

# Hong Kong local media's coverage of the "Biliteracy and Trilingualism" policy based on text analysis

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## Abstract

**This study focuses on the discourse tensions arising from the "Biliteracy and Trilingualism" policy implemented after Hong Kong's return to China in 1997. The study draws on a self-constructed corpus from 1997 to 2025, comprising 42 valid news texts from LexisNexis. Through text analysis, combined with word frequency and co-occurrence analysis using the KH Coder tool, this study explores the differences in how different discourse actors construct this policy. The study uses high-frequency words such as 'promote' and core indicator words such as 'English, Cantonese, and Mandarin' as entry points to analyze the local multi-platforms' understanding of language policy. By visualizing the semantic associations of keywords through co-occurrence network diagrams, the study reveals the functional positioning of the three languages and the power game behind them. This study aims to clarify how different local discourse entities in Hong Kong (official, media, and multiple platforms) construct the "Biliteracy and Trilingualism" policy in order to provide empirical evidence for language governance in multilingual regions and offer a new analytical paradigm for related research.**

## Keywords

**Biliteracy and Trilingualism, text analysis, educational context, language identity.**

## 1. Introduction

Since Hong Kong's return to China in 1997, the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government has implemented the "Biliteracy and Trilingualism" language policy. Putonghua was included in the public school curriculum along with English and Cantonese, establishing its official language status[1]. This policy not only reshaped Hong Kong's language ecology but also became an important paradigm for language governance after the return. However, over the past two decades, since the policy was implemented, significant differences have emerged in social cognition surrounding bilingualism and trilingualism. These contradictions have profoundly affected the advancement of Hong Kong's language policy and the integration of social culture.

Although the "Biliteracy and Trilingualism" policy itself is of great importance. These existing studies on Hong Kong's language policy have two significant limitations. On the one hand, there is a lack of theoretical perspective and research dimensions: many studies rely on Western colonial discourse theories or macro-narrative frameworks, focusing on macro-issues such as national integration and educational functions, but often interpreting Hong Kong's local language policy from a Western perspective while overlooking complex internal voices. For example, diverse discourses on "Biliteracy and Trilingualism" (including the varied demands of ordinary citizens, students, and the young generation) expressed by Hong Kong people on social media and other platforms lack systematic analysis, making it difficult to reflect the granular details of policy implementation in the local context. On the other hand, there is a lack

of quantitative analysis: existing research lacks quantitative comparisons of multiple local text sources (such as government news, media reports, and social media comments), such as word frequency correlation and co-occurrence network analysis. To fill the gap, this study integrates diverse texts and uses the KH Coder tool to conduct word frequency and co-occurrence analysis by using text analysis, aiming to present the discourse construction and linguistic interaction essence of Hong Kong's "Biliteracy and Trilingualism" policy while providing empirical evidence for policy optimization.

In conclusion, this study is significant for two reasons. Theoretically, it enriches language policy studies by revealing the discursive mechanisms through which national identity and local heritage are balanced in multilingual contexts, offering a new analytical framework for understanding policy implementation beyond technical prescriptions. Practically, it provides empirical insights into addressing public misgivings and fostering inclusive language governance, aiming to fill existing gaps, which provides empirical evidence for understanding the social acceptance of language policies and the balance between national identity and local cultural heritage, and offers a new analytical paradigm for language governance in multilingual regions.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. English: Colonial Legacy and the Popularization Controversy

Hong Kong's "Biliteracy and Trilingualism" policy has become a new form of language governance after the handover. Thompson argues that there is often a linguistic hierarchy in which one particular language dominates and others are marginalized in colonial settings, which helps to explain the view put forward by Zou Jiayan that the Hong Kong government under British rule has implemented an English-first policy, which has resulted in the marginalization of Chinese for a long time[2,3]. Baker notes that in Hong Kong, English is regarded as the higher language and a symbol of the elite, while Li indicates that the Hong Kong SAR continued to view English as "the core competitiveness of the knowledge-based economy." [4,5] Bolton points out from the perspective of social change that Hong Kong has shifted from 'elite bilingualism' to 'mass bilingualism'. [6] Census data show that the proportion of people claiming to be proficient in English has continued to rise over the past few decades. Although self-reported proficiency is difficult to accurately reflect actual proficiency.

However, this position faces two challenges. On the one hand, the 'declining English proficiency theory' is controversial. Shepard & Rose point out that there has been a significant decline in English language proficiency among both students and teachers in HK in recent decades, while Baranova, Honan, and Khine argue that this could be a seed for rhizomatic possibilities if considered through a Bourdieusian–Deleuzian lens [7-10]. In contrast, Bolton and Leung both fail to identify any persuasive evidence indicating a decline in English proficiency, concluding based on available evidence that the common perception of a downward trend cannot be proven valid [11,12]. Therefore, Sewell cautions that the power of the media to influence perceptions and policymaking should not be underestimated. On the other hand, the 'popularization' of English has not been achieved [13]. Chan finds that the audience of English-language media (such as the South China Morning Post) is limited to expatriates and the highly educated [14].

### 2.2. Cantonese: a carrier of local identity and the contradiction between policy marginalization

The controversy surrounding English's colonial legacy has yet to be fully resolved, and the contradiction between Cantonese's social function and policy status as a local mother tongue has resurfaced, becoming another key tension in Hong Kong's language ecology. Linguistic

stratification within the colonial context provides a logical starting point for understanding the current controversy. Lingling and Xianlang emphasize that after the reunification in 1997, the Basic Law established the framework of “Biliteracy and Trilingualism” (Chinese, English; Cantonese, English, Putonghua), aiming to strike a balance between national identity and international competitiveness [15]. Yee Ho emphasizes that the HKSAR Government has established a correct orientation for its language policy: trilingualism is crucial for the development of this unique international city in China [16]. It is also important for the future of Hongkongers.

The status and development of Cantonese have presented a complex tension before and after Hong Kong’s return to China. Lee & Leung note that some scholars predicted that after Hong Kong’s return, English would continue to gain popularity in science, technology, finance, and trade, while Mandarin would gradually expand to replace English as the language of politics and administration, with Cantonese—the dominant spoken language in Hong Kong—limited to informal communication among friends and family [17]. However, the reality is that Cantonese has far outlasted this prediction. Li argues that its omnipresence in all major sectors of society, including families, schools, government, newspapers, broadcasting, social media, and art forms (from Cantonese pop songs and Cantonese opera to films and stand-up comedy), has made it the default language of identity for over 90% of Hong Kong’s Chinese population [18]. Additionally, Harwood & Lai point out that mother tongue instruction taught in Cantonese has been proven to have many educational advantages [19].

In contrast, the situation of Cantonese at the official policy level is somewhat awkward. Although government policies recognize the status of Cantonese, Lee & Leung emphasize that language promotion funds are mainly invested in English and Mandarin, with a lack of systematic investment in Cantonese [17]. In administrative discourse, Cantonese is often vaguely referred to as the ‘mother tongue’ without clarifying its status as an independent language, resulting in unclear promotion goals. Furthermore, Harwood & Lai note that in past mother tongue instruction policies, Cantonese was considered merely a medium of instruction in Chinese as Medium of Instruction (CMI) schools rather than a dedicated subject, and its position in the education system far from receiving the attention it deserved [20]. Consequently, Evans observes that although Cantonese is the mother tongue of most Hong Kong students and research has proven it to be the most effective medium of instruction [8], its status as a medium of instruction is gradually being eroded by English and Mandarin in actual educational practice—a phenomenon that further confirms that educational research findings are not the primary consideration in formulating language education policies, and this trend seems difficult to reverse in Hong Kong’s long process of moving towards “Biliteracy and Trilingualism”. Evans even emphasizes that in Hong Kong’s case, while some policies are formulated based on research, others ignore effective research evidence [20]. Therefore, Li & Liang argue that to realize the aim of “Biliteracy and Trilingualism”, the current policy and measures are worthy of rethinking—specifically, how many learning resources should be allocated and how to plan to achieve the most fruitful results, which matters significantly [21].

### **2.3. Mandarin: a Carrier of National Identity and Policy Tension**

While Cantonese’s role in local identity contrasts sharply with its policy marginalization, the need to promote Mandarin as a national language has added a new dimension to Hong Kong’s language dynamics.

Li posits that the SAR’s demand for Putonghua, the common national language of China, can be seen as a natural accompaniment or foreseeable outcome of the process of decolonization and renationalization [18]. In fact, Li Guisheng & Liang Huimin, Liang Huimin, and Bolton et al. have evidenced that the use of Mandarin has increased with the growth of economic and trade exchanges with the mainland [22-24].

Despite the growing significance of Mandarin and the rising demand for its use, its promotion and implementation face numerous challenges. Adamson & Lai argue that it is important to acknowledge that the situation of Mandarin before the handover was drastically different from today's: as a sibling of Cantonese, its use was significantly restricted at the time, a historical context that has indirectly led to some public misconceptions about current Mandarin promotion, with some even associating it with 'weakening Cantonese' [25]. Therefore, Liang contends that, regarding the language environment, promotion efforts must first dispel public misunderstandings: speaking Mandarin well does not mean weakening Cantonese, as the two are not mutually exclusive [26]. The government should strengthen publicity, clarify its position, and share experiences benefiting from Mandarin use.

These arguments and research findings collectively point out that Mandarin promotion cannot be pursued in isolation, as it relies on effective communication to resolve misunderstandings in order to build an environment where multilinguals jointly serve Hong Kong's long-term development.

### 3. Methodology

Text analysis can balance overly rigid and stereotyped social analysis and is a valuable method for studying social and cultural changes [27].

This research employs KH Coder, a text data mining software, to conduct text analysis to find hidden logic and assumptions through specific text. Text analysis tools generate new text from queries through computer-implemented processes. These new texts are composed of the original text broken down and reassembled, creating new hybrid works for interpretation [28].

To lay a foundation for the subsequent text analysis with KH Coder, this study first carried out systematic text data collection and sorting. Text data collection, where literature texts were selected from the LexisNexis database involving news from South China Morning Post (local media), Hong Kong Government News (official stance), and EJ Insight and Daily Hong Kong report (a multi-information platform) between 1997 and 2025 were gathered to construct a literature text corpus, and each piece of literature was numbered. A total of 173 documents were retrieved, and after screening for high-quality academic literature and removing duplicate and irrelevant texts, 42 valid articles with a total of 28,188 tokens (16,669 used) and 3,619 (3,360 used) unique words were finally obtained. (Figure1)

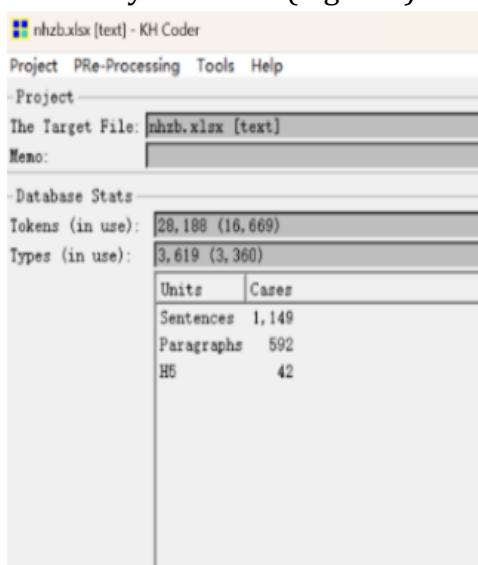


Figure 1. KH Coder Database Statistics Display

## 4. Analysis

### 4.1. The Whole Analysis of High-frequency Words

To deeply explore the diverse characteristics of the promotion of “Biliteracy and Trilingualism” in Hong Kong, this study used KH Coder software to pre-process the text and extract high-frequency words, focusing on the high-frequency verb “promote” as the core for targeted analysis, aiming to clarify the subject, object, and deep logic of language promotion in Hong Kong.

After using KH Coder to pre-process the text, the high-frequency word filtering function was used to extract noun and verb data further, thereby generating the ‘Noun Frequency Table’ (Figure 2) and the ‘Verb Frequency Table’ (Figure 3). First, the noun frequency table shows the terms school, language, student, education, policy, and trilingualism. These high-frequency nouns indicate a strong focus on educational contexts, specifically embracing discussions around the implementation of the “Biliteracy and Trilingualism” policy in schools. Meanwhile, in the verb frequency table, the top ten lexical verbs include “say,” “learn,” “teach,” “use,” “do” “include,” “speak,” “promote,” “make,” and “give,” which appear frequently, reflecting the core narrative’s relevance around “language practice.” “learn” and “teach” directly relate to language behavior in educational settings.

In the high-frequency word analysis, “promote,” as a word with a distinctly positive orientation, epitomizes the proactive actions and positive goals of Hong Kong’s biliteracy and trilingualism promotion. (Figure 2)

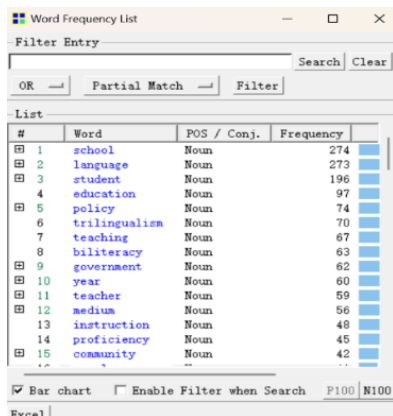


Figure 2. Noun Frequency Table

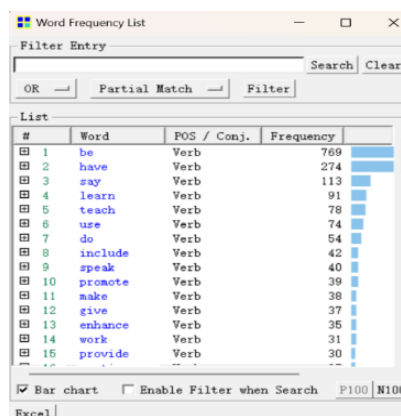


Figure 3. Verb Frequency Table

First, in KH Coder, “promote” can be set as an index term, then locate the term through the software’s search function (Figure 4). The system will automatically extract all text fragments containing “promote” and present all sentences containing the term as index lines, thereby enabling centralized extraction and analysis of the context related to “promote.” Specifically, it shows that the “promote” initiative is primarily driven by the government and official institutions, including the Education Bureau (EDB), the Standing Committee on Language Education and Research (SCOLAR), and the Director of the Education Bureau. It also includes schools, community organizations, businesses, universities, and other stakeholders. For example, statements such as “the EDB and SCOLAR have been working together to promote biliteracy and trilingualism,” “Schools needed to do more to promote English learning opportunities outside the classroom” and “local organisations are invited to submit proposals for innovative and educational activities to promote Chinese language” demonstrate a promotion model that combines government leadership with social collaboration, highlighting the authority and social participation of Mandarin Chinese and English as a public policy.

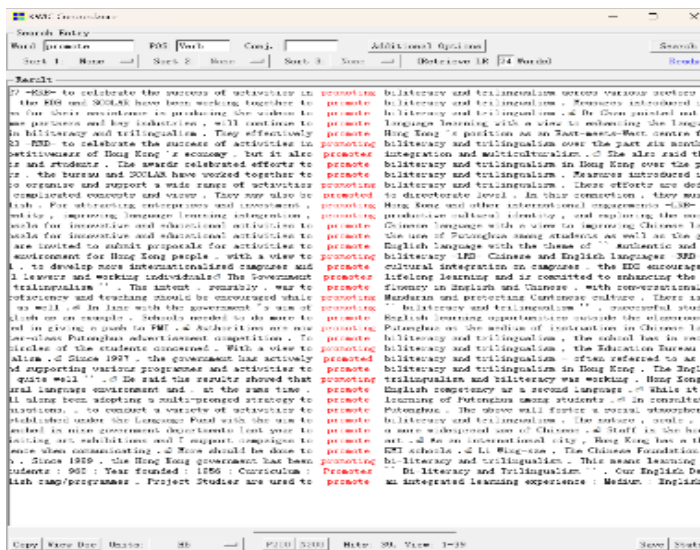


Figure 4. KH Coder Text Search Results Interface

What is more, it shows the promotion target. The “promote” not only focuses on the overall framework of “Biliteracy and Trilingualism”, but also specifically addresses the learning and use of specific languages (Putonghua, English, and Chinese), and covers different groups and scenarios. The groups range from local primary and secondary students (‘enhancing interest in writing and reading as well as developing their oral and expression skills in Chinese’), teachers(‘utilising the Language Fund to sponsor them to take the Putonghua Proficiency Test’), to new immigrants (‘offering appropriate courses and workshops to non-local students who wish to learn Chinese/Cantonese.’). In addition, in terms of scenarios, covering education (classroom teaching, campus activities), and community (language competitions, cultural activities).

Notably, the word “promote” in the text does not refer to a one-way push for a single language, but implies a balance between multiple languages like promoting Mandarin while protecting Cantonese culture and encouraging English proficiency while strengthening Chinese learning, it not only meets the needs of national development, but also maintains the local cultural roots and international competitiveness.

#### 4.2. The Respective Analysis of High-frequency Words

To systematically explore the multilingual ecology of Hong Kong and the social and cultural implications embedded in its language policy, an in-depth analysis based on targeted textual extraction and case interpretation on English, Cantonese, and Mandarin is focused on.

First, we set “English, Cantonese, Mandarin/Putonghua” as index terms, filter out the index lines based on these index terms, and then continue analyzing based on these index lines. Meanwhile, by combining specific textual cases to interpret their functional positioning, we can further reveal the social and cultural logic behind Hong Kong’s language policy.

To start with the analysis of Cantonese (Figure 5), the function and significance of Cantonese in Hong Kong society are reflected not only in the deep connection between daily communication and identity, but also in the controversial positioning and practice of the education system—this dual manifestation makes Cantonese a core carrier of Hong Kong’s local cultural attributes.

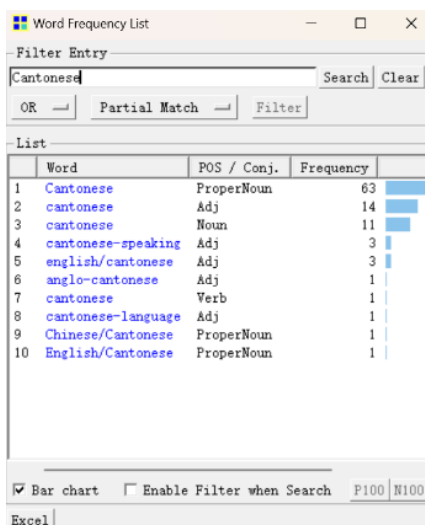


Figure 5. Word Frequency List Interface (Cantonese)

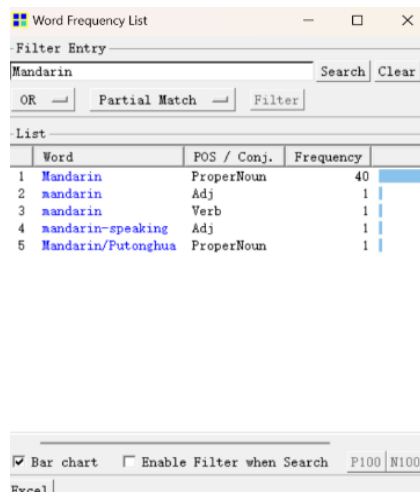


Figure 6. Word Frequency List Interface (Mandarin)

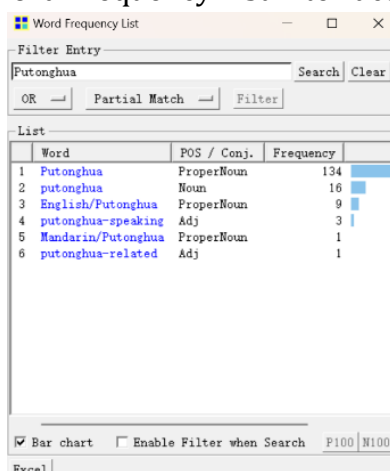


Figure 7. Word Frequency List Interface (Putonghua)

Next, turning to Mandarin (Figure 6) and Putonghua (Figure 7), it plays multiple roles in Hong Kong’s language policy ecosystem: in terms of policy, as the statutory core language, it is promoted through official mechanisms to serve ‘national identity’, ‘regional integration’ and enhance trilingual proficiency; in educational practice, its promotion integrates ‘flexible media selection’ (such as the PMIC model) and the ‘classroom plus extracurricular’ approach,

accompanied by academic controversy over the effectiveness of improving Chinese proficiency; furthermore, its interaction with Cantonese highlights ‘status controversy’—there are concerns about ‘squeezing out local languages’ and arguments for ‘bilingual coexistence’, which essentially reflects the deep game between ‘national and local language identity’ and reflects the complex relationship between policy and social culture in Hong Kong’s multilingual environment.

Finally, regarding English (Figure 8), in Hong Kong, it is not only the core language of international competitiveness (the dominant working language in business, law, and other fields) and a key goal of the “Biliteracy and Trilingualism” education system, but also forms tension with Cantonese and Mandarin in policy adjustments (such as mother tongue education). Specifically, its instrumental value (in the workplace, further studies) and symbol of ‘international identity’ highlight the real conflict between ‘practical needs’ and ‘cultural identity’ in people’s language choices, which further enriches the complexity of Hong Kong’s multilingual ecology.

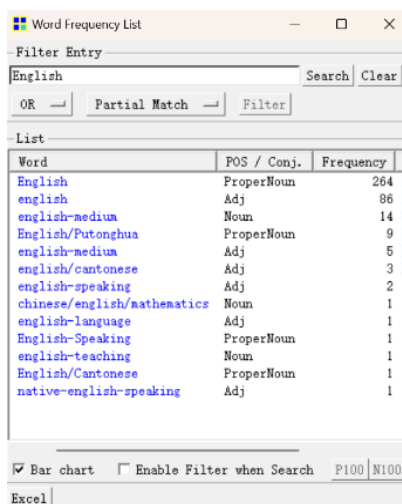


Figure 8. Word Frequency List Interface (English)

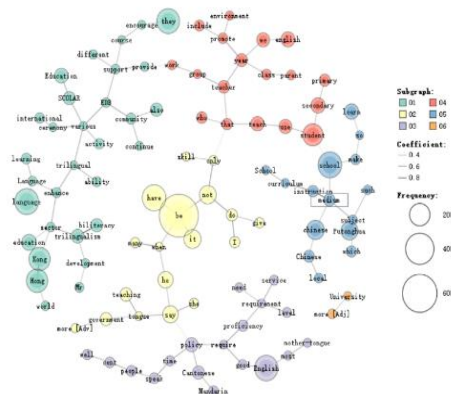


Figure 9. Cluster Diagram

### 4.3. Cluster Analysis

This visualization diagram (Figure 9) is generated based on the Kh Coder’s co-occurrence analysis of Hong Kong culture. Through the multiple designs of nodes, lines, and colors, it clearly presents the core vocabulary associations and thematic classifications in this discourse system. This image uses the KH Coder tool to analyze word frequency and co-occurrence in texts related to the “Biliteracy and Trilingualism” policy, generating a visual representation of the language network. Its core purpose is to visualize the association patterns of words within the text and assist in analyzing the logic of Hong Kong’s language governance discourse. Circular nodes

represent individual words, and the size of the circle corresponds to the word frequency (200/400/600 in the legend represent the frequency threshold). Large nodes such as “language,” “school,” and “English” are also included. This indicates that this type of vocabulary appears frequently in the corpus and is the core of the discourse. In addition, edges (connecting lines) reflect the co-occurrence relationship between words and indicate the strength of association (the higher the value, the closer the semantic association). What is more, color coding clustering words into categories (01-06) based on topic similarity.

As analyzed in the figure, the green images relate to policy promotion and educational practice (‘Education’ ‘SCOLAR’ ‘enhances’ ‘bilingualism’ ‘trilingualism’), reflecting official and institutional support for improving “Bilingualism and Trilingualism.” The red images focus on core education subjects (‘teachers’ ‘students’ ‘teach’ ‘use’), illustrating that schools are the primary venue for the implementation of language policy, exemplified by the controversy surrounding education medium and language use. The blue images centered around specific language and curriculum (‘school’ ‘curriculum’ ‘Chinese’ ‘Putonghua’) reflect the practice of the “Bilingualism and Trilingualism” in curriculum design and teaching language. Yellow represents language existence and basic interaction (‘be’ ‘have’ ‘he’ ‘say’), focusing on the basic existence of language and daily interactions. For example, ‘be’ ‘have’ is a high-frequency verb, and the text often discusses how languages are used or exist such as whether Cantonese is still the dominant language in daily life and whether the space for English is being squeezed. ‘she’ ‘he’ is related to individual language expression and community interaction and helps understand the daily feedback of ordinary Hong Kong people on their language attitudes. Purple represents policy and proficiency requirements (‘policy’ ‘proficiency’ ‘mother-tongue’ ‘requirement’), which is related to policy regulations and language proficiency standards. ‘Policy requires’ embodies English proficiency with career development and binding Mandarin proficiency with national integration.

Different colors are clustered, from the six dimensions of ‘policy promotion (green),’ ‘educational practice (red),’ ‘curriculum controversy (blue),’ ‘daily interaction (yellow),’ and ‘proficiency issues (purple),’ which fully presents the diverse attitudes of Hong Kong locals towards the “Bilingualism and Trilingualism.”

## 5. Discussion

From a practical perspective, the policy systematically promotes the balanced development of Chinese (including Mandarin), English, and Cantonese through an official-led, multi-agent collaborative model (EDB, SCOLAR, linking schools and communities, etc.). This not only serves to integrate into national development (promoting Mandarin), but also maintains international competitiveness (English proficiency) and local cultural roots (Cantonese inheritance), forming a dual orientation of instrumental value (economic competitiveness and social mobility) and cultural value (identity recognition and diverse integration).

From the perspective of controversy, the educational context (school teaching media, curriculum setting) is the focus of conflict, reflecting the differences among different groups on ‘language priority’: the official focus is on the balance of “Bilingualism and Trilingualism” to adapt to development needs, while society is implicitly anxious about the loss of Cantonese status and worried about the weakening of practical English skills. This tension is not a contradiction, but a dynamic negotiation in a pluralistic society on ‘how language matches identity and real needs.’ Ultimately, the implementation and controversy surrounding “Bilingualism and Trilingualism” demonstrate that Hong Kong’s language ecology is not merely the product of policy design but rather a concentrated expression of how various sectors of society, within the national and international triangle, achieve identity balance and development adaptation through language choice. Its value far exceeds simply cultivating language proficiency. Rather, it epitomizes the

complex interactions at the cultural, economic, and social levels of Hong Kong as a meeting point of East and West.

## 6. Conclusion

This study uses the relevant texts of Hong Kong's "Biliteracy and Trilingualism" policy from 1997 to 2025 as the research object, and uses KH Coder, a tool that analyzes word frequency and co-occurrence, revealing differences in the policy constructions of different discourse actors. The study found that the popularization of English is controversial; Cantonese, a carrier of local identity, has been marginalized in policy, and the promotion of Mandarin has faced challenges. Policy implementation is dominated by the government and involves a multi-stakeholder collaborative model, with education being a focal point of controversy. Future research can be deepened and expanded in many ways. First, by broadening the research perspective and incorporating multidisciplinary theories such as sociolinguistics and cultural studies, the deeper connection between language policy and social culture can be analyzed from a more comprehensive perspective. Second, by expanding research methods and combining quantitative and qualitative analysis, such as conducting field research and interviews, the findings can be more convincing. Further research can be conducted on controversial issues, delving into the complex factors behind disputes such as the popularization of English, the status of Cantonese, and the promotion of Mandarin, providing more targeted recommendations for policy optimization. Future research on Hong Kong's "Biliteracy and Trilingualism" policy can further focus on the details of policy implementation: in-depth analysis of the specific application results and problems of each language in different fields can provide a basis for precise policy adjustments. Furthermore, in light of the needs of the times, such as the development of the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area and the deepening of international exchanges, the research can explore how it can serve social and economic development. Focus on innovation in educational practice and contribute to the harmonious development of Hong Kong's language ecology.

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