Project title
Use of Kongish: Construction of Local Identity among Hong Kong Youngsters

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1. Introduction
Kongish is a kind of hybrid language, which refers to romanised Cantonese blended with English, used in online communication. The term “Kongish” emerged in 2015 after the creation of “Kongish Daily”, a Facebook page which provides a platform for discussion about this unique language phenomenon observed among Hong Kong young people (Sewell & Chan, 2016). Some people might view Kongish as a new variety of local languages. Yet, language varieties do not appear out of thin air but are transformed and created. Kongish is a continuation of a long-standing language practice that has long been used by Hong Kong youngsters in internet chat rooms and on social media since the end of the 20th century (Lim, 2019).

Some people would confuse Kongish with Chinglish, slang for spoken or written English language that is influenced by the Chinese language (Huang, 2006). However, the difference between Kongish and Chinglish has been pointed out that:

*Kongish is more coherent and integral than Chinglish. Chinglish is more amorphous and doesn't really have any rules. Everything in Chinglish is pretty much ad hoc and spontaneous (anything goes), whereas Kongish — because Hong Kongers have been developing it for decades and are apt to actually exchange whole sentences and even series of sentences in it — has a body of mutually agreed upon usages and a higher degree of intelligibility for its own speakers. (Mair, 2015, in Sewell & Chan, 2016, p.601)*

Kongish shows continuities and overlaps with other bilingual language practices, and has relatively sedimented patterns of lexis and grammar. The systematicity and communality of Kongish make it a unique style of language use which more people mutually agree upon its usage than other forms of Hong Kong English.

To be able to comprehend Kongish, high proficiency in Cantonese and English is a fundamental requirement. While cultural knowledge, familiarity with Hong Kong’s current affairs, access to social media and identification with political stances are equally important (Sewell & Chan, 2016). Language is used as a tool to differentiate the “in-group” and “out-group”. Recently in the 2019 Anti-extradition Bill Movement, Kongish has earned a high level of media exposure because of the sense of in-group cohesion it gives to Kongish users (for more details, please refer to Appendix 1). The increasing level of acceptance towards Kongish among Hong Kong young people has
raised our interest in investigating how youngsters view Kongish and how it contributes to users' identity construction. Hence, this study will first explore the rising popularity of Kongish in Hong Kong and study youngsters’ perceptions and different ways of applications of Kongish. The sense-making process of different groups of Kongish users will be examined. Last but not least, we will dig into the relationship between Kongish and young people’s self-recognition of who they are in society.
2. Objectives and Research Questions

Through this research, we hope to investigate how Hong Kong youngsters apply Kongish in online communication and how they perceive and feel about Kongish. The significance of Kongish may vary across individuals due to the difference in social background and years of usage. Thus, the usage habits of different social groups would not be the same. Given different applications and ways of interpretations, some users might view Kongish as a legitimate variety of local languages while some may not. In addition, we hope to analyze how Kongish affects users’ formation and reinforcement of local identity.

Our four research questions are as follows:
1. How do Hong Kong youngsters apply Kongish in communication?
2. How do Hong Kong youngsters perceive Kongish?
3. Do Hong Kong youngsters view Kongish as a legitimate variety of local languages?
4. What is the relationship between Hong Kong youngsters’ attitudes towards Kongish and their local identity?
3. Literature Review

This section will first analyze and present the existing research regarding Kongish in different fields of study, then discuss the sociological contribution of this research in understanding the Kongish usage pattern and its contribution to the local identity formation of Hong Kong youngsters. Furthermore, we will discuss the main theories supporting our research. We will mainly focus on symbolic interactionism and social cognitive theory since they help us to conceptualize the sense-making process of (varieties of) languages. The theoretical framework provides us with a better idea of how different groups of Kongish users interpret and apply Kongish and explain Kongish’s characteristics (i.e. communality, function, and identity) as a variety of local languages. It is important to highlight that there are no existing sociological studies on the relationship between Kongish and the identity construction process of its users. Hence, we would research on similar cases in other countries in connection with other varieties of languages. Considering the high similarity in the language composition of Kongish and Singlish, we will look into the relationship between the use of Singlish and the ethnic identity of Singaporean. We hope to take some inspiration from similar studies to help us construct our argument on Kongish’s impact on the development and reinforcement of local identity among Hong Kong youngsters.

3.1 Kongish in Linguistics Studies

Kongish is an English-based creole written language in Hong Kong. Unlike standard English, Kongish includes many discourse particles and Cantonese words in romanised form, it does not follow the grammar of English as well. The detailed linguistic analysis showed that hybrid languages are usually evolved from the code-switching phenomenon in spoken language (Wang, 2016). Code-switching is a specific phenomenon in a bilingual society, suggesting that bilingual speakers can switch freely between two different languages in a sentence. For instance, Canadian would mix English with French, while most people in Hong Kong would mix Cantonese and English in spoken language. Code-switching demonstrates the individual’s proficiency in both languages, and their sense of belonging to the community (Wang, 2016).

Apart from spoken language, the application of code-switching is also extended to online texting and leads to the emergence of Kongish. As a medium of content, language evolves constantly to meet people’s needs across time. Compared to the mix of Chinese characters and English letters,
combining romanised Cantonese and English is considered to be a more simplified and efficient way of expression, which might explain the rise of Kongish in online communication (Sewell & Chan, 2016). The education policy in Hong Kong has also contributed to the prevalence of Kongish. Due to the colonial background and Hong Kong’s position as an international financial center, English has been an official language in our city and is widely used in the business sector and higher education (Sharifian, 2010). In the early 2000s, the Education Bureau incorporated phonics into the English teaching curriculum at primary level. The policy enhanced students’ understanding of phonics and syllables, equipping them with the ability to transcribe Cantonese into romanised form (Sewell, 2010).

Kongish is more than the mix of romanised Cantonese and English. The creation of Kongish can be classified into 4 ways, including (1) literal translation of the meaning of Cantonese phrases into English, (2) transliteration, transcribing the Cantonese pronunciation into roman letters, (3) adding Cantonese particles into sentences, and (4) using incorrect grammar or pronunciation for humorous effect (Tai, 2017). The structure of Kongish is highly flexible, a phrase in Cantonese can be expressed in various ways, yet still being comprehensible.

Whether Kongish should be included as a branch of English is a debatable topic in the linguistics field. The “Three Circles of English” model proposed by Kachru (1991) has demonstrated a generally accepted view, classifying English in the world into three circles. The inner-circle includes original English-speaking countries, standard British and American English are seen as traditional. The outer-circle mostly consists of countries that were colonised by those in the inner-circle, so English was rooted in these countries at some point in time. Countries in the expanding circle have their official languages and considered English as a lingua franca to the external environment. Some scholars agreed that Hong Kong should be categorised into the outer-ring, considering Kongish as a variety of English. While some rejected the idea since Kongish cannot be universally understood and is only applicable in Hong Kong.

3.2 Kongish in Cultural Studies
Kongish is a local sub-culture with rising popularity among young people. It is evolved from the parent culture, which refers to the two mainstream languages in Hong Kong - standard English
and Cantonese. Kongish users have formed their own cultural group in which their shared beliefs or practices (i.e. typing Kongish in online communication) are at variance with individuals within the broader mainstream culture.

Kongish is deemed as the texting code for Hong Kong local people in certain generational groups. Since the ability and tendency to use Kongish is one of the commonalities of members in the group, it has become its texting characteristics and sub-culture. Therefore, when individuals apply Kongish, both local identity and generational identity are expressed. Kongish Daily was a hot facebook page in Hong Kong that features news and memes in Kongish. It emphasized it was a new sharing site for “Hong Kong people” and has accumulated around 50k followers at the end of 2019. The popularity of the page illustrates that Kongish was recognized by part of the community even though it was not accepted as a standard language in Hong Kong.

In the 1970s, the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at the University of Birmingham reconceptualised culture. It was suggested that culture should not be limited to the higher culture, but emphasizing youth subculture. Indeed, sub-culture is usually underlooked and criticized by parties in the parent culture (Fang, 2005). Taking the use of language as an example, people in Hong Kong mostly express thoughts in perfect, well-structured language. Therefore, the sub-culture of using Kongish is seen as harmful to language proficiency, as it may hinder people’s learning of English grammar. Using Kongish is equated to incompetence in language. Meanwhile, Kongish users are negatively labeled as “the uneducated”.

However, CCCS considered sub-culture as a way of resistance (Stahl, 2003). The prevalence of Kongish can be understood as an expression of localism, resisting to the cultural invasion of China. Since the transfer of sovereignty in 1997, the Hong Kong government has been trying to relocate Cantonese from the mainstream language in Hong Kong to merely a Chinese dialect implemented (Kaeding, 2017). Different language policies such as using Putonghua as the medium of instruction for teaching the Chinese Language subject in primary and secondary schools were implemented to popularise Mandarin. However, Cantonese acts as a cultural commonality among individuals in Hong Kong, which is of great importance to the local identity formation (Ye, 2009). The immigration and language policies induced fear of losing local identity among Hong Kong people.
Hence, localism came to light in opposing the cultural invasion and the local identity crisis, aiming at preserving local cultures. While Kongish is seen as a local culture considering the Cantonese feature incorporated in the language (Kaeding, 2017). Therefore, some localists may engage in this sub-culture as a resistance to the mainstream, which is seemingly emerging in Chinese culture.

To conclude, the discussion on Kongish in different academic fields has facilitated our understanding of this hybrid language in Hong Kong. The linguistics research outlined the evolution of Kongish and provided a framework on the features of this flexible language. The validity of Kongish as a language and a branch of English from the linguistics view can possibly affect how people use it. Meanwhile, research in the field of cultural studies shed light on the relationship between the use of Kongish and localism. The sub-culture of using Kongish, especially among the younger generation, has acted as a form of resistance to the mainstream that devalues and dilutes the local culture. They try to protect their local identity as a Hongkonger through supporting sub-culture that contains the local feature. However, some gaps were left to be filled with our research. In this capstone project, we will investigate how the youth perceive Kongish, and how the hybrid language is used in online communication. In addition, we would like to discover the meaning of Kongish to this generation, and how it contributes to the formation of local identity.

3.3 Case study of Singlish
As mentioned above, there are no existing empirical studies in regard to the relationship between Kongish and people’s identity formation and reinforcement. Therefore, we would take reference from existing studies about Singlish to understand how a variety of local language(s) influence citizens’ self-identification in society.

Singlish emerged from the ethnically diverse environment in Singapore (Gwee, 2018). The population in Singapore is mainly composed of Chinese (77%), Malays (14%) and Indians (8%), creating a multilingual society with four official languages, including English, Mandarin, Malay, and Tamil. Since the independence of Singapore in 1965, the government has posited English as the nation’s official lingua franca. It has become the major medium of teaching in the bilingual education system, contributing to the good command of English among the Singaporeans.
Therefore, the language features in people’s mother tongue, such as Mandarin, Chinese dialects (Hokkien, Teochew, and Cantonese), Malay, and Tamil were incorporated into standard English, evolving into Singlish as a hybrid language. It consists of four language features, (1) the generalised use of “is it” question tag in yes-no questions; (2) the delete of copular verbs in a sentence, for example, the word “is” is deleted from the sentence “the sky blue”; (3) the frequent use of particles like “ah” and “lah”, and (4) vocabulary originated from Chinese dialects and Malay are used in Singlish (Gwee, 2018).

Among ordinary Singaporeans, Singlish is considered as “language of street” and usually used in informal situations, such as in conversation with family or friends, indicating casual intimacy (Goh, 2016). While standard English is used on formal occasions, including workplace, education institution, and the government. In 2000, the “Speak Good English Movement” was launched by the Singapore government to eradicate Singlish from Singaporean, encouraging people to speak grammatically-correct English that was universally understood. However, it was not widely supported by the citizens. Research showed a positive attitude of the general public towards Singlish, and people aged 25 to 29 were found to have a stronger emotional attachment with the hybrid language (Goh, 2016).

Singlish has become a social marker over time, people who can switch effectively between Singlish and standard English are perceived to be more educated and in a higher social status; while those who cannot speak Singlish, may be seen as “not Singaporean enough” (Wong, 2015). It showed the connection between the ability to use Singlish and the identity of Singaporean. The hybrid language serves as a code, which can only be decoded by the “real Singaporean” that share the same culture.

Similar to Singlish, Kongish is also a type of hybrid language, mixing of romanized Cantonese and English. High similarity can be spotted in their language features. Compared to standard English, both languages do not have a fixed set of grammatical rules, demonstrating high flexibility in usage. The same meaning can be presented and comprehended in various forms.
Languages are constantly evolving, so are hybrid languages. As Singlish has been widely used in Singapore, different elements of the local culture would be added into the language bit by bit, further developing in a more updated version. Through understanding the evolution of Singlish, we can better understand how Kongish was developed in Hong Kong by looking into the impact of public policy. Research on Singlish also sheds light on the relationship between hybrid language and identity formation. The younger generation in Singapore was found to be emotionally attached to Singlish and considered it as a crucial part of the Singaporean culture (Goh, 2016). The findings may help us to investigate the relationship between Kongish and the local identity formation. In the following research, we will look into the possible function of Kongish as an identifier in defining "the real Hongkonger".

3.4 Theoretical framework

3.4.1 Symbolic interaction
Symbolic interaction is a theory that focuses on the relationship among individuals within a society. It is believed that communication, which involves languages and symbols as a medium to exchange meaning, contributes to the sense-making process of the social world. Other than being shaped by the social world, people actively and collectively shape it. The meaning of the symbols is derived from social interaction and modified through interpretation (Blumer, 1969; Mead, 1934). Meaning would then become a shared understanding among the social group, and it will affect the way to interact with individuals under the same social context (Blumer, 1969). According to Blumer (1969), there are three premises of symbolic interactionism. The premises include people interact with things depends on its meaning ascribed, people’s interaction defines the meaning of things, or specific circumstances vary how people interpret the meaning of things. This theory helps us to understand the sense-making process of Kongish as a means for communication. Meanings of Kongish are created and constantly altered by the users through their interaction.

3.4.2 Social cognitive theory
This theory states that individuals acquire new knowledge or behavior by observing others within the context of social interactions, experiences, and outside media influences. According to Bandura (1986), individuals observe others performing a behavior and the results of that behavior, which then leads to subsequent behaviors guided by their observation. Learners are sometimes motivated
by goals, which direct their behavior. In the case of Kongish, it is not taught properly in a formal education context. Instead, it is spread through observation and imitation via the online platform. One of the purposes of this study is to investigate why and how Kongish users start using Kongish, despite the fact that it is not an official language. This theory can provide us with a better idea of the learning process of Kongish users.

3.4.3 Language and identity construction

With reference to the social identity theory, identity is formed by self-categorization (Turner et al., 1987). An individual can categorize, classify, or name him/herself in particular ways in relation to other social categories and classifications. Social groups are a significant source of pride and self-esteem, as well as a sense of community and belonging. The world is divided into in-group and out-group, social comparison eventually appears. The in-group would discriminate against the out-group to enhance their self-image (Tajfel et al., 1979). Tabouret-Keller (2017, p.317) mentioned an example of language and social identification:

-On the battle-field after their victory over the people of Ephraîm, the Gileads applied a language identity test to sort out friends and foe: all of the soldiers were asked to pronounce the word shibboleth; those who pronounced the first consonant as [ʃ] were friends, those who pronounced it [s] were enemies and therefore killed at once (Judges: XII. 6).

A similar case has happened in Hong Kong in August 2019 during the social movement. Kongish was perceived as an indicator to identify in-group and out-group by the protestors (for more details, please refer to Appendix 1). Language serves as the basis of identification by means of a shared element. It binds individuals and social identities together, offers both the means of creating this link and that of expressing it. Identification is served by the name of the language that fulfills the symbolic function of representation at both social and individual levels, thus representing an affiliation with a community or a group (Tabouret-Keller, 2017). It echoes with Sewell and Chan (2016)’s study about the identity functions of Kongish. It fosters the formation and maintenance of group identity. It emphasizes in-group identity and enhances solidarity while increasing the distance between insiders and outsiders.
4. Methodology

This section will present and explain the data collection methods used in this research, which are semi-structured interviews, focus group observation and content analysis of WhatsApp conversations. This study has mainly employed the qualitative research method because the purpose of this research is to investigate how the usage of Kongish influences the local identity construction process of Hong Kong young people. Different individuals may adopt different meanings and ways of interpretations of Kongish. Conducting qualitative research allows us to acquire in-depth answers from our samples so that we can understand their thoughts and behavior in detail. Yet, we will also answer our research questions through quantitative content analysis in order to understand the Kongish usage pattern of youngsters in general.

4.1 Semi-structured interviews

To explore interviewees’ attitudes and habits of using Kongish, as well as its contribution to their local identity, 18 semi-structured interviews were conducted in this research. All interviewees have received primary and secondary education in Hong Kong, and are current students in local universities (aged 18 to 23), demonstrating the ability to use and comprehend Kongish.

A list of criteria was followed in the interviewee selection process. We tried to eliminate factors of age and educational background, which might influence their ability to use and their perceptions towards Kongish. Interviewees were required to meet the criterion of finishing primary and secondary study in Hong Kong, so as to eliminate the significant differences in the social or learning experiences they were exposed to (i.e. important social movements, or national education in the school curriculum), which might affect their local or national identity formation.

Through the interviews, we would like to investigate in their perceptions towards Kongish, and the rationale behind their options of using Kongish, standard English or Cantonese in online communication on a daily basis. In addition, we examined the local identity of the interviewees, then found out whether the use of Kongish has strengthened their sense of belonging in different social groups and influenced how they view themselves and other Kongish users.

(Please refer to Appendix 2 for interview questions)
4.2 Focus group observation
In order to investigate the relationship between intimacy and the tendency of using Kongish, an online focus group observation was conducted. Two groups, a total of 10 participants with a habit of texting in Kongish were recruited without knowing the purpose of the study. Relationship intimacy was the independent variable, participants in Group 1 know each other, while the participants in Group 2 are strangers.

The study was in the form of a 7-minute group discussion on Whatsapp. The participants were added to a Whatsapp group in advance. The instruction was given in an audio-recording format instead of a written format to avoid any unintentional guide in participants’ language use. The two groups were asked to discuss the same random topic which was unrelated to our study (“use of close friends list on Instagram”). Their choice of language in texting was observed and analysed. The true purpose of the study was disclosed and explained to the participants after the discussion.

4.3 Content analysis
Besides, content analysis was conducted to explore interviewees’ habit of using Kongish. We mainly focused on possible factors such as relationship intimacy and occasion formality in content analysis. 18 participants were asked to show his/her record of their latest 50 messages with (1) a family member, (2) a close friend, and (3) an acquaintance, on their most frequently used instant messaging applications (eg. Whatsapp / WeChat / Messenger). The language used in the text was identified, and the frequency of Kongish usage was calculated. We would like to know if the level of intimacy with the contact person would affect interviewees’ choice of language used in online communication.
5. Findings

5.1 Semi-structured interviews

5.1.1 Kongish usage pattern

In the interviews, interviewees were asked the occasions in which they would use Kongish. All interviewees suggested social media, particularly instant messaging applications e.g. WhatsApp and Telegram. Kongish is mainly used in day-to-day online communication. Six out of eighteen interviewees would also type Kongish in social networking sites like Facebook and Instagram. But the frequency was much lower than WhatsApp. An interviewee explained:

“I seldom use Kongish in Instagram story or post because I’m afraid that some of my friends from other countries may not understand the meaning of Kongish words.”

For discussion forums, interviewees seldom used Kongish since they wanted to align with the “culture” of the forum.

When asked about the people to whom they would type Kongish, all interviewees answered “friends” immediately. But some interviewees put forward that it depended on the level of intimacy. Only when they were sure that their friends were able to comprehend would they choose to type in Kongish. When meeting new people, they preferred using Cantonese or English to communicate as they were not sure about whether the other side knows Kongish. The same criterion applied to the family. More than half of the interviewees would never use it with their parents because their parents did not know English, hence were also not capable of comprehending Kongish.

5.1.2 Meanings of Kongish

We have also investigated the meanings of Kongish to the interviewees, and the responses can be classified into three aspects, which are the intimacy indicator, the effective communication tool, as well as a Hong Kong local culture.

Almost three-quarters of interviewees started learning Kongish when they first entered secondary or university because they noticed that everyone around them was using. For instance, one of the interviewees explained:
“...because Kongish seems to be popular among my peers, especially my classmates, which impels me to learn it in order to follow the norm.”

Similarly, another interviewee explained:

“...because nearly everyone around me is using Kongish in texting, mainly communication on Whatsapp. I don’t wanna be left out in the conversation, that’s why I started learning Kongish and all the abbreviations.”

The responses have shown that peer influence is a significant motivation for Hong Kong youngsters to start using Kongish in online communication. Nearly all interviewees agreed that the use of Kongish in communication was an indicator of intimacy, and tended to use Kongish in online conversations with friends and family (if able to comprehend). Compared to standard Hong Kong English, youngsters generally think Kongish is playful in tone, so it is more suitable to be used in casual conversation with intimate interlocutors.

In addition, interviewees were asked why they kept using Kongish for years. Most interviewees mentioned the convenience of typing in Kongish since they did not need to switch to the Chinese keyboard and they could ignore the grammatical rules of standard English. Other interviewees thought that Kongish appeared to be more amiable and less formal when compared to standard English or Chinese. The use of Kongish would reduce the sense of distance with others. It can be seen as an effective communication tool.

Last but not least, two-thirds of interviewees considered Kongish to be a unique part of Hong Kong culture. For instance, one interviewee explained:

“...Kongish is unique, you cannot find it in other places outside Hong Kong...”

Indeed, Kongish is a complicated hybrid language, simply being able to comprehend Cantonese and English does not mean that one can understand and apply Kongish. It is more than a mix of Cantonese and English, considering the Hong Kong culture such as slang incorporated into it. For example, regardless of their ability to comprehend Cantonese and English, the mainland Chinese from Guangdong Province may not be able to understand Kongish if they know nothing about Kong Kong culture. And an interviewee further elaborated her view in relating Kongish to the local identity as a Hongkonger:
“...Kongish is like a set of code for real Hongkonger, people who are not local enough would never be able to decode such language...”

5.1.3 Importance of Kongish

All interviewees had a positive perception towards Kongish and a majority of them took pride in their Kongish-using ability. But when asked if they thought it was important for Hongkongers to learn Kongish, most of the interviewees disagreed. An interviewee said:

“[Kongish is] not really important. Kongish doesn’t have any practical use, eg. it can’t be used in the workplace, etc. Being trilingual (Cantonese, English & Mandarin) in Hong Kong is good enough.”

Although Kongish was agreed to be a unique culture in Hong Kong, it has not been widely accepted and adopted in society. Thus, being able to use Kongish is not so important in Hong Kong.

5.1.4 Kongish and local identity

Almost all interviewees only identified themselves as a Hong Kong citizen, except that one interviewee considered herself as a Hong Kong Chinese citizen and a Chinese citizen as well. All of them have seen the selected Kongish publications in recent social movement before and they generally held a positive attitude towards using Kongish in that way:

“I think it enhances collectivism among Hongkongers as it’s only locals who are usually able to comprehend the meaning of Kongish. This actually echoes with the ongoing social unrest, it’s only us Hongkongers who can really comprehend the situation.”

As mentioned above, Kongish is seen as an in-group identifier among Hong Kong youngsters. And this function is particularly significant after the start of the social movement. Most interviewees indicated that their sense of identity as a Hongkonger was reinforced when they saw Kongish publications related to the protests. They felt they were bound by Kongish since it was a collective culture shared by Hongkongers. People from mainland China and other countries could not comprehend Kongish content. They were proud of their Kongish-using ability, as well as their identity as a Hong Kong citizen.
5.2 Focus group observation

The focus group observation showed significant differences between the two groups in terms of participants’ tone and their choice of language. During the online experiment, participants in group 1, i.e. a group of friends, tended to apply Kongish, WhatsApp stickers, and emoji in text form while those in group 2, i.e. a group of strangers, preferred bilingual text and emoji messaging on mobile devices. English vocabulary was sometimes expressed in short form by both groups, e.g. “fd” (friend) and “po” (post). Among 108 messages in group 1’s discussion, 52% of them were in Kongish and a range of humorous stickers was sent; while in group 2’s discussion, there were only 30 messages, which were all conveyed in Cantonese, English or both, but not Kongish.

According to the independent variables of this online experiment, participants in group 1 had a higher level of intimacy than those in group 2 while holding others constant. Regarding the result, it illustrated that the level of intimacy would affect people’s willingness to use Kongish as the communicating language. In addition, the results in group 1 showed that Kongish was a mutual and commonly-used language among the participants. Therefore, the closeness of individuals should be considered as one of the underlying factors affecting their choice of using language as well as learning a language.

5.3 Content analysis

The WhatsApp content analysis focused on three groups of people, including close friends, acquaintances, and family members. 750 data from each social group were collected from 18 participants. By calculating the percentage of Kongish usage in their WhatsApp messages, it showed that applying Kongish is common in online conversations with friends, as 77.67% of the messages were in Kongish. It was followed by the category of acquaintance which accounted for 28.4%. Lastly, only 6.11% of messages were conveyed in Kongish in the WhatsApp conversation with family members.

By analyzing interviewees’ messages with close friends, it was found that they tended to apply formal Cantonese or English when the conversation was relatively serious or formal. For example, when they were talking about their careers or suggestions to their friends, they would unintentionally change their tone and choice of language. In contrast, when it was just a normal
chat or gossip, they mostly applied Kongish. This phenomenon was seldom seen in the category of acquaintances.

As acquaintances are regarded as those who are not too close to the interviewees, the range of definitions is comparatively broad. Some of them showed their conversation with project group mates while some provided their messages record with their colleagues. In general, interviewees use more Kongish with project group mates than colleagues in their part-time work. The major reason for this difference was age. They were more likely to apply Kongish when that person had a similar age with them instead of those who were older.

Among the 18 interviewees, most of them showed a conversation with their parents, while only a few of them chose the messages with their brothers or sisters. It illustrated that when they texted with people in other generations, even when they were close, they seldom texted in Kongish. For the Kongish messages sent to parents, they tended to express their emotions via Cantonese intonation such as “yes ar” and “ok lah” which were the relatively simple form of Kongish that could be easily comprehended. On the other hand, the WhatsApp conversation between brother and sister had a higher probability of Kongish usage. This phenomenon might be due to a narrower age difference.
6. Discussion and Implications

After critically analyzing the data collected from semi-structured interviews, focus group observation, and content analysis, it can be concluded that Kongish is viewed as a unique local culture in Hong Kong among young people. In this section, we will discuss the social learning process and local identity reinforcement of Kongish with reference to the theoretical framework mentioned above.

First and foremost, the social cognitive theory has suggested that people develop new knowledge or behavior through observation (Bandura, 1986). Social surroundings and the environment play an important role in influencing one’s cognition towards the behavior, hence creating their incentives to imitate the same behavior after evaluating the consequences they observed from former models. In the interviews, we have found that peer influence appears to be the most influential motive for users to start using Kongish in online communication. And it usually happens when youngsters enter a new environment (e.g. secondary and university) and meet a new social group. As individuals desire to establish and maintain a good relationship with others as soon as possible, they try to observe and follow the way of interaction of other individuals in the group. They fit into the group by imitating the existing practices or cultures. Through observing the interaction and practices among the individuals in an unfamiliar social context, youngsters receive information from models about the use of Kongish and how it helps to construct relationships and deliver messages. They gradually demonstrate new patterns of behavior and become a Kongish user themselves. In other words, individuals observe and adjust their texting behaviors in social interactions, and learning Kongish is a means for them to construct and reinforce their social identity.

Based on the data collected from the interviews, focus group observation and content analysis, Kongish users decide which texting language to use depending on three factors: (1) the receiver's ability to comprehend Kongish, (2) their intimacy with the receiver, and (3) the formality of the occasion. Firstly, Kongish users would consider the language proficiency of the receiver. Therefore, they would prefer typing Cantonese when texting with family members who do not know English. On the other hand, since their friends of the same generation usually have a similar education background, language proficiency and cultural knowledge, the frequency of Kongish
usage is much higher. Secondly, Kongish users generally prefer to use Kongish with whom they have a more intimate relationship, i.e. friends, instead of acquaintances or strangers. Kongish is a reflection of closeness in a relationship. Thirdly, Kongish users would also consider the formality of the occasion due to the casual characteristic of Kongish. They rarely use Kongish in the workplace or with the boss because it is deemed to be a very informal language.

Of course, the above three factors may not be applicable in all circumstances and they may sometimes contradict. After all, individuals’ behavior varies in accordance with their identity in the community. For example, individuals may prefer standard Cantonese or English when they discuss relatively serious topics with their close friends. In order to effectively select the appropriate texting language, young people must be clear about their identity in certain social groups or under certain social contexts. They make behavioral judgments based on their experiences, observations and environmental factors, so that what they do align with the social expectations on their roles.

A sense-making process is involved when individuals learn and apply Kongish. With reference to the symbolic interactionism, the sense-making process of languages or its varieties is developmental. Languages are continuously re-created and modified during social interactions (Blumer, 1969; Mead, 1934). To non-Kongish users, romanised Cantonese and abbreviations (e.g. “ks” - an abbreviation of “kei sud”, which refers to “actually” in English) does not have any meaning because they cannot be interpreted. While it can be communicated and understood among Kongish users. The sense-making process of Kongish involves several steps. Kongish learning builds on one’s prior knowledge of Cantonese and English. The meanings of Kongish are then given and determined by its users. The developmental meaning of Kongish explains the reason why Kongish keeps evolving. Kongish starters observe and learn to understand the meanings from other members of the social group. By interacting with other Kongish users, individuals would be capable to apply this “common code”. The shared meaning of Kongish derived from the interaction which makes it a communication tool initially, it also becomes a boundary marker separating in-group and out-group.
Language is a way for people to express and create cultural identity. It has set the condition of social inclusion and exclusion, which serves as an invisible guideline to follow for certain groups. To some youngsters, their capability of typing in Kongish is deemed to be an expression of local identity as a Hong Kong citizen. On an individual level, Kongish shapes users’ identity through the process of sense-making. From the interviews, Kongish users generally agree that only Hongkongers can comprehend and use Kongish. It is a code of communication that includes one person in the social group. On the societal level, internal cohesion is enhanced by Kongish since users take pride in their Kongish-using ability and Kongish as a unique culture in Hong Kong. And the pride is derived from their self-identification as a Hongkonger. Yet, it is important to note that the influence of the recent social movement should be taken into consideration. We cannot measure its level of effect on people’s perceptions of Kongish and how they identify themselves. After all, our interview results show that our targeted age group highly consider themselves as Hongkongers rather than Chinese. Pure Hong Kong citizens may be more open to local subculture, thus the reinforcement effect of Kongish on youngsters’ local identity is much stronger.
7. Limitations

Despite the fact that we have tried to reduce sampling error in this research by recruiting interviewees with similar educational backgrounds and ages, the sample may not proportionally represent our target population - Hong Kong youngsters. We have limited our sample to university students while excluding non-student or secondary Kongish users. With different educational backgrounds and ages, they may interpret and apply Kongish differently within their social circles. Our sample size is not big enough to maximize the generalizability, which may not be able to draw a comprehensive conclusion. Therefore, future research should include more youngsters in different backgrounds and age groups, so as to collect diverse opinions on their perceptions towards Kongish.

In addition, only two focus groups (one with close-friends and one with strangers) were observed and analysed due to limited time and number of participants. While we rely on the result of these two focus groups to construct our argument about the relationship between intimacy and the tendency of Kongish usage. It is suggested that future research can conduct a more comprehensive focus group observation so as to compare the data collected from different focus groups from the same category. It can increase data reliability. Moreover, we have asked our focus group participants to discuss their usage of the “close friends” feature on Instagram, which is a casual topic. The given topic might influence participants’ choice for texting language. If a more serious topic (e.g. political issue) was given, we might obtain different data.
8. Conclusion
This research aimed to investigate how Hong Kong youngsters perceive Kongish, their Kongish-using patterns, and how it contributes to users' identity construction. Semi-structured interviews, focus group observation, and content analysis was employed to understand Hong Kong youngsters’ thoughts on this special hybrid language of Cantonese and English. With reference to the theoretical framework of symbolic interactionism and social cognitive theory, we know that Kongish users generally associate Kongish to their local identity due to its local feature. Regardless of whether Kongish is recognised by the majority of Hong Kong people, the findings reveal the reason why Hong Kong youngsters start Kongish learning, Kongish users’ perceptions of Kongish and how their local identity is constructed and reinforced by using Kongish. Since Kongish was socially constructed, it was not standardized and variation of the usage exists frequently. Yet, in spite of the varying expression, Kongish users see it as a local culture of Hong Kong. Through the sense-making process, Kongish does not only act as a communication tool but also a way to distinguish an individual’s local identity and generational identity.
References


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Appendix 1
Recently in the 2019 Anti-extradition Bill Movement, Kongish has earned a high level of media exposure since Hong Kong young protestors used Kongish as a tactic to deter Chinese infiltrators and trolls from monitoring their actions and discussions (Cheng, 2019). They typed messages and slogans in romanized Cantonese as non-Cantonese speakers may have difficulty in comprehending the meaning. There was widespread use of Kongish among protesters in various communication channels such as the LIHKG forum, Telegram, Instagram and Facebook. Soon, NGO and media followed suit. For instance, pro-democracy newspaper Apple Daily used Kongish “wai yuen gin” (see you at Victoria Park) in its front-page headline to promote the rally organized by the Civil Human Rights Front on 18 August (“Jin ri wai yuen gin min zhen hu yu ji hui be water”, 2019). Amnesty International Hong Kong also made Kongish posts on its Facebook and Instagram pages (Cheng, 2019). Kongish has extended its significance from online communication to political activism and aroused greater public attention. It appeared that the level of acceptance in Kongish has been growing rapidly.
Appendix 2

Semi-Structured Interview Questions

1. Please try to explain what Kongish to you is.
2. When did you start using Kongish? Why?
3. Why do you use Kongish now? Why do you prefer Kongish over other languages (Chinese / Standard English)?
4. Does Kongish mean anything to you other than a communication tool?
5. How important do you think it is for Hong Kong people to learn Kongish? Why?
6. To what extent do you want to be proficient in Kongish? Or are you already proficient?
7. Under what circumstances/occasions would you use Kongish in online communication (e.g. posting on social media, texting in WhatsApp, etc.)?
8. Do people around you use Kongish?
9. Which group(s) of people do you & don’t you usually communicate in Kongish? Why?
10. Do you take pride in your Kongish-using ability? Why?
11. Do you think that Kongish is a unique culture in Hong Kong?
12. What do you think about “add oil” has been included in the Oxford Dictionary?
13. How would you define your local identity?

-Showing images of publication in Kongish to the interviewee-
14. Have you seen these images before? On which platform? Can you comprehend them?
15. What do you think about these publications during social movement? Did you have the same feeling on Kongish before the movement?
16. People claimed that only “real Hongkongers” can comprehend and communicate in Kongish. To what extent do you agree with this claim?
17. Do you think Kongish has reinforced your local identity? Why or why not?