

MISTRANSLATIONS

Yes or no

Words for “yes” and “no” do not exist in any Chinese language. The structure of the language is to repeat the verb or adjective of the question in its positive form for yes, and in its negative form for no.

Is that true? *Hye mm hye a*, 係唔係呀?

Yes, it’s true. *Hye a*, 係呀, literally true with a following confirming particle; or

No, it’s not true, *mm hye*, 唔係, literally true with a preceding negative particle.

Reflexive questions in English create particular problems for the native Chinese speaker who is generally unsure whether to answer in the affirmative or the negative since the grammar of the two languages is so different.

For example, “you’re not coming, are you?” “*nay mm hye duck a hor*, 你唔嚟得呀可?” expects the Chinese answer, “yes, I’m not coming.” “*hye ah, ngor mm hye duck* 係呀,我唔嚟得.” In English the expected answer is, “no, I’m not.”

Singular or plural?

Chinese words are not generally pluralised. The context tells the listener if one or more than one is in question. When speaking English as a second language, the idea that a choice must be made whether to use a noun or verb in its singular or plural form is just too hard. Most people default to the Chinese style and use the singular for all purposes.

Masculine or feminine?

The spoken Chinese for he, she, and it, is the same word. The gender of the pronoun is not differentiated and if it sounds odd to hear “Mr Brown’s not here, she went to a meeting” it is just because to a native Chinese speaker the gender of the pronoun is irrelevant.

Just wait

Is a direct translation of *dung ha la*, 等下啦, wait a little please, which is a very polite phrase in Cantonese. The speaker is trying say “I’ll be with you in a moment.”

It can also mean “I’ll take care of it,” “I’ll handle your case in a moment,” “Your problem will be solved momentarily,” or “You don’t have to worry or do anything else.”

As a bald assertion in English, it can easily be taken as sarcastic and quite offensive. There is no such intention and as with many translations the golden rule is give the speaker the benefit of the doubt, Chinese go out of their way to ease life along and if they intended offence you would know about it!

Take your time

A direct translation of *marn marn lye*, 慢慢嚟, there's no rush, do this slowly. Polite in the original Chinese, depending on the circumstances it can be most offensive in English. The speaker may be trying to say that what you are doing is not interfering with him at all; or that if you embark on a particular course of action it will necessitate a large input from you in terms of your time.

This particular mistranslation was the impetus behind this book. Hung used the phrase to reply to a student who had asked how he could speed up learning Chinese. On being told he should take his time, he was so incensed that he wrote to the university and complained. Baillieu knocked over a pile of books in a second-hand bookshop and apologised to a couple who were trying to get past. When told to take her time, her immediate reaction was "who does that arrogant young pup think he is?"

Thank you and excuse me

Both are *mm goy*, 唔該, in Cantonese. They tend to be confused in translation to English.

Large numbers

The system of counting in China is different from the rest of the world. Numbers are still based on the decimal system but the grouping is different. A unit of 10,000 is a common

measurement and any Chinese dealing with foreigners quickly becomes aware that he thinks about numbers differently.

Chinese prefer to avoid any misunderstanding when it comes to figures, so often the basis of business dealings gone wrong. Therefore, to communicate large numbers, figures are reduced to writing and the use of a calculator to display the total is preferred.

In shops, assistants often use a calculator to communicate the price of any and all goods and services. If you wish to suggest a different price, it is quite acceptable to clear the display and put your own numbers on the screen. There is less and less bargaining these days, however, and your offer will not necessarily even be entertained.

Outlook

Generally, when Chinese say “outlook” in English, they mean appearance. This is because the Chinese expression for appearance or façade is “outside look,” *ngoy gwoon*, 外觀.

Talkative

If someone is described as talkative in Chinese, it means that he or she is a people person, someone who enjoys good interpersonal relationships. There is no belittling inference as carried in English where “talkative” is used to mean someone who does not know when to keep quiet. Talkative is likely to be taken and meant as a compliment by Chinese.

CULTURAL ANOMALIES

Dumb insolence – the ‘Mm Jo Mm Chor’ mentality

When a shopkeeper or a doctor’s receptionist, for instance, is asked a question and responds with a blank stare and complete silence, it tends to fray the temper. This reaction stems from the Cantonese saying *dor jo dor chor, seen jo seen chor, mm jo mm chor*, 多做多錯, 少做少錯, 唔做唔錯. Roughly translated this means as the more you do the more mistakes you make, the less you do the fewer mistakes you make; if you do nothing you make no mistakes and this, of course, is not bad.

The *mm chor* of not bad is also used to mean quite good, okay, etc. How is your daughter’s new job? *Mm chor*, quite good!

To most Cantonese, silence is infinitely preferable to admitting to not knowing the answer, or giving information which may be wrong (and risk being held responsible for it). Therefore, to simply ignore a question is a way of avoiding responsibility and/or offering a reply which might turn out to be wrong and thus bring about loss of face.

Imperial
time



Old
days



Upbringing



Meeting



Responsibility is not lightly taken. Another common way of avoiding responsibility is to refer the questioner to another department (especially in Government offices), or to state, “that’s not my responsibility” and resort to silence.

The Chinese smile

A smile from a Cantonese does not necessarily indicate happiness or pleasure, as one might expect from a Western viewpoint. This is also common in Japan, Indonesia, the Philippines, Vietnam, Thailand, and many other Asian countries. It does not extend to northern China where smiles are rare.

A smile is used to soften the blow of bad news. For instance, your boss might smile at you broadly while telling you “you’re sacked.” You are not being laughed at, you are being consoled.

Smiling is also used to hide embarrassment, often with dumb insolence attached. A smile will be hidden behind by someone who does not want to admit a mistake has been made or that a precious article has been broken.

These smilers are not aware of the enormous offence that their well-intentioned smiles can cause and are surprised and often hurt when told to wipe the smiles off their faces.

Baby talk and word stresses

Voice-overs on television advertisements and personal service providers such as masseuses often use baby talk to adults. This is done in an effort to be more polite and friendly, it is not intended to be patronising.



A Westerner may use a higher pitch to indicate excitement or a rising tone to indicate disbelief. Since Cantonese is a tonal language, these indicators are not used as they may change the meaning of the words. Instead, a word it may be drawn out to an exaggerated length to express excitement or have extra syllables added; to express disbelief, an additional particle is added.

That's right, *hye*.

That's definitely right, *hye*. (with an emphatic nod)

That's right! *Hye luk!* (with a hand gesture)

Tell me that's not right! *Hye mair!?* (with head thrust forward)

Media scaremongering

Any news affecting health and diet is treated as a front-page sensational item. The topic also becomes one for casual conversation and if, say, it is discovered that some food product is polluted or has a slightly higher than standard content of a heavy metal, the result is likely to be that the whole town will eschew jellyfish, for instance.

As a result of scaremongering over dim sum and the oiliness of some types, certain selections are now very hard to come by. *Ho Wong Seen Jook Gewn*, 蠔皇鮮竹卷, fried beancurd roll in oyster sauce, for instance, is now generally served in soup – which sounds healthier but in fact the roll is prepared exactly the same way, it is just the replacement of broth for the sauce which gives this impression.

Egg yolks are often now left on the side of the plate for the same reason. The media has told us that they are high in cholesterol and regardless of the frequency with which one might even see egg yolk in the modern Cantonese diet, it is generally left on the plate – even though the dish was chosen for the rich flavour of the egg yolk. Go figure!

In Mainland China, MSG is an expected addition to most dishes and is even served in a bowl, like sugar, to sprinkle on your food to taste. In Hong Kong, however, this is becoming less and less the norm as concern over health issues increases and many restaurants now advertise themselves as MSG-free.

Pointing

Cantonese regularly point at themselves using either the thumb or the forefinger. A different meaning is inherent depending on

which digit is used. The nose is the indicator of self in Cantonese culture, not the heart as in other cultures.

Pointing at oneself with the thumb indicates pride. Yes, I did that, isn't it good! The forefinger covers the rest of the emotions, or is neutral. Yes, it's my turn, I'll take it. Yes, I did it, I'm sorry.

Just as in the West, Cantonese consider it rude to point at others with their index finger.

The little finger is used to belittle or indicate failure in others. Wiggled in the air while saying, "your English is so bad," it emphasises that an insult is intended. It should never be construed as light-hearted.

Thumbs up in Cantonese culture is indicative of excellence. The thumb is raised with the other fingers closed and the whole hand lowered to a sudden stop, rather than the Western habit of lifting the thumb, which conveys much the same meaning.

Umbrellas and walking sticks are commonly used to point at people and this should not be taken as intentionally offensive. It is merely a local habit indicating that the wielder of the weapon is trying to get a point across.

Saying sorry

A salute to the eyebrow is a gesture that means the saluter is sorry. A salute with both hands at once means you are very sorry.

You might be sorry for being late, taking up another's time unnecessarily, or anything at all. It is an admission that you were wrong and wish to make amends.

The road construction sign showing a worker in his helmet performing a double salute means, then, sorry for the inconvenience.

Pulling on both earlobes conveys a serious and heartfelt apology. The story behind this is that, as children, most Cantonese have their ears pulled by their mothers to impress upon them that they

must listen and not again break the rules. The mothers might also require that the children pull their own earlobes, until they hurt, and stand against the wall as a lesson.



Step on one's toes, step on one's chest

Cantonese euphemisms for the invasion of personal space. If someone says you are stepping on his toes or chest, he is probably very upset indeed. It is unusual for Hong Kong people to make such personal comments about another's behaviour and you should take a physical step away.

If a Cantonese asks if he has stepped on your tail, he is asking if he has offended you. The expression should also be taken as apology for unwitting offence.

On the other hand, if you are asked if you mean to shave the questioner's eyebrows, he means that you are not giving him his proper and due respect. If the insult was not intended, apologise immediately.