013; Fishman, 1991, 2004; King, Fogle & Logan-Terry, 2008; Lin, 2019; Spolsky, 2012). In contexts where particular languages are not protected by national language policies or are different from commonly used languages, families have become critical sites where such languages can be maintained in order to sustain bilingualism/multilingualism. As people increasingly move across linguistic and national boundaries, an increased number of linguistic varieties are in need of protection in various contexts. For this reason, family language policies and practice have received increasing attention in research. If 'a language policy' is regarded as 'a political decision and ... attempt' to manage the status of particular languages and their practice 'in a given society', family language policy can be seen as 'a deliberate attempt' to influence particular language/literacy practices 'within home domains and among family members' (Curdt-Christiansen, 2009, p. 352).

Previous research has noted that parents' choice of language and implementation of literacy practices with children can contribute significantly to the maintenance of these languages (e.g. Garcia, 2003; Guardado & Becker, 2014; Kosonen, 2008). To understand parents' family language policy decisions, it has become important for researchers to appreciate the ideological beliefs, attitudes and efforts of the parents with regard to these decisions (e.g. Curdt-Christiansen, 2009; Shao & Gao, 2019; Spolsky, 2004, 2009; Zhang & Tsung, 2019).

Therefore, we conducted this study to explore the beliefs, attitudes and efforts of individual parents with regard to the use and preservation of regional Chinese varieties including Cantonese in the region of Guangzhou, a Southern Chinese megacity. It must be noted that family language policy decisions and practices have particularly profound implications for the survival of regional Chinese varieties (or 'dialects') such as Cantonese in Guangzhou, since the national language policy stipulates that the standard spoken Chinese ('Putonghua') should be used in the public arena while regional Chinese varieties are largely assigned to private domains, including family settings. Based on Spolsky's (2004) language policy model of ideology, practice, and management, this study examined the family

language policy being practiced in suburban areas of Guangzhou, which attract a large number of migrants.

## **2. Family language policy**

Spolsky (2004) proposes that family language policy decisions should be understood in terms of the beliefs or ideologies, practices, and management related to family languages. He further defines language practices as ‘the habitual pattern of selecting among the varieties that make up its linguistic repertoire’, and language management indicates ‘any specific efforts to modify or influence that practice by any kind of language intervention, planning or management’ (2004: 5). Family language policy decisions related to practice and management are often associated with the ‘ideas, values, beliefs, attitudes, prejudices, myths, religious structures and all the other cultural ‘baggage’ that individuals carry about particular languages (Schiffman, 2006: 112). The cultural ‘baggage’ constitutes ideological foundations to particular language practices and the efforts to manage such practices in the home domain, which deserves attention in research.

Family language policy decisions are also significantly mediated by various contextual conditions, both linguistic and non-linguistic, which include sociolinguistic, sociocultural, socioeconomic, and socio-political contexts (Spolsky, 2004). In other words, family policy decisions are made by individuals after considering factors such as the variety of languages available, the symbolic values of the languages, the material benefits associated with particular languages, and their political status. As an example, in a multilingual context where English is not an official language, parents may nevertheless decide to invest heavily in their children’s learning of English if they believe it provides access to valuable qualifications (i.e. a degree from an English medium university) and quality employment opportunities (i.e. a position in a multinational company). It is not surprising that parents, children, and caretakers are key participants in family language policy implementation (Spolsky, 2012), with these stakeholders influencing each other’s language practices and beliefs. Fishman (1970) noted that first-generation immigrants tend to add new languages to their linguistic repertoires, the second generation grows up to be bilingual, and the third generation grows up as monolinguals speaking the dominant language in a given context. It remains to be seen whether this three-generation theory can be applied to the preservation of regional Chinese varieties such as Cantonese in a context where they are not recognized as official languages.

## **3. Contextualizing the inquiry on family language policy decisions**

Mainland China has a population of 1.3 billion people, including 56 ethnic groups. Of these, the 55 ethnic minority groups, including Mongolian, Tibetan, Uyghur, and Zhuang, speak over 290 languages (Coblin, 2000; Li, 2006), while the dominant Han (汉) group comprises 91.5% of the total population and speaks at least ‘2,000 more or less distinct dialects or sub-dialects’ (Li, 2006, p. 150; Coblin, 2000). The 2,000 distinct regional Chinese varieties can be roughly classified into

several dialect groups, such as Northern Mandarin, Gan, Kejia (Hakka), Min, Wu, Xiang, and Yue (Cantonese), each group having a large number of sub-varieties.

Because a shared language has been historically seen as a crucial linguistic foundation for political unity, the government promotes Putonghua ('a common speech') as the national standard spoken Chinese (Chen, 1999). *The Law of the National Commonly Used Language and Script of the People's Republic of China* regulates that Putonghua should be used in public domains including government services and education. Although the Law also protects regional Chinese varieties because of their historical heritage and distinctive cultural forms, such as opera, the nationwide promotion of Putonghua has reduced the space for the use of regional Chinese languages, and their survival has become increasingly uncertain across the country (Gao, 2012, 2016; Shao & Gao, 2019; Shen, 2016; Shen & Gao, 2019; Xia & Shen, 2019).

The region of Guangzhou in this study has Cantonese as its regional lingua franca. Outside China, Cantonese is spoken as a mother tongue by the majority of the population of Hong Kong and Macau and also by overseas Chinese communities in Malaysia, Canada, Brazil, Australia, New Zealand, Europe, and the United States. It is the most widely known and influential variety of Chinese after Putonghua, and is generally considered the only one which can match Putonghua in terms of both geographical and social strength (Chen, 1999). Even though Cantonese and Putonghua share much vocabulary, the two languages are mutually unintelligible due to pronunciation, grammatical, and lexical differences—i.e. the two languages are not mutually intelligible like English and Dutch.

Despite the Chinese government having decided to make Putonghua the standard spoken Chinese variety in the People's Republic of China (PRC) as early as 1956 (Chen, 1999), Cantonese still functioned as the dominant medium of instruction in Guangzhou's schools till the 1980s. Since the reform and opening up in the 1980s, the Chinese government began to promote Putonghua in earnest. In Guangzhou, regulations were issued twice, first in 1982 and then in 1992, to stipulate that Putonghua should be promoted from kindergarten and elementary schools onward. Schools gradually began to adopt it as the medium of instruction, although the status of Cantonese as a regional lingua franca has been maintained because of the frequent socio-economic exchanges between the region and Hong Kong. In 2001 the People's Republic of China issued the *Law of the National Commonly Used Language and Script* for the standardization of language usage across the country. Following this, regional governments in the area intensified the promotion of Putonghua. In nearly every school, slogans are put up to remind students and teachers to 'speak Putonghua, [and] write correct Chinese characters'. Students are obliged to communicate in Putonghua at school. Quite a few schools went to extremes by forbidding the use of Cantonese even after class in schools (Gao, 2015, 2017). Such micro management of language usage in schools has profoundly influenced many local children's acquisition of Cantonese. However, schools' language policy practices, echoing the national language policy, might have been undertaken in response to increasingly heterogeneous student populations.

Since the 1980s the region of Guangzhou has been attracting people from different parts of the country because of its robust economic growth. Over the years these migrants, who speak different regional Chinese varieties other than Cantonese, have settled down as residents in the region. A recent survey suggests that Guangzhou has a total of 108 million people, 30.1% of whom are migrants with temporary status (Liang, 2013). The rising proportion of non-Cantonese speakers inevitably erodes the demographic basis for the status of Cantonese as the regional lingua franca, prompting this inquiry to explore how families have been responding to these sociolinguistic shifts and maintaining the status of Cantonese as the regional lingua franca.

#### 4. The study

In order to appreciate the role of family language policy decisions in sustaining regional Chinese varieties, specifically Cantonese, the study examined Chinese parents' language ideology, practices, and management in the region of Guangzhou. It addresses the following research questions:

- 1) How do parents think of Cantonese and its maintenance at home?
- 2) In what situations was Cantonese used by the participants?
- 3) How do parents manage their language practices at home?

To address these research questions, we adopted a sequential mixed method approach in the inquiry (Creswell, 2003). We developed and administered an online questionnaire for a survey of Chinese parents' language ideology, practices, and management within the home domain. After the survey, we also conducted semi-structured interviews with a small number of parents (mothers and fathers) to gather detailed data that could help us interpret the questionnaire results.

The study involved parents of primary school students (grades 3 to 6) who live in Guangzhou and its suburban areas. We decided to focus on this group of parents because some of them might be immigrants and may have witnessed their children's language shifts. As according to the *Guangdong Statistical Yearbook 2016*, the number of permanent residents increased by 35.72% (*Guangdong Statistical Yearbook 2016*. <http://www.gdstats.gov.cn/tjnj>, 2017-03-10) between the years of 2000 and 2015, with an average 1.1 million immigrants coming from other provinces or other cities of Guangdong (*Guangdong Statistical Yearbook 2004–2016*. <http://www.gdstats.gov.cn/tjnj>, 2017-03-10) every year.

##### 4.1. Participants

We recruited the participants through our contacts in primary schools. Guided by ethical research principles, participation in the survey and semi-structured interviews was entirely voluntary. Participants were assured of their anonymity and did not receive any monetary incentives, but were informed that the results will be vital to the preservation of regional Chinese varieties, including Cantonese. Seven hundred and seventy-one (771) participants completed the parental questionnaire, including 533 (69.13%) mothers and 238 (30.9%) fathers. The participants were

between 30 and 50 years of age, with 69.6% of them between 35 and 45 years of age and 25.4% below 35 years; only 4.9% were older than 45 years.

Mother tongue	Putonghua	Cantonese	Other dialects	Total
People	211	284	276	771
Percentage	27.4%	36.8%	35.8%	100%

Table 1 Percentage of parents' mother tongues (n = 771)

Varieties of Chinese	P, C +	C & P	P & +	P	C	other Ds	total
Percentage	80.8%	54.1%	12.5%	12.1%	2.7%	4.8%	100%

Notes: P=Putonghua; C=Cantonese; D=dialect

Table 2 Percentage of parents' regional Chinese varieties (n = 771)

Our parental participants covered different educational levels, with 42.6% of the participants possessing a Bachelor's degree or higher (4.3% with a Master's degree). Participants engaged in a variety of occupations, such as teachers and doctors (12.1%), civil servants (4.2%), company staff (14.9%), private business owners (29.7%), freelancers (19.8%), and others (19.3%). They also came from diverse linguistic backgrounds, including 36.8% speaking Cantonese as their mother tongue, 27.4% speaking Putonghua as their first language, and 35.8% speaking other regional Chinese varieties as their mother tongue (see Table 1). It must be noted that 80.8% of the participants spoke Putonghua, Cantonese, and other regional Chinese varieties, 54.1% of participants spoke both Cantonese and Putonghua, and 12.5% spoke both Putonghua and another regional Chinese variety. Monolinguals were found to be in a minority among the participants; 12.1% spoke only Putonghua, 2.7% spoke only Cantonese and 4.8% spoke only one of the other regional Chinese varieties (see Table 2).

Finally, 10 of the surveyed participants were chosen for semi-structured interviews; these participants indicated their willingness for interview and were given opportunities to elaborate on their survey answers.

## 4.2. Data collection

The questionnaire was constructed on the basis of Spolsky's (2004) language policy model of ideology, practice, and management. It consists of four parts; the first part includes basic information about the participants, such as age, gender, education, profession, mother tongue, variety of dialects, and the child's educational level. The second part includes language practice with child, spouse, and the elderly at home, and also language used in the workplace and on social occasions. The third part includes language ideology and attitudes, such as understanding and analysis of different language resources, which determine the criteria for language selection and differences in language usage. The fourth part focuses on language management—that is, whether the parents guide the child to speak a certain variety or not, and for what purpose. The questionnaire was developed from Wang's (2016) sociolinguistic survey.

Before we administered the instrument, a pilot test was conducted. The pilot test results were satisfactory as the reliability Cronbach's alpha( $\alpha$ ) was 0.794 (Hensen, 2001). The semi-structured interview questions were derived from the questionnaire itself as we intended the interviews to be opportunities for participants to elaborate on their answers and provide more detail.

Data was collected via the WEN JUAN XING tool ([www.sojump.com](http://www.sojump.com)), which is a professional online survey, evaluation, and voting platform. The platform provides users with a series of services such as the online design of questionnaires, data collection, and survey results analysis. When reporting, we used descriptive statistical analysis results to capture the general trends in the statistical data. We also combined those who indicated 'strongly agree' and 'agree' into 'agree', and those who indicated 'strongly disagree' and 'disagree' into 'disagree'.

Ten parents participated in the semi-structured interviews. The interview recordings were transcribed and the transcripts sent to the participants for double-checking. As guided by the research questions and conceptual framework (Spolsky, 2004), the interview data were read multiple times. The first reading helped us to become familiar with the content and sharpened our foci to specific issues mentioned by the participants in light of the conceptual framework. In the second reading, each interview transcript was coded according to the framework and reconstructed into an individual account of family language policy decision-making. The third reading allowed us to compare different individual accounts and identify major themes from the data, before we conducted further readings to conceptualize the themes emerging from the responses to the research questions.

## **5. The findings**

Emerging from the analysis of the survey and interview data, parents' attitudes towards Cantonese and their awareness of its maintenance were quite encouraging. The data also suggested that the parents had a diverse repertoire of linguistic varieties for use when interacting with different people in different settings. However, the analysis further revealed that parents make limited efforts to manage language usage at home, suggesting that the future of Cantonese and the prospects for sustaining bilingualism/multilingualism at home are not promising. These issues are elaborated in detail in the coming sections.

### **5.1. Attitudes towards the maintenance of Cantonese**

To answer Research Question 1, we examined the participants' ideological beliefs as reflected in their attitudes with regard to the maintenance of Cantonese and bilingualism/multilingualism (e.g. Spolsky, 2004). As shown in Table 3, the majority of the participants (83.3%) had a positive attitude toward a mastery of Cantonese, reflecting that Cantonese remains an important regional lingua franca in Guangzhou. 85.4% of the participants completely or partially agreed that family environment is crucial for children's learning and use of Cantonese. 85.1% of the participants were in favour of speaking to very young children in Cantonese, while 91.5% of the participants approved of speaking in Putonghua to children at a very

young age. 69.2% of the participants disagreed with the statement that speaking Cantonese at home will affect children's learning of Putonghua. 76.3% of the participants agreed that children can learn Cantonese and Putonghua simultaneously at home. 95.2% of the participants were in favour of children using more than one language or regional Chinese variety for the good of their future. Among family members, mothers played the most important role in children's learning of Cantonese. Although 59.4% of the participants viewed the use of Cantonese as being in decline due to the promotion of Putonghua, 81.9% of the participants said they would like to maintain or learn Cantonese despite having a different mother tongue.

Statements	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
It's necessary for people living in Guangzhou area to master and continue using Cantonese	642 83.3%	108 14%	21 2.7%
Family environment is very important for children to master Cantonese	658 85.4%	79 10.3%	33 4.3%
Speaking Cantonese to children from birth is conducive to the mastery of Cantonese	656 85.1%	93 12.1%	22 2.9%
Speaking Putonghua to children from birth is conducive to the mastery of Putonghua	705 91.4%	39 5.1%	27 3.5%
Speaking Cantonese at home will affect children's mastery of Putonghua	237 30.8%	220 28.5%	314 40.7%
Learning Cantonese and Putonghua at home at the same time will make kids confused and end up in failure	183 23.8%	157 20.4%	431 55.9%
In addition to Putonghua, to master a language or dialect is good for children's futures	734 95.2%	22 2.9%	15 1.9%
Among family members, mothers play the most important role in children's mastery of Cantonese	522 67.7%	167 21.7%	82 10.6%
Among family members, fathers play the most important role in children's mastery of Cantonese	433 56.2%	235 30.5%	103 13.3%
Among family members, caretakers play the most important role in children's mastery of Cantonese	412 53.4%	222 28.8%	137 17.8%
Due to the promotion of Putonghua, the use of Cantonese is in decline	458 59.4%	175 22.7%	138 17.9%
Whether your mother tongue is Cantonese or a regional Chinese variety, you are aware of the importance of maintaining Cantonese	631 81.8%	113 14.7%	27 3.5%

Table 3 Parents' language attitudes and ideology in numbers and percentages (n = 771)

## 5.2. Language practice

Apart from exploring participants' beliefs and attitudes, the data also revealed the actual language practices (Spolsky, 2004) that they engage in for maintaining Cantonese and bilingualism at home (Research Question 2). Table 4 documents that 36.9% of the participants reported using Putonghua while 15.7% of them used Cantonese for communication with children at home. 28.5% of them used a

mixture of Cantonese and Putonghua, while 11.2% used other regional Chinese varieties. This means that Putonghua is the most popular linguistic variety used by the surveyed parents to communicate with their children, even though only 27.4% of the parents speak it as their first language. About 36.8% of the parents spoke Cantonese as their first language, and more than half of these used Putonghua together with Cantonese when interacting with children. Over two thirds of the parents who spoke other regional Chinese varieties did not report using their mother tongues when speaking to their children. The strength of Putonghua is further shown in the data on the parents' language choices in the workplace. 43.5% of them only used Putonghua, 45.5% reported using a mixture of Putonghua and Cantonese, while only 11% spoke Cantonese or other regional Chinese varieties.

In contrast, parents' language choices more closely reflect their linguistic backgrounds when speaking to spouses and the elderly, suggesting that they might have sacrificed their mother tongues when socializing with their children for the sake of helping them acquire powerful linguistic varieties such as Putonghua and Cantonese. This may have to do with the fact that Putonghua dominates in the workplace, leaving limited room for using Cantonese and regional Chinese varieties.

Domain	Putonghua only	Cantonese only	Cantonese & Putonghua	Other regional Chinese varieties
Talking to kids	344(44.6%)	121(15.7%)	220(28.5%)	86(11.2%)
Talking to spouse	206(26.7%)	233(30.2%)	103(13.4%)	229(29.7%)
Talking to parents	121(15.7%)	251(32.6%)	47(6.1%)	352(45.7%)
Language use in the workplace	335(43.5%)	73(9.5%)	351(45.5%)	12(1.6%)
Language use on social occasions	322(41.8%)	93(12.1%)	349(45.3%)	7(0.9%)

Table 4 Parents' language practices in numbers and percentages (n = 771)

### 5.3. Language management

The results above suggest that the participants displayed language practices inconsistent with the beliefs and attitudes that they had towards Cantonese and regional Chinese varieties. These results generated further interest in finding out how they managed language choices to promote the learning of Cantonese and other regional Chinese varieties (e.g. Spolsky, 2004). As reflected in Table 5, only a small percentage of the participants consciously taught their children Cantonese (26.1%) or guided them to use Cantonese (27.1%). Over 40.2% of them admitted that they chose to talk to children in Putonghua because it is the language used in schools. Nearly half of them (48.2%) preferred Putonghua as the medium for communication over Cantonese (24.1%). In contrast, only 17.3% of the participants deliberately chose Cantonese for speaking to children. Less than 10% of the parents organized family activities related to traditional Cantonese culture, while even fewer of the surveyed parents (8.9%) dedicated a specific amount of time to using Cantonese at home.

Statement	Yes	No	Sometimes
Did you consciously teach your kids Cantonese?	201 (26.1%)	323 (41.9%)	247 (32%)
Did you consciously guide your kids to communicate in Cantonese?	209 (27.1%)	338 (43.8%)	224 (29.1%)
Have you ever consciously selected Putonghua to communicate with your kids owing to the influence of school education?	310 (40.2%)	283 (36.7%)	178 (23.1%)
Have you ever consciously selected Cantonese to communicate with your kids owing to the influence of family background?	133 (17.3%)	493 (63.9%)	145 (18.8%)
Did you often organize family activities related to Cantonese traditional culture?	74 (9.6%)	648 (84%)	53 (7%)
Did you have a fixed length of time to communicate in Cantonese among family members at home?	69 (8.9%)	648 (84%)	54 (7%)

Table 5 Parents' language management in numbers and percentages (771)

#### 5.4. Managing language practices at home: Interview data

The inconsistency between beliefs and language practices among the participants, together with their lack of effort to manage language choices, is well illustrated by a close examination of a typical family, where Mark, a primary school student, grew up. As can be seen in Table 6, Mark grew up in a linguistically complex extended family. Although his father and paternal grandparents spoke Cantonese and some Putonghua, Mark's mother spoke Cantonese, Hakka, Teochew, and Putonghua, and has maternal grandparents spoke Teochew and Hakka. There was no common language between grandparents on the two sides. For better communication in the extended family, Mark's parents chose Putonghua as the family lingua franca, which became the first language for Mark after his birth, as explained by his mother:

##### *Extract 1*

My son's grandparents on his father's side speak Cantonese and patchy Putonghua. I can speak Cantonese, and I talk with them most of the time in Cantonese. But my father doesn't speak Cantonese, nor can he understand Cantonese. He speaks Teochew and patchy Putonghua. When my husband and I communicate with my parents, Putonghua is the choice. When grandparents from both sides communicate, patchy Putonghua is the lingua franca. Therefore, when Mark was born, all family members chose patchy Putonghua to communicate with him. We also thought speaking Putonghua is good for his future schooling. (Parent 5)

Members of the Family	First language	Other linguistic varieties
Mark's mother	Hakka	Teochew, Cantonese, Putonghua
Mark's grandpa on his mother's side	Teochew	Some Putonghua
Mark's grandma on his mother's side	Hakka	Teochew, some Putonghua
Mark's father	Cantonese	Putonghua
Mark's grandparents on his father's side	Cantonese	Some Putonghua
Mark	Putonghua	Cantonese

Table 6 Language list of Mark's family members

As can be seen in Extract 1, the sociolinguistic complexities at home were obviously a highly important factor motivating members of Mark's extended family to use Putonghua as the medium of communication. The importance of Putonghua for Mark's education was also mentioned as another important reason for them to interact with Mark in Putonghua. The national language policy, which stipulates that Putonghua should be the medium of instruction, further strengthened Mark's parents' resolve with regard to their family language choice. Mark's experience of family language choice echoes the participants' questionnaire responses, in which 40.2% of the participants were found to have consciously selected Putonghua to be their kids' first language for future education. By choosing Putonghua as the family language, the surveyed parents believed that their children would have at least some linguistic advantage during their schooling. There were seven other families among the interviewed participants who chose Putonghua as their child's first language because the mother tongues of their parents and grandparents are different.

Among all the interviewees, only one family chose to use Cantonese as the child's first language because the parents and grandparents on both sides were Cantonese speakers. Putonghua was sometimes used between the child and their parents because the parents spoke Putonghua. Two families with parents and grandparents sharing the same regional Chinese varieties (other than Cantonese) chose Putonghua as their child's first language, as described in the following extract:

*Extract 2*

We are Xiang dialect speakers, but we chose Putonghua for speaking with our son because of the big (macro, authors' note) environment. We never consciously guide him to speak Xiang or Cantonese. He can understand some Xiang, but seldom uses it. He is exposed to some Cantonese in his school, he can speak some Cantonese, but when communicating with his classmates, Putonghua is the choice. (Parent 3)

The interview data further indicate that the interviewed parents began to appreciate the importance of Cantonese when their children reached a certain age, especially after the 'Protecting Cantonese Movement' in 2010.

*Extract 3*

When my daughter was over two years old, we began to develop her competence in Cantonese despite her refusal or reluctance. I'm from a

Cantonese-speaking family and all my relatives are Cantonese speakers. My husband is from a Hakka-speaking family, but he can speak Cantonese. Consequently, it's not difficult for me to make this language use decision. But when we speak with her grandparents on her father's side, Putonghua is the choice, because they cannot speak Cantonese. (Parent 2)

As can be seen in the extract, it is not easy to insist on the use of Cantonese in a linguistically complex extended family. Nevertheless, most of the interviewed informants chose to develop their child's Cantonese competence after they had achieved a firm grasp of Putonghua. They considered Cantonese essential for them to live in this region, where a good command of Cantonese provided a sense of belonging and identity. Again, in the case of Mark, he could not speak Cantonese until his grandfather (on his father's side) noticed his inability to speak Cantonese even when he reached school age (7 years old). His grandfather began to teach him Cantonese after he read a newspaper story about the 'Protecting Cantonese Movement'. At the very beginning Mark was quite reluctant to speak Cantonese, as observed by his mother. The family tried their best to motivate Mark to speak Cantonese:

*Extract 4*

We tried every means to arouse his interest in Cantonese. His grandpa proposed fixing an hour for Cantonese practice with him every day, with some prizes. I consciously played games with him, like "Now it's Cantonese Channel", and then spoke Cantonese with him. When Mark could understand some Cantonese, we also proposed fixing a day for Cantonese speaking every week—with prizes, of course. I've applied my teaching approaches to my son's Cantonese learning. Isn't it funny? Haha! Bit by bit, his attitude has changed and he no longer takes Cantonese practice as a burden now.

Although Mark changed his attitude towards using Cantonese at home, he still chose Putonghua as his first choice when socializing with his classmates or friends. In the process, primary school students like Mark gained a good command of Putonghua and some competence in Cantonese, but they lost any gains in of the other regional Chinese varieties that their parents and grandparents spoke. This phenomenon raises further questions about the preservation of Cantonese and the promotion of bilingualism in contexts where migrants speaking different regional Chinese varieties intermarry with each other. Both the survey and interview data document the decline of regional Chinese varieties other than Cantonese and Putonghua in these family settings.

## 6. Discussion

This paper has explored family language usage decisions and practices in Guangzhou to examine how family language practices may contribute to sustaining the use of Cantonese and promoting bilingualism/multilingualism in the region. The study identified inconsistencies between the participants' beliefs and actual language practices in the survey, revealing mediation by sociolinguistic complexities, national language policies, and socioeconomic conditions in family

language decisions and practices. Spolsky (2004) noted that “... in many families, there will be no explicit language management but simply choices based on practice and ideology” (p. 43). In the study, only 121 (15.7%) of the parents chose Cantonese to communicate with their kids, while 344 (44.6%) chose Putonghua and 220 (28.5%) used both Putonghua and Cantonese, even though the mother tongue of 284 (36.8%) of the participants was Cantonese. These figures reflect the rising importance of Putonghua as the lingua franca. What is promising for those concerned with the survival of Cantonese is that 76.3% of the participants believed that children can learn Cantonese and Putonghua simultaneously at home, and 85.4% of the participants believed that the family environment is very important for children’s mastery of Cantonese.

Nevertheless, it would be unreasonable to expect these families to adopt language practices that contradict the dominance of Putonghua, which is the intended outcome of national language policies. As can be seen in the data, most families have adopted increasingly bilingual or even multilingual language practices with Putonghua clearly in prime position, even though Cantonese remains an important lingua franca in the region. Putonghua has become the preferred lingua franca even in the domain of the family, largely because of sociolinguistic diversity in families and the role of Putonghua in children’s schooling.

These findings enrich our understanding of contextual mediation of family language policy decisions (e.g. Curdt-Christiansen, 2013; Fishman, 1991, 2004; King, Fogle, & Logan-Terry, 2008; Spolsky, 2012; Zhang & Tsung, 2019). They sombrely remind us that the sustaining of regional Chinese varieties or linguistic varieties without official recognition requires a set of socio-political conditions including relevant national language policies conducive to their maintenance.

It is encouraging to see that Cantonese has regained some importance as the regional lingua franca as families with Cantonese-speaking parents and grandparents have become aware of the need to preserve Cantonese for cultural heritage and a sense of belonging, especially after the ‘Protecting Cantonese Movement’ (e.g. Gao, 2012, 2015, 2017). Fishman’s (1970) classical observation of shifts in language usage and practices over three generations is clearly being borne out among the surveyed participants’ families, but the first two generations of local Cantonese-speaking parents appear to be increasingly active in maintaining Cantonese as an important element in the third generation children’s linguistic repertoire. The interviewed participants shared the efforts they had put into promoting the learning and use of Cantonese among their children, even though this does not change the fact that Putonghua remains the preferred language variety when socializing with other children in schools.

However, the survival of other regional Chinese varieties spoken by the participants could be at risk as Cantonese received increasing attention from the surveyed participants, who largely held the view that the learning of Cantonese and Putonghua simultaneously does not involve any contradiction. The data reveal that participants who spoke regional Chinese varieties other than Cantonese and Putonghua were acquiring Cantonese and Putonghua, and the space for using regional Chinese varieties other than Cantonese and Putonghua was apparently

quite limited. We will admit that our inquiry has been constrained by our concerns about the status of Cantonese as the regional *lingua franca*, although Guangzhou is also home to thousands of migrants from other parts of the country. Our results indicate that researchers should be even more concerned about the fate of regional Chinese varieties other than Cantonese, which are not backed up by the national language policy and do not enjoy a prestigious status like Cantonese. The decline of these regional Chinese varieties in migrant families again speaks for the profound mediation of sociocultural, socioeconomic and socio-political conditions on migrants' family language policy decisions (e.g. Fishman, 1970; Spolsky, 2004), and this deserves further research.

## **7. Conclusion**

This study explores family language decisions within the region of Guangzhou. It has revealed that Putonghua is the *de facto* preferred linguistic variety for communication and education among the majority of the participants, although Cantonese still enjoys a high level of popularity as the regional *lingua franca*. The most worrying results emerging from the inquiry are associated with the decline of regional Chinese varieties other than Cantonese, as they are unable to match the strength and importance of Cantonese and Putonghua in the region.

The results present a significant dilemma for language policy makers and educators. Mass migration has created an unprecedented need for the promotion of a shared language between migrants and local residents. Without top-down government pressure, Putonghua has become another *lingua franca* to facilitate effective communication among speakers of diverse regional Chinese varieties in contexts which attract migrants. This reduces the public space for using regional Chinese varieties, especially locally prestigious ones such as Cantonese in the region of Guangzhou, and increases local residents' sense of insecurity as they feel their familiar ways of living and speaking are under threat. Conflicts between Cantonese and Putonghua are portrayed in the 'Protecting Cantonese Movement' (Gao, 2012), but the numerous less prestigious regional Chinese varieties spoken by these migrants are quickly declining. How these regional Chinese varieties can be sustained alongside Cantonese without changing the national language policies remains a critical question for language policy makers and educators in the fast-changing Chinese society.

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