

Reflection: Language, Identity and Community

My body practice is speaking Cantonese to my local classmates as much as possible. It has been four months since the start of the body practice, and I am proud to say I have been sticking to this practice ever since and in border situations. With much improvement in accuracy and fluency in speaking this new language, my views on the cultural and social contexts that I set out to explore have also experienced some huge transition. I would like to reflect on my bodily experience from the perspectives of linguistics, identity and interpersonal interaction.

Learning a language

Language is essentially a ‘symbolic system’ (Lumen Learning, 2018), and compared with science subjects, language is less about right or wrong, but more about whether you can speak in a native and natural manner. That leads to the question of how to evaluate and assess the learning process. In this practice, although not intentionally, I avoided using any tracking, recording devices or methods, but solely focused on my direct experience and feelings. To be more specific, when I was learning English at school, I was made aware of the number of vocabulary, used recorders to check my intonation and pronunciation, and assessed my progress by means of quizzes and tests; on the contrary, speaking Cantonese in the past four months, I paid more attention to how nervous or relaxed I felt when I talk to local people, how much difficult I felt listening to someone else speaking, how ‘awkward’ or ‘embarrassed’ I felt when I ‘exposed’ my poor pronunciation to my native speaker friends. However, looking back at it, I sometimes imagine what if I have used some of the tracking technology. As Natasha described in his article (2016), the tracking technology can go as detailed as each bite of your food, each breath you take. What if there is such a device that can monitor how accurate my intonation is as I speak,

give my timely feedback on my mispronunciation, and suggest better use of vocabulary... Would I want that? The answer is probably no. I am proud and lucky that I have a chance to really experience learning a new language without all the quantifying and tracking methods which are dominant in school education, and let my body fully feel the learning process. Furthermore, the point of my practice is also not only about learning a Cantonese, but also about the interpersonal interaction between me and the local people, which the tracking technology cannot fulfill.

Constructing an identity?

The challenges I met in doing this body practice, is to address the question, both from my local classmates and myself, of why I am doing this practice. Whether it is fair enough to say ‘language is tightly tied to your identity’, me, as a mainlander, speaking Cantonese is not correlated with my identity and is not a norm among mainland students. In the beginning, I would receive some backlash or confusion, and people would judge me for speaking a language that is not effective for communication, and for my broken spoken Cantonese. Sometimes the judgement made me feel objectified. However, I held on and at some point I changed to be more active towards my choice of language, which I later realized to be the so-called ‘embodiement’, just like how Sara Rehman embodied her choice of ‘showing her Muslim’ by putting hijab (2019). I think the unwelcome reception probably is a result of the local people that I talked to mistaking my choice of language as efforts to construct a fake identity, where in fact I am trying to challenge the ‘necessary’ association between my identity as a mainlander in Hong Kong and the limited language choice that I am allowed to have. It is my own choice, and it is I who is determining my identity.

Fitting into a community

By community, I probably mean the Cantonese speaking community, which is presumably the dominant community in Hong Kong society. Revisiting the starting point of my body practice, I think I was indeed trying to fit in more into my class, and have a relatively easier life living in Hong Kong. I remember a few times where the people who I was talking to gave me a confused look and replied in Mandarin or English, which I now take as the exclusion keeping me out of the 'Cantonese speaking community'. However, I sometimes wonder whether there really exists such a community, or I am just making it up because I have put myself into a special position. It is interesting to be in such a position, which enables me to take a step back and think about individuality, identity in relation to society, just like most of the narrators in *Body Battlegrounds* recorded how their individual and personal experiences allowed them to break down how certain characteristics of their appearance or their body practice symbolize bigger things in their community.

However, I still think there does exist such a community, for the reason that whether you can speak Cantonese or not makes a significant difference in your life in Hong Kong, especially if you are from Mainland. As I am getting better at Cantonese, whenever I hang out with my Mainlander friends and meet with a situation of having to speak to local people, such as shop assistants or waiters at restaurants, I would usually volunteer to be the one speaking. I notice the subtle expression on my friends' face by which I can somehow figure out what they were thinking. Probably it is a privilege to be able to communicate in Cantonese. This further leads me back to the life of ours approximately from September 2019 to January 2020, where the political climate was really having major impacts on us. I remember my mental turbulence of taking a bus

or MTR, fearful of getting into a confrontation; I remembered how such feelings would further make us feel held back from accessing a lot of places, even restaurants and supermarkets. Furthermore, I now believe this constant psychological anxiety must have had a tangible impact on our mental and physical health. This is similar to the structural inequality analyzed in Gravlee's report (2009). In his study, the 'racial' difference could potentially lead to various physical and mental health problems. Compared with 'race', language seems to be a smaller and less significant topic. However, from my body practice, I would say being able to speak Cantonese for a 'Mainlander-looking person' in Hong Kong, also has that structural impact.

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