Translation Disaster: Unpacking Cantonese with the Study of Steven Chow's Movies

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Abstract

In the corrected edition of Jacques Derrida's *Of Grammatology* (1998), English translator Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak questions Derrida's approach to using the Chinese language as the opposition to deconstruction in Western language as a strategy to create otherness, yet with no in-depth study to the language in her preface:

> "The relationship between logocentrism and ethnocentrismis indirectly invoked in the very first sentence of the Exergue." Yet, paradoxically, and almost by a reverse ethnocentrism, Derrida insists that logocentrism is a property of the West. He does this so frequently that a quotation would be superfluous. Although something of the Chinese prejudice of the West is discussed in Part I, the East is never seriously studied or deconstructed in the Derridean text." (Derrida, 1998, lxxxii)

The essay is going to expand the application of Derrida's deconstruction and other critiques to Western languages over the Chinese language, or more precise, Cantonese Chinese, the language that has a closer relationship and trace to classical written and spoken Chinese. The generalization of "Chinese" is problematic in the first place when the development of written words and spoken dialect are not unified; the separations and entanglements of the two forms will be further discussed in the essay.

Using Hong Kong actor-director Steven Chow's movies as the case study, where his wordplay of written and spoken Cantonese collectively show and response to Derrida's idea of signifier and signified, Différance and binary opposition, has made translation impossible, for both subtitles to dubbed version of his movie; The essay will continue to challenge Derrida's use of Chinese in his book as and his argument that logocentrism is the totality of the occident. (Derrida, 1998, p. 72)

1. The Trace of Cantonese

Cantonese is one of the spoken dialects in Southern China that is used in Guangdong Provence nowadays, namely the Canton. The use of Cantonese is popularized when Guangzhou became the key trading port between China and foreign countries in the 1700s and speared across the Canton Provinces including the British colonized Hong Kong.[1] Cantonese and Traditional type were used since the and remain until to become the official spoken and written Chinese of Hong Kong Special Administrative Region that different from the mainland China of using Mandarin Chinese and simplified type.

There is an ongoing debate on whether Cantonese is a dialect or an independent language that has an older historical trace than Mandarin. Linguistically, Cantonese has a separate phonics system of 9 tones including three entering tones (high, medium and low) that create a more dynamic sound wave than the 4 tones in mandarin.[2] The speculation went on when research found Cantonese is the dialect most rhyme and give the high and low cadence in the classical poetry Tang Dynasty (618-907), considered as the origin of Chinese literature along with the use of Traditional Chinese calligraphy.[3]

Example:

贈 孟 浩 然 – 李 白 A Gift for Meng-haoran, by Li Bai

		Cantonese phonic	Mandarin phonic
吾 愛 孟 夫 子 ，	風 流 天 下 聞 。	man4	wen2
紅 顏 棄 軒 冕 ，	白 首 臥 松 雲 。	wan4	yun2
醉 月 頻 中 聖 ，	迷 花 不 事 君 。	gwan1	jun1
高 山 安 可 仰 ，	徒 此 挹 清 芬 。	fan1	fen1

The obvious difference between the two Chinese languages is that we write what we speak in Mandarin and vice versa, while spoken Cantonese differs totally from the Mandarin or

classical Chinese literature; Although Cantonese shares similar vocabulary with Mandarin; it is distinctive when it comes to the spoken form in terms of pronunciation, sentence structure, and lexicon.[4]

Example:	Cantonese term	Mandarin term
Meal box	飯盒	盒飯
	[rice][box]	[box][rice]
Privacy	私隱	隱私
	[private][hidden]	[hidden][private]

Terms and structures in spoken Cantonese are considered informal to Chinese literature where the invention and expansion of vocabulary are comparable to Derrida's idea of Différance, not just inspired from the classical Chinese, but the influences of cultural exchanges with the western countries.

Taking the adjective *"麻甩" (maa4 lat1)* for example, a negative term to describe disgusting male, exclusively and commonly use in Cantonese speaking population, without a precise record of the origin while the wildly accepted explanation of the term came from the French word "Malade", when the Belgian missionary doctor used to call sick patient in Guangzhou. Without knowing the French word and thought that is a word for sick male, Canton people then invent the term with similar pronunciation.[5]

Applying Derrida's idea of Différance, the development of Cantonese doesn't just stop with the growth of spoken Cantonese vocabulary; the uniqueness of spoken Cantonese has adapted into written Cantonese in the recent decade, become a part of Hong Kong literature besides Mandarin and classical Chinese literature, that was once only considered as formal literature.[6] Written Cantonese is the direct transcript of the spoken form with invention of auxiliary and

function words in between; this help break-down the distance between words and speech that create the intimate reading experience to Cantonese speaker.

There are more examples of English-transliteration vocabulary invented in Hong Kong during the British colonization such as *Taxi—的士 (dik1 si6)* and *Store—士多 (si1 dou2)*; On the other hand, Hong Kong-English (港式英語) is the invention of simplified English terms from the direct-translation of Cantonese word such as *好耐冇見—long time no see* and *加油—add oil*, which is widely used in the English-speaking community. The term add oil is the latest Cantonese lexicon that has been made an official term in the Oxford English Dictionary in 2018.[7]

2.   Case Study: *Flirting Scholar* 唐伯虎點秋香 *(1993)*

Steven Chow is a well-known Hong Kong comedy actor/director/producer. Chow signature style in loony performance and witty lines brought him the success to become the household name when it comes to Hong Kong comedy movies that dominated the local film industry in the 1990s. The use of exaggerated body languages and random plots made his movie entertaining not just to the local but overseas audiences as well; however, the fluency in Cantonese is necessary in order to enjoy the full experience of his movies, with Chow constantly play with words and using local slangs as comedic punch, which neither subtitle or the dubbed version can translate or capture the essence of the original lines.

Flirting Scholar 唐伯虎點秋香 (1993) is Chow's first directed movie and parody adaptation to the classical Chinese opera play with the same name. The movie set in Tang dynasty and focuses on the character Tong Pak Fu, one of the 4 best scholars at the time, on his quest to approach to his crush that is a house-maid. Tong is known for expertise as an artist, poet, and calligrapher. The case study is going to focus on one particular scene (1:01:03-1:03:32) in the movie where Tong is having a poetry couplet competition with his enemy. Paying with words, the homophonic of spoken Cantonese has added another layer of meanings on top of the classical Chinese literature: it appears to be polite and normal in writing form while extremely offensive, yet hilarious, with the colloquial usage in Hong Kong. There is no way to translate this scene without further explanation, yet the English translator gives up and the subtitles have become gibberish in the official debut.
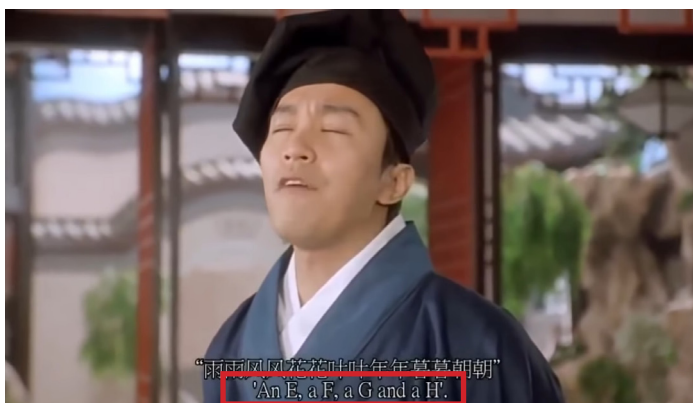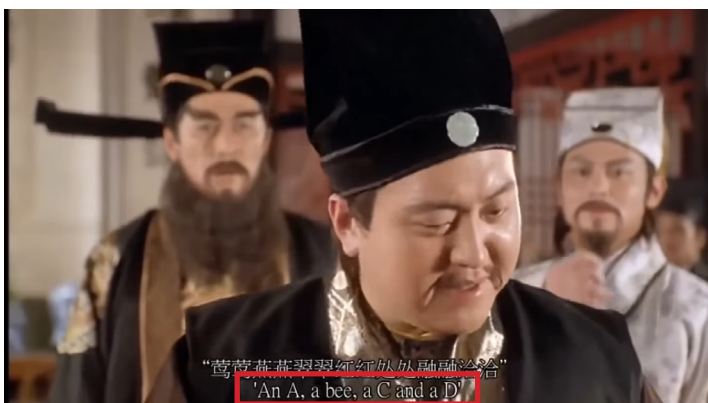
Video source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vg_HBVOvVWk&t=3797s

The essay is going to unpack this particular scene to continue Derrida's discussion of deconstruction on Chinese.

2.1 Signifier and Signified

One key idea in *Of Grammatology* is the differences between signifier and signified, where signifier is the matter of origin while the signified is the matter or meaning beyond; The emphasis on signifier to signified is an infinite process that opens the never-ending possibility to the origin signifier.

> "It is therefore a situation where the signified commands, and is yet free of, all signifiers-a recognizably theological situation." (Derrida, 1998, xvi)

Couplet competition is a classical literature game where one side gives the first sentence, and then the opponent has to come back with the next sentence with a similar structure, in terms of words count, location of the type of terms (noun, adjective, etc.)and a progression of meanings.

The first type of signifier-signified notable in the scene is between word and meaning. Classical Chinese literature valued the beauty of words and aesthetic of the sentences, external understanding of the content and rearrangement of the components are required in order to

generate the final meaning. Take the first couplet that plays with ascending and descending numbers, for example (1:01:03-1:01:22):

(1)［一鄉二里］［共三夫子］，［不識］［四書五經六義］，［竟敢教］［七八九子］，［十分大膽］！

Signifier: [1 village, 2 neighborhoods] [total 3 masters], [don't know] [4 books, 5 prayers, 6 lectures], [dare to teach] [7,8,9 kids], [10 points outrageous]

Signified: Very small area, A set of Chinese classical literature for ethics and morality, many people, very

Signified: This is outrageous for the uneducated master to teach people in the small village!

(2)［十室九貧］，［湊得］［八兩七錢六分五毫四厘］，［尚且］［三心二意］，［一等］［下流］！

Signifier: [10 wives, 9 poor], [gathered] [$8.7654], [still] [3 heart,2 thoughts], [first class] [pervert]!

Signified: (Husband is the missing subject here), very poor, be of two minds (about having new wives)

Signified: That man already got ten wives and in poverty still thinking about having new wives? What a pervert!

The second type of signifier-signified is between written Chinese and the sound of spoken Cantonese. The punctuation-free couplet contributes to the flexible separation of the sentence that gives the options of text-translation and sound-translation. Take the final couplet, for example, the text-translation is normal while the sound-translation is full of expletives and foul slangs (1:03:08-1:03:16):

(1) [冚家] [剷泥] [齊種樹]。

Text-translation (signifier):	[Whole family] [dig mud] [altogether plant tree]
Text-translation (signified):	Whole family planting tree together.
Sound-translation (signifier):	Slang for cursing the whole family to die, meaningless text

(2) [汝家] [池塘] [多] [鮫魚]。

Text-translation (signifier):	[My home] [pond] [lots] [mackerels].
Text-translation (signified):	I have a lot of mackerels at the pond in my home.
Sound-translation (signifier):	Meaningless text, homophonic of effort wasted with expletive
Sound-translation (signified):	Fucking waste of efforts

(3) [魚肥] [果熟] [麻] [撚飯]。

Text-translation (signifier):	[Fat fish] [ripe fruit] [grandma] [cook rice]
Text-translation (signified):	Grandma cooking with abundant ingredients
Sound-translation (signifier):	Meaningless text, homophonic of troublesome with expletive
Sound-translation (signified):	Fucking troublesome

(4) [你] [老母] [兮] [親下廚]！

Text-translation (signifier): [Your] [mother] [oh] [personally cook]

Text-translation (signified): Your mother is doing the cooking herself

Sound-translation (signifier): your mom, foul language of female private part, meaningless text

Sound-translation (signified): You mother fucker!

2.2   Binary Oppositions

The process of defining something when first defining the other is what Derrida calls binary opposition as a critique of the idea of *otherness* in western literature, where the two subjects only co-exist with one another and unnecessary in opposition.

> " Differance invites us to undo the need for balanced equations, to see if each term in an opposition is not after all an accomplice of the other : " At the point where the concept of differance intervenes . . . all the conceptual oppositions of metaphysics, to the extent that they have for ultimate reference the presence of a present, . . . (signifier/signified; sensible/ intelligible; writing/speech; speech [parole] !language [langue] ; diachrony/synchrony; space/ time; passivity/activity etc.) become non-pertinent." (Derrida, 1998, lix)

The concept of binary opposition is not a stranger in Eastern philosophy. For example, the Heart Sūtra (प्रज्ञापारमिताहृदय Prajñāpāramitāhdaya) in Mahāyāna Buddhism is all about binary opposition. The core idea of the Sūtra emphasized that there is no distinction between Śūnyatā, translated to "emptiness" and "form":

> "Form is emptiness, emptiness is form. Emptiness is not separate from form, form is not separate from emptiness. Whatever is form is emptiness, whatever is emptiness is form." (Rupan śūnyatā śūnyatāiva rupan. Rupan na prithak śūnyatā śūnyatā na prithag rupan. Yad rupan sa śūnyatā ya śūnyatā tad rupan.) – English translation of the Heart Sūtra.[8]

The scripture states that there's neither arise nor perish, impure nor pure, increase nor decrease when everything comes from emptiness. The Heart Sūtra is a critique of the perseverance of materialism.

Another example of binary opposition in Chinese philosophy is the concept of *Yin-yang (陰陽)* in Taoism (道家). In Chinese cosmology, the universe creates itself in the cycle of Yin

and Yang, the circulation of *Yin - shades/negatives* and *Yang - brightness/positives*; The only sustainable way for the Cosmo to operate it the balance of "opposition". [9] Using black and white as the metaphoric oppositions, the symbol of Yin-yang demonstrated the cycle of life need an equal portion of both sides circulating each other, while the black contains white and the white contains black.

The idea of dualism is embedded in Chinese philosophy, where the formation of the language is the manifestation of the binary opposition. Different from Western languages, each Chinese character is a signifier that signifies meanings beyond the word; the combination of words formed 詞語—generally translated as the "term" but accurately each character stands for "word" and "speech/expression" respectively; The inclusion of the oppositions exists in a Chinese term as a whole, such as 是非—*right + wrong* and 緣分—*innate fate + acquire efforts*, to a completed relationship. Going back to the case study, the reduplication couplet is formed by opposition terms (1:02:35-1:02:43):

(1) [鶯鶯燕燕] [翠翠紅紅] [處處] [融融洽洽]。

Signifier: [Acura-swallow] [Green-red] [everywhere] [fusion-negotiation]

Signified: The vibrant colors and sounds made the harmonious nature.

(2) [雨雨風風] [花花葉葉] [年年] [暮暮朝朝]。

Signifier: [Rain-wind] [flower-leaf] [yearly] [dusk-dawn]

Signified: The cycle of life is endless.

3.   Chinese Language and Logocentrism

Logocentrism comes from the Greek term logos that meaning speech, though, law or reason as the central principle, of language and philosophy, the absolute truth. According to Derrida's interpretation of logocentrism, speech is the original signifier of meaning, while the written word is signified to the spoken word. (Powell, 1997, p. 33) Derrida explains that, according to

logocentrist theory, speech is more present than writing, where the speaker can engage with the listener but the writer is absent from the reader. Logocentrism asserts that writing is a substitute for speech and that writing is an attempt to restore the presence of speech. (Derrida, 1998, p. 49)

As mentioned in the Abstract, Derrida claimed that Chinese is contrary to logocentrism, exclusive to the Occident language system. Is that true? The answer is yes and no; the essay will continue to investigate the 6 methods of Chinese character formation, namely Liu-Shu (六書)[10], and how they are responding to logocentrism differently.

*- **Pictogram, Indicatives and Ideogram** (象形, 指事, 會意):*

These three methods of word formation are where the meaning is signified within the look of the word itself. Hence, writing becomes the signifier of speech. Pictogram is the oldest way of word making is shape imitation; In other words, most Chinese characters were originally formed as simplified pictures of objects.

Image source: https://rvi.biz/chinese-pictographs-and-meanings-bing-images-chinese/3157316859431159033

Indicatives is signs of indication, whether on its own or on top of the pictogram words. For example, one-two-three is written as 一二三, using the number of strokes as the sign as the meaning; For the later, on top of 刀—*knife* and using a dot to point out the indicated location then becomes 刃—*the sharp edge of a knife*.

Ideogram means to figure out the meaning of the word with the components of two or more characters. For example, the combination of 田—*field* and 力— *strength*, signifying 男—*male*, who use their strength in agriculture.

- Phonetic-semantic compounds, Mutual Explanatories and Phonetic Loans (形聲, 轉注, 假借):

Words established under these three methods are a combination of two components, halved with the "word capital" and halved with the "sound indicating character". The written word is signified by both writing and speech.

Phonetic-semantic compounds character is formed with the "capital" (shape) to indicate the categories of the word belongs to, and the other half of the word determines how the word is going to sound. The meaning and sound of a character are interchangeable in mutual explanatories words. Simply said, one can guess the written word with its sound or guess the sound of the word with its written form.

For example, words formed from captial *山/— mountain,* such as *嶼—isalnd* and *峰—peak* are related to landscapes; words share the same sound componient 土 (tou2) sounds similar - 吐 (tou3), 肚 (tou5), 杜 (dou6).

Phonetic loans are the way to invent new characters from speech, by fitting in the meaning of the term into word capital and sound indication to the other half; the written words in Cantonese slangs and expressions have mostly created this way.

4. Conclusion: the Incapability of Translation

By unpacking the characteristic of Cantonese, it appears that the language has ticked multiple boxes in Derrida's deconstruction; the written and spoken form of language varied with each other while both under transformation upon the influences on Classical Chinese literature, written and spoken mandarin, intercultural exchange in colonization, popular culture and many more. The trace of Cantonese is voided when there is neither one singular origin nor the end of the language.

The multiple-layers significations between the written and spoken Cantonese have proved that there is multiple "truth" within and beyond one signifier; where the translation is incapable of containing them in full, or according to Derrida, there is no end to significations. The only certain truth we have is a choice of personal truth at the absolute point of time.

In responding to logocentrism, the case study demonstrates that the meanings in Cantonese neither begin with speech nor writing, an example of binary oppositions; In fact, they co-exist with each other and simultaneously progress and (re) generate more possibilities to the language.

With the previous points, it once again reinforced that translation is nowhere near the "truth" of one language; translation is indeed the "absent" writing criticized by Derrida to logocentrism theories. The translation is one way to understand the language but not necessarily communicating everything; to push forward, the activation of Cantonese, or any language I would say, is to pay attention to matters besides the text and speech, such as ideologies, beliefs, behaviors and more within the particular culture that contribute to the language formation.

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