

# Between Erosion and Opportunity: Navigating the Linguistic Landscape of Heritage Language Maintenance in Globalised Contexts

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## Abstract:

Globalisation affects speech communities in complex ways, influencing language contact phenomena such as language spread, language shift, language loss and language maintenance. The spread of a few dominant world languages naturally leads to the marginalisation of minority languages, as speakers and communities shift towards those varieties that offer greater economic, social or political capital. The decline of minority or endangered languages parallels the loss of biodiversity, resulting in detrimental effects on our linguistic landscape. As conservationists strive to protect the natural environment, linguists, educators and community leaders must also take action to preserve our sociolinguistic heritage.

This presentation examines these themes through a case study of Hakka, a minority language both within its native Greater China and among the Chinese diaspora. Drawing on linguistic examples, I first highlight some distinctive features of Hakka compared to other Chinese varieties. Applying a sociolinguistic lens, I then analyse Hakka's precarious position, comparing its status in the Hong Kong metropolis with that in the UK's Chinese community. This dual focus reveals how globalisation both threatens and potentially facilitates heritage language maintenance.

The case of Hakka exemplifies the dynamics of language hierarchies in globalised contexts. In Hong Kong, the once-vibrant Hakka language has undergone significant decline over the last half century amid institutional neglect. Speakers have largely shifted to Cantonese – the societal lingua franca; more recently, Hakka has been overshadowed by Mandarin, the rising national standard. In contrast, among British-Chinese communities, pockets of Hakka speakers have experienced intergenerational transmission of the language, particularly in households with grandparents, due to reduced competition from dominant Chinese languages, although competition with English, the societal host language, remains. This divergence highlights how diaspora contexts can create protective spaces for minority languages, even as British-Chinese community schools offer only Cantonese and Mandarin heritage language education, reflecting globalised hierarchies.

Yet, digital globalisation now adds new dimensions, presenting unexpected opportunities for minority language awareness through social media and digital platforms, and facilitating connections between minority speakers. In Hong Kong, supported by these technologies, recent movements for intangible heritage preservation are sparking renewed interest in Hakka and other minority languages. Hakka advocates are utilising these platforms to share learning resources, build local networks, and elevate the language's visibility. These developments could inspire similar revivals in diasporic settings like the British-Chinese community.

To harness this momentum, innovative approaches to heritage language maintenance should work with, rather than against, globalised realities. These include community-



driven initiatives that promote minority heritage education alongside majority heritage language programmes, even in the absence of top-down policies, and fostering intercultural exchanges between Hakka communities worldwide. Heritage language maintenance in today's interconnected world ultimately requires both local community commitment and smart engagement with global networks. This approach applies not only to Hakka but to other minority languages facing endangerment, provided action is taken before language endangerment becomes too advanced to be reversed. In this context, the interplay between globalisation and deglobalisation points to the importance of local efforts to preserve linguistic and cultural diversity.

**Keywords: minority language endangerment, heritage language maintenance, sociolinguistic landscape, Hakka Chinese**

