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Asymmetric Curricular Securitisation: Language Policy and the Patriotic Turn in Hong Kong's Primary Curriculum Reform

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Research Article

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Abstract

This paper examines how Hong Kong's post-2019 ideological turn has been redistributed across the two official written-language subjects in the primary curriculum. Drawing on corpus-assisted critical discourse analysis (CDA), it compares the 2023 Chinese Language Curriculum Guide and the 2025 English Language Curriculum Guide — the first primary-specific English guide, now scope-matched to the Chinese guide (P1–P6). Nine ideological domains, modality profiles, key lexical items, collocations, metaphors, and structural silences are analysed across both corpora (33,794 Chinese characters; 75,262 English words), with a temporal comparison of the 2017 and 2025 English guides. The findings reveal *asymmetric curricular securitisation*: national-security and patriotic vocabulary newly imported into English (national security 0→26; patriotic 0→4), while Chinese embeds ideology substantively through monolithic cultural heritage. Yet the two subjects diverge further on modality — Chinese directive (1:0.69 obligation-to-permission), English enabling (1:2.05) — producing a functional division of labour in which Chinese constructs the national subject and English the global-national subject. Cantonese is fully erased from the 2025 English guide. The paper argues that securitisation enters multilingual curriculum through the heritage language first, then the colonial/global language, and theorises this as a differentiated, language-specific mechanism of policy enactment.

1 Introduction

Hong Kong's "biliterate and trilingual" policy — two written languages (Chinese and English) and three spoken (Cantonese, English, and Putonghua) — has long been presented as a pragmatic accommodation to the territory's colonial history, its global economic function, and its local linguistic ecology. Since 2019, however, this framework has been subject to sustained political reconfiguration. The promulgation of the National Security Law (NSL) in June 2020, the introduction of a Values Education Curriculum Framework in 2021, and the mandating of National Security Education across all subjects from the 2022/23 school year (following the 2021 curriculum framework) have together constituted what may be characterised as a securitising turn in curriculum governance. Curriculum guides, as policy instruments that authorise and constrain what counts as legitimate knowledge in schools, are a privileged site for examining how such an ideological shift is enacted across different school subjects.

A central question for language policy scholarship is whether ideological turns documented in one language subject extend into others — that is, whether securitisation is subject-contained or curriculum-wide. Hong Kong is a diagnostic case: Chinese is the heritage/national language, historically associated with cultural content and national identity, while English is the colonial and global language, associated with cosmopolitan skills and critical thinking. If the post-2019 turn has crossed from Chinese into English, this would indicate that securitisation is redistributed across the curriculum through differentiated language-policy roles.

This paper investigates that question through a corpus-assisted critical discourse analysis (CDA) of the two newest primary curriculum guides: the *Chinese Language Curriculum Guide* (Curriculum Development

Council [CDC], 2023) and the *English Language Curriculum Guide (P1–6)* (CDC, 2025). The 2025 English guide is analytically critical: it is the first primary-only English guide, now scope-matched to the Chinese guide (P1–P6), enabling a level comparison. A temporal comparison with the 2017 English guide further tests whether the ideological turn is emergent. Three research questions guide the study:

1. How are English and Chinese differentially positioned in the 2023/2025 primary curriculum guides, as evidenced by lexical fields, discourse prosodies, and the distribution of ideological domains?
2. What discursive patterns characterise each guide's framing of national identity, values education, and global citizenship — specifically modality, lexicalisation, collocation, metaphor, and silence?
3. Does the post-2019 ideological turn documented in the Chinese subject extend into the English curriculum?

The paper advances the concept of *asymmetric curricular securitisation* to theorise the findings: national ideology is redistributed through differentiated language-policy roles, with Chinese as the substantive national subject and English as a global-national subject onto which a national-security and values layer is grafted. This formulation moves beyond describing "patriotic vocabulary in English" to an account of how curriculum reform enacts securitisation asymmetrically across a multilingual policy regime — a contribution to language-policy theory on the mechanisms by which ideological change travels across school subjects.

The study makes three contributions. Empirically, it provides the first systematic, corpus-assisted comparison of Hong Kong's two latest primary curriculum guides, establishing a replicable framework for cross-linguistic curriculum analysis. Theoretically, it introduces asymmetric curricular securitisation as a mechanism specifying how ideological change is redistributed across subjects according to their symbolic properties. Politically, it shows how a securitising regime operates through routine, differentiated recontextualisation of a shared template rather than overt suppression — with relevance beyond Hong Kong for understanding how nationalist ideology enters multilingual education systems.

The paper is motivated by a broader puzzle in language-policy research: in multilingual education systems where a colonial/global language coexists with a heritage/national language, how does a securitising regime allocate ideological functions across the two? Hong Kong is instructive because the asymmetry between English and Chinese is institutionally entrenched and symbolically loaded: English carries the capital of mobility and cosmopolitan identity; Chinese carries national belonging and cultural legitimacy. When a securitising turn requires both subjects to carry national-security content, the question is not merely *whether* they do, but *how* they do so differently — and this paper argues that the "how" is theoretically more significant than the "whether", revealing securitisation as a differentiated mechanism that exploits the existing symbolic hierarchy of languages.

The paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 situates the study in Hong Kong's language-policy history and the post-2019 securitising turn. Section 3 develops the theoretical framework, integrating corpus-assisted CDA with critical language-policy theory, Bourdieu's symbolic power, and securitisation and banal-nationalism scholarship. Section 4 details the methodology. Section 5 presents the findings

across six analytical threads. Section 6 develops the concept of asymmetric curricular securitisation and its implications for language-policy theory. Section 7 concludes.

2 Language policy, curriculum, and post-2019 Hong Kong

2.1 Curriculum guides as language-policy instruments

Language policy scholarship has increasingly moved beyond the analysis of formal policy texts to examine how policy is enacted, implemented, and resisted across multiple layers of educational practice (Ricento & Hornberger, 1996; Spolsky, 2004). Ricento and Hornberger's (1996) "onion" metaphor frames policy as a multilayered phenomenon — from national macro-policy through institutional mediation to classroom-level interpretation. Curriculum guides occupy a distinctive position within this architecture: produced by state agencies (in Hong Kong, the Curriculum Development Council and Education Bureau) to specify what should be taught, in what language, and with what values, they are policy instruments that authorise particular forms of knowledge and legitimate particular speaker identities (Shohamy, 2006; Tollefson, 1991).

Shohamy (2006) argues that language policies frequently operate through "hidden mechanisms" — including curricula, textbooks, and testing — that naturalise ideological positions without explicit policy declaration. A critical reading of curriculum guides thus attends not only to what is prescribed but to what is omitted, and to how the positioning of languages constructs hierarchies of legitimate language and speakerhood. This study takes curriculum guides as policy texts that construct "regimes of knowledge" about legitimate language, culture, and learner identity.

It is important to distinguish the present analytical level from that of classroom practice. Curriculum guides mediate between macro-level policy (laws, frameworks) and micro-level enactment (teachers, learners, classrooms): they authorise and constrain practice by specifying legitimate content, legitimate language, and legitimate pedagogic stance. The claims in this paper are accordingly bounded: they concern how the policy text *constructs* curricular reality, not how that construction is received or resisted in schools, though Section 6 returns to its implications for enactment.

2.2 Hong Kong's language-policy history

Hong Kong's language ecology has been shaped by its colonial history and its post-1997 reintegration with China. English, inherited from colonial rule, retains high symbolic capital as the language of global commerce, higher education, and social mobility (Bourdieu, 1991; Bolton, 2003). Written Chinese, in its standard form, is the national language; Putonghua is its spoken standard. Cantonese, the vernacular home language of the majority of Hong Kong's ethnic Chinese population, occupies an ambiguous position — widely spoken but largely unwritten in formal domains and absent from the "biliterate" framing (Poon, 2019). This hierarchy produces what Phillipson (1992) would recognise as an unequal linguistic order, but one inflected by a postcolonial rather than simply colonial dynamic: English is

simultaneously an instrument of global competitiveness and a residue of colonial power, while Chinese□ □ (bears) the weight of national-cultural legitimacy.

The biliterate-trilingual policy, formally articulated in the 1990s and refined since, has always encoded a functional division: English for global/economic functions, Chinese for cultural and national functions, Cantonese for vernacular/community life (Poon, 2019). Its apparently neutral, pragmatic framing — "two written, three spoken" — obscures an underlying hierarchy in which English commands the greatest symbolic capital, written Chinese commands national-cultural legitimacy, and Cantonese, the daily language of the majority, is confined to unofficial domains and excluded from the biliterate frame entirely (Bolton, 2003; Poon, 2019). What is distinctive about the post-2019 period is the politicisation of this division. The 2012 Moral and National Education controversy — a failed attempt to introduce a patriotic national-education subject — demonstrated that overtly nationalistic curriculum reform was politically contested and could be resisted through mass public mobilisation. The post-NSL environment, by contrast, has enabled a more pervasive and less contested integration of national-security and patriotic content across *all* subjects, rather than through a standalone subject vulnerable to public opposition — a shift from a discrete, contestable subject to a distributed, curriculum-wide frame that relocates ideological content into the routine fabric of every subject's guidance, where it is harder to isolate and oppose. A recent review likewise shows that Hong Kong's English-language education is shaped by interacting political, economic and educational agendas rather than by pedagogy alone (Lau, 2020).

2.3 The securitising turn

The National Security Law (2020) and the subsequent National Security Education framework (Education Bureau, 2021a) mandate that national-security content be integrated across the curriculum rather than confined to a single subject. This represents a securitising move in the sense developed by Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde (1998): an issue is presented as an existential threat requiring extraordinary measures, thereby moving it beyond ordinary political contestation. In the curriculum, securitisation operates not through explicit threat discourse but through the routine normalisation of national-security vocabulary, patriotic values, and prescribed national identity across pedagogic content. Billig's (1995) concept of *banal nationalism* is instructive here: nationalism is reproduced not only through overt patriotic slogans but through the routine, barely noticed language of everyday institutional life — including the lexical choices, metaphors, and silences of curriculum documents. A critical reading of how securitisation enters curriculum must therefore attend to the mundane and the absent as much as the explicit.

The Values Education Curriculum Framework (Education Bureau, 2021b) introduced seven priority values — including "national identity" and "law-abidingness" — that now structure content across subjects. The Chinese guide was revised in 2023 and the English guide in 2025; both are now primary-specific (P1–P6). The English revision is the analytically critical case: if the ideological turn documented in Chinese has extended into the English subject — the colonial, global, cosmopolitan language — then securitisation is curriculum-wide rather than subject-contained. The seven priority values and the Generic Skills framework constitute a shared template that runs through both guides, providing a common

organisational spine; what differs is how the ideological substance is inflected through each language's symbolic and pedagogical properties. It is this differentiation — not the shared template — that the analysis seeks to illuminate.

3 Theoretical framework

3.1 Corpus-assisted critical discourse analysis

The study employs corpus-assisted CDA, combining the systematic, replicable pattern-finding of corpus linguistics with the interpretive, socially situated reading of critical discourse studies (Baker et al., 2008; Wodak & Meyer, 2016). Corpus methods — keyword analysis, collocation, concordancing, and frequency profiling — provide empirical purchase on large text volumes that manual reading cannot reliably survey, while CDA provides the theoretical lens to read quantitative patterns as ideologically meaningful (Fairclough, 1992; van Dijk, 1998). Baker et al. (2008) argue this synergy mitigates each approach's weaknesses: corpus methods counter CDA's tendency toward cherry-picking, while CDA counters corpus linguistics' tendency toward decontextualised description.

Five CDA dimensions structure the analysis: *lexicalisation* (how concepts are named and thereby framed), *modality* (how obligation and permission distribute authority), *metaphor* (how conceptual frames construct social actors and processes), *silences* (what is systematically absent), and *appraisal* (how evaluation is managed) (Martin & White, 2005; van Dijk, 1998). The analytical move is to read quantitative corpus findings — frequency distributions, collocational profiles, modality ratios — as traces of ideological positioning.

3.2 Language policy and symbolic power

The interpretive framework draws on critical language-policy theory. Tollefson (1991) and Shohamy (2006) frame language policy as a mechanism through which unequal social relations are produced and naturalised; Pennycook (1998) extends this to the postcolonial dynamics of English, showing how the global spread of English is entangled with colonial and neo-colonial power. For Hong Kong, Poon (2019) provides the specific account of the biliterate-trilingual policy's operation in primary schooling. These perspectives direct attention to how curriculum language constructs differentiated value for English, Chinese, Putonghua, and Cantonese — a hierarchy Bourdieu (1991) theorises as the distribution of *symbolic capital*, in which languages and varieties carry unequal social value that is misrecognised as natural rather than politically produced.

Bourdieu's framework is particularly apt for the present analysis because it explains why English and Chinese carry different ideological loads despite being subject to the same curriculum template. English, as the language of global capital, accumulates symbolic capital through mobility, skills, and criticality; Chinese accumulates it through cultural legitimacy and national belonging. The same securitising content, grafted onto these asymmetrical symbolic foundations, is textually inflected in different ways — a dynamic the concept of asymmetric curricular securitisation is designed to capture, without inferring

the effects such inflection may or may not have on readers. Symbolic capital is not fixed but continuously (re)negotiated through use: when the English guide imports national-security vocabulary, it reconfigures the symbolic economy in which English operates, binding its cosmopolitan capital to a national-security frame.

3.3 Securitisation, nationalism, and legitimate speakerhood

To theorise the ideological turn, the study integrates three further resources. Buzan et al.'s (1998) securitisation framework provides the conceptual vocabulary for understanding how national-security discourse moves issues beyond ordinary political contestation; applied to curriculum, it illuminates how securitising content is normalised across subjects rather than debated. In the Hong Kong curriculum, national security is not presented as a constant emergency but as a routine theme integrated across all subjects — a process of security rather than a single securitising speech act. The curriculum guides are one site where this occurs: they recast national security as pedagogic content, moving it from political debate to routine educational practice.

Billig's (1995) banal nationalism directs attention to the routine, unnoticed reproduction of national frames through curriculum language — not only explicit patriotic content but the absence of alternatives. Nationalism, for Billig, is reproduced not through flag-waving but through the mundane, daily habits of language that construct the nation as a natural, taken-for-granted frame. Curriculum guides are prime sites of banal nationalism: they construct the nation through routine lexical choices (□□□□ as a default, unmarked category), metaphor (cultivation as a natural process), and silence (the absence of Cantonese, democracy, rights). Attending to these routine features is essential for understanding how securitisation operates without appearing to do so.

Kachru's (1985) World Englishes framework situates the "global English" side of the division: English in Hong Kong is not simply a foreign language but a postcolonial variety occupying what Kachru would call the Outer Circle — one that has developed local norms and functions through colonial and postcolonial history. This framing matters because the English curriculum guide is shaping a local variety with its own history of colonial and postcolonial power, not simply importing an external, global language. The grafting of national-security vocabulary onto English-language pedagogy is therefore an intervention in the symbolic economy of a postcolonial language, reconfiguring the relationship between English's cosmopolitan capital and its national-security framing.

Together, these resources enable the paper to read the curriculum guides as constructing two legitimate learner-speaker figures: the Chinese national subject (cultivated, morally formed, nationally identified) and the English-speaking global-national subject (skilled, agentic, cosmopolitan yet nationally secured). The erasure of Cantonese, Hongkonger identity, and rights-based vocabulary is read not as incidental absence but as a constitutive feature of this speakerhood regime — the production of legitimate language and legitimate speakers through the management of what can and cannot be named.

The integration of these resources is deliberate rather than eclectic. Each addresses a different analytical question: corpus-assisted CDA asks *what* the textual patterns are; critical language-policy theory asks *how* those patterns function as policy instruments producing unequal speakerhood; Bourdieu asks *why* the same content produces different effects across languages; and the securitisation/nationalism scholarship asks *what kind* of ideological process is underway. Section 6 synthesises these into a single theoretical claim about the mechanism by which ideological change travels across a multilingual curriculum.

4 Methodology

4.1 Data

The study analyses two primary curriculum guides published by the Curriculum Development Council (CDC) of the Hong Kong Education Bureau:

- **Document A**: *Chinese Language Curriculum Guide (P1–P6)* (CDC, 2023), 67 pages, approximately 33,794 Chinese characters, in Traditional Chinese.
- **Document B**: *English Language Curriculum Guide (P1–P6)* (CDC, 2025), 290 pages, approximately 75,262 English words.

The 2025 English guide is the first primary-only English curriculum guide; previously, English guidance spanned primary and secondary levels. This revision makes the English guide scope-matched to the Chinese guide (both P1–P6), enabling a level comparison that was not previously possible. A third document — the 2017 English Language curriculum guidance (CDC, 2017) — is used for the temporal comparison (Research Question 3) to determine whether the ideological turn is emergent in English.

4.2 Corpus construction and preprocessing

Both guides were obtained as published PDF documents. Text was extracted using pdfplumber (Python), with manual verification of segmentation against the source documents. For the Chinese corpus, segmentation was performed using a dictionary-based approach supplemented by manual review, yielding character-level tokenisation. For the English corpus, standard whitespace tokenisation was applied using the Natural Language Toolkit (NLTK). Because the two corpora differ substantially in size and operate in different writing systems, all frequency comparisons are normalised per 10,000 tokens (characters for Chinese, words for English).

A methodological caveat is necessary: comparing Chinese characters with English words is not a like-for-like comparison, since a single Chinese character may correspond to a morpheme or word, and ideological concepts are often expressed through multi-character compounds (e.g., □□□□ “national security” comprises four characters but one semantic unit). Normalisation is therefore a heuristic permitting relative *density* comparison rather than a claim of semantic equivalence. Where semantic comparison matters (e.g., “critical thinking”), translation equivalents are identified and compared

qualitatively via collocation and distributional profiles — the qualitative analysis providing interpretive depth that frequency alone cannot deliver.

The extraction process involved three quality-control steps. First, the extracted text was checked against the source PDFs page by page for a random 10% sample, with no significant extraction errors found. Second, tables and diagrams were excluded from the token count to avoid inflating frequencies with structural text. Third, for the Chinese guide, which contains both Simplified and Traditional characters in the source PDF (a known issue in government publications), all text was normalised to Traditional characters using the OpenCC library, consistent with the guide's official language. The English guide required no such normalisation but was checked for hyphenation artefacts from PDF extraction, which were resolved using a hyphenation-joining script.

4.3 Analytical procedures

Corpus analysis was conducted using AntConc (for keyword, collocation, cluster, and concordance analysis) and AntWordProfiler (for frequency profiling), supplemented by custom Python scripts for domain-frequency extraction. Nine ideological domains were derived inductively from a close reading of both guides and refined through keyword analysis: standardisation, instrumentalism, critical thinking/agency, cultural heritage, moral/values education, national identity, global citizenship, equity/inclusion, and future/lifelong learning. A keyword dictionary was developed for each domain in both languages, with items validated through concordance checking to ensure they carried the intended semantic load in context. Global citizenship was added as a ninth domain following the pilot reading, as it emerged as a salient but analytically distinct orientation from national identity.

The domain construction followed a grounded procedure. The first reading of both guides yielded an initial list of approximately 120 candidate items, which were then grouped thematically and refined through keyword-in-context (KWIC) analysis: items that did not consistently carry the intended ideological load in context were excluded or recoded. The resulting nine-domain dictionary comprises, in total, 89 Chinese keyword items and 94 English keyword items, each mapped to one of the nine domains. The full keyword dictionary is available from the corresponding author on reasonable request to facilitate replication.

Modality was coded by identifying all tokens of obligation (English: *must, shall, should*; Chinese: □□, □, □) and permission (English: *can, may, allow, enable*; Chinese: □, □) markers, with concordance verification to exclude non-modal uses. An obligation-to-permission ratio was computed for each guide as a summary measure of directive versus enabling stance. Collocational analysis used a span of ± 5 tokens with mutual information thresholds. CDA readings of lexicalisation, metaphor, and silence were developed through iterative concordance inspection and cross-document comparison.

The analysis proceeded in three phases. In Phase 1, frequency profiles and domain-density tables were generated for both guides, providing the quantitative overview. In Phase 2, concordance analysis was used to examine the contexts of key terms — for example, all instances of "national security" in the

English guide were inspected in context to determine whether the term carried pedagogical or ideological force. In Phase 3, the findings were interpreted through the theoretical framework developed in Section 3, with particular attention to the asymmetries between the two guides and their implications for the concept of asymmetric curricular securitisation. This phased design ensured that quantitative patterns were not simply reported but interrogated for their discursive significance.

4.4 Reliability and limitations

The study employs a single primary coder; inter-coder reliability was not formally computed, a limitation mitigated by reporting exact counts and normalised values, providing concordance examples for interpretive readings, and documenting the domain keyword dictionary to permit replication. The analysis is confined to the policy text itself: it makes claims about how the curriculum guides *construct* learner identities and ideological positions, not about how they are *enacted* in classrooms. This boundary — curricular discourse as policy text, not pedagogical practice — is maintained throughout.

A further limitation concerns the scope of the document analysis: the study examines the curriculum guides but not the textbooks, teaching materials, or assessment instruments that operationalise them. These materials may amplify or moderate the ideological patterns identified here; future research should extend the corpus-assisted CDA approach to them to test whether the asymmetries identified at the guide level persist, intensify, or are mediated at the level of implementation.

The cross-linguistic comparison itself presents a limitation. Normalising Chinese characters and English words to the same per-10,000 scale permits relative density comparison but does not ensure that the counted items carry equivalent semantic weight; a Chinese two-character compound and an English two-word phrase may index the same concept but be counted differently. The domain-dictionary approach mitigates this by ensuring comparable item sets in both languages, but normalised frequencies should be read as indicative of relative density rather than precise equivalence. The qualitative concordance and collocation analysis provides the interpretive check that quantitative normalisation alone cannot.

A further limitation concerns the representativeness of two documents for a curriculum system with many ancillary materials. The guides are, however, the authoritative policy instruments that frame those materials, so their analysis is a necessary step in understanding curriculum-level language policy. A final note concerns translation: Chinese terms are glossed with English approximations, but these glosses are analytical tools rather than semantic equivalents. Where a term's connotative range matters — as with □□ versus *critical thinking*, or □□□□ versus *careful deliberation* — the discussion foregrounds the non-equivalence rather than treating the terms as interchangeable.

5 Findings (Appendices I-IV for the sample raw data will be provided upon reasonable request)

5.1 Ideological domain distribution

Table 1 presents the normalised frequency (per 10,000 tokens) of nine ideological domains across both guides. Several contrasts are striking.

Table 1
Normalised ideological domain distribution (per 10,000 tokens)

Domain	Chi 2023	ELE 2025	Ratio
Standardisation	105.6	44.4	Chi 2.4×
Instrumentalism	119.8	172.7	ELE 1.4×
Critical thinking/agency	48.5	47.3	≈ equal
Cultural heritage	27.8	4.1	Chi 6.8×
Moral/values education	32.6	39.3	ELE 1.2×
National identity	22.5	17.7	Chi 1.3×
Global citizenship	14.5	13.4	≈ equal
Equity/inclusion	0.9	16.7	ELE 18.6×
Future/lifelong learning	27.8	65.5	ELE 2.4×

Figure 1. Ideological domain density (per 10,000 tokens) across nine domains, comparing the 2023 Chinese and 2025 English curriculum guides.

Three patterns warrant interpretive attention. First, the *standardisation gap*: the Chinese guide deploys prescriptive and standardisation markers at 2.4 times the density of the English guide (105.6 vs 44.4 per 10,000). This gap has narrowed from approximately 5× in a comparison with the 2017 English guide, but Chinese remains substantially more prescriptive in its orientation. The standardisation vocabulary in the Chinese guide includes □□ (standard, normative), □□ (guideline), and □□ (unified), which collectively construct a pedagogic field in which correct language use is a matter of conforming to externally prescribed norms. The English guide's standardisation vocabulary — *standard, appropriate, correct* — is comparatively thinner and frames correctness through pragmatic appropriateness rather than prescriptive uniformity. The gap's narrowing over time, however, suggests that the English guide is not immune to the prescriptive turn; it is simply lagging behind the Chinese guide in density rather than resisting it qualitatively.

Second, the *critical-thinking convergence*: the two guides show near-equal density of critical-thinking/agency markers (48.5 vs 47.3), yet the lexicalisation is sharply asymmetric. The English guide uses the phrase *critical thinking* 29 times; the Chinese guide never uses □□ (the direct translation, connoting "critique" or "judgement"), instead substituting □□□□ (careful deliberation) and □□ (inquiry) — terms that carry Confucian-inflected connotations of reflective judgement rather than adversarial critique. Comparable density, then, masks divergent ideological lexicalisation. This is a finding with methodological as well as substantive significance: it demonstrates that normalised frequency

comparisons, while useful, can obscure qualitative differences that only concordance-level analysis can reveal. The two guides appear to value “critical thinking” equally; in fact, they construct two different intellectual virtues under the same analytical label.

The divergent lexicalisation of critical thinking also carries political significance. The English guide’s *critical thinking* is embedded in a liberal-pedagogical tradition that values questioning, evidence evaluation, and independent judgement; the Chinese guide’s □□□□ is embedded in a Confucian tradition that values reflective deliberation, moral discernment, and the harmonious integration of thought and conduct. Neither tradition is inherently more “critical” than the other, but they construct different relationships between the learner and authority: the English tradition authorises the student to question received knowledge; the Chinese tradition authorises the student to internalise and embody moral principles through careful reflection. In the context of a securitising curriculum environment, this difference matters: the English guide’s critical thinking carries the potential to question national-security framings (though the newly grafted values layer constrains this potential), while the Chinese guide’s reflective deliberation is more readily compatible with the cultivation of national identification.

Third, equity/inclusion produces the largest proportional gap in Table 1. The English guide records 126 tokens across the domain, equivalent to 16.7 per 10,000 words, whereas the Chinese guide records 3, or 0.9 per 10,000 characters. On the study’s stated normalisation, the English density is therefore 18.6 times the Chinese density (16.7 ÷ 0.9, rounded). The English guide repeatedly names *inclusion, learner diversity, special educational needs* and *access*, while the Chinese guide gives learner difference only marginal textual visibility. The contrast does not establish classroom enactment, and the character–word denominator prevents exact semantic equivalence. It does show that differentiated learner need is far more salient in the English policy text. The gap therefore separates a learner whose needs are explicitly differentiated and accommodated from one addressed largely as a collective object of cultivation, echoing concerns that language access becomes inequitable when intersecting needs remain unnamed in policy (Cioè-Peña et al., 2025).

The *cultural heritage* domain further illustrates this pattern of asymmetry. The Chinese guide’s density (27.8 per 10,000) is 6.8 times that of the English guide (4.1), reflecting the substantive embedding of cultural content in Chinese — □□□□ (Chinese culture) appears 52 times, frequently preceded by □□ (excellent). The English guide’s thin cultural-heritage density is not an absence of culture per se but a different framing: culture is relativised through *different, diverse, intercultural* rather than substantively specified as national heritage. The instrumentalism domain reverses this: the English guide is denser (172.7 vs 119.8), reflecting its stronger framing of language as a tool for global competitiveness, twenty-first-century skills, and future readiness. These inversions confirm that the two guides are not simply “more” or “less” ideological in aggregate but distribute their ideological investments across different domains according to the symbolic properties of each language. The moral/values domain (Chi 32.6 vs ELE 39.3 per 10,000) is the one domain of near-parity, reflecting the shared Values Education framework. However, even here the lexicalisation diverges: the Chinese guide’s moral vocabulary is anchored in □□ (moral character), □□□ (values), and □□ (positive), constructing morality as a matter of character formation

through cultural immersion; the English guide's moral vocabulary includes *values, attitudes, responsibility*, constructing morality as a matter of individual disposition and civic obligation. The national-identity domain (Chi 22.5 vs ELE17.7) is notable for the English guide's higher density — a finding that, as Section 5.5 elaborates, complicates the assumption that English is the "less national" subject.

5.2 Modality: directive versus enabling

The modality analysis reveals a further and widening divergence. Table 2 reports obligation and permission markers and their ratio.

Table 2
Modality profile: obligation and permission

Obligation markers	**Chi 2023**	**ELE 2025**	**ELE 2017**
	256	**300**	**—**
Permission markers	177	614	—
Obligation:Permission ratio	1:0.69	1:2.05	1:1.91

Figure 2. Modality profiles comparing obligation and permission markers across the Chinese 2023, English 2017, and English 2025 guides. Panel (a) shows raw token counts; panel (b) shows the obligation-to-permission ratio.

The Chinese guide is *directive* (1:0.69): obligation markers outnumber permission markers, producing a deontic stance dense with □□ (must) and □ (shall). The English guide is *enabling* (1:2.05): permission markers — dominated by *can* (457 tokens) and *may* (157) — substantially outnumber obligation markers. Critically, this gap has *widened* over time: the 2025 English guide is more enabling (1:2.05) than the 2017 guide (1:1.91), while Chinese remains directive. The two subjects are diverging further on modality, not converging.

This finding is consequential for the securitisation argument. The English guide is becoming *more* pedagogically permissive at precisely the moment it imports national-security vocabulary. The ideological layer is grafted onto — not substituted for — an enabling, skills-based pedagogy. This produces the distinctive surface of the English guide: a permissive, agentic register that nonetheless incorporates a national-security and values frame. The tension between permissive surface and narrowing ideological horizon is central to the concept of asymmetric curricular securitisation developed below.

It is worth dwelling on the modality *can*, which appears 457 times in the English guide — more than any other modal. Its dominance constructs a pedagogic world in which students *can* develop, *can* explore, *can* communicate: agency is the grammatical default. By contrast, the Chinese guide's modality is anchored in □ (should, 160 tokens) and □□/□ (must/shall, 40 tokens combined), constructing a world in which students are subject to obligation and prescription. The divergence in modality is therefore not

merely a stylistic difference but a difference in the *deontic architecture* of each subject — the distribution of authority, permission, and agency that the curriculum text constructs. That these architectures are diverging further over time, even as the two guides converge on national-security vocabulary, is the empirical heart of the asymmetry claim: convergence in content, divergence in stance.

5.3 Key lexical evidence

Table 3 presents salient lexical contrasts across the two 2023/2025 guides.

Table 3
Key lexical evidence: Chi 2023 vs ELE 2025

Concept	Chi 2023	ELE 2025	Interpretive reading
Students/learners	□□ 534	students 1360	ELE foregrounds learners more strongly
Critical thinking	□□ 0; □□□□+□□	critical thinking 29	Comparable density, different lexicon
National identity	□□□□□□ 2	national identity 10	Identity frame now explicit in both
National security	0	national security 26	New securitisation layer in ELE
Equity/inclusion	□□ 1; SEN 0	learner diversity 14; SEN 4	ELE names learner difference
Cantonese	□□ 1	Cantonese 0	Vernacular largely erased
Chinese culture	□□□□ 52	Chinese culture 2	Chi substantive; ELE thin/framed

The temporal comparison (Table 4) establishes that the national-security and patriotic vocabulary in the 2025 English guide is *emergent* — every term was absent in the 2017 guide.

Table 4
ELE 2017 → 2025: emergent and disappearing markers

Marker	2017	2025	Shift
national security	0	26	+ 26
national education	0	5	+ 5
patriotic	0	4	+ 4
law-abidingness	0	3	+ 3
filial (piety)	0	3	+ 3
Cantonese	5	0	−5

Figure 3. Emergent and disappearing markers in the English Language Curriculum Guide, 2017 to 2025. Blue bars indicate vocabulary newly imported; terracotta bars indicate vocabulary erased.

The English guide thus retains its critical, enabling lexical vocabulary while importing a national-security and patriotic layer — alongside the erasure of Cantonese, which dropped from five occurrences in 2017 to zero in 2025. A previous comparison of the 2023 Chinese guide with the 2017 English guide predicted that a future English-guide revision would be the test case for whether the ideological turn extends across the whole curriculum. The 2025 guide provides that confirmation: it has extended.

Two features of the emergent vocabulary merit emphasis. First, the imported terms are not organic to the English-subject register — *law-abidingness* and *filial piety* are not standard English-as-a-foreign-language vocabulary. Their presence signals an ideological incursion rather than a pedagogic evolution. *Filial piety*, in particular, is a culturally specific concept derived from Confucian ethics; its appearance in an English-language curriculum guide is consistent with the transfer of Chinese-cultural content into the English subject — a pattern that, on the present evidence, is suggestive of a heritage-to-colonial-language sequence rather than confirmed by it. Second, the simultaneous disappearance of Cantonese (5→0) co-occurs with the patriotic-vocabulary appearance; read together, the erasure of the local vernacular and the inscription of national vocabulary can be read as two aspects of the same textual reconfiguration of what the English guide considers a legitimate object of attention. What is added (national security, patriotism) and what is removed (Cantonese) together redraw the boundary of the "sayable" within the English subject.

A closer inspection of the 26 occurrences of *national security* in the 2025 English guide reveals that the term appears predominantly in the Values Education strand and in introductory framing sections rather than distributed throughout the pedagogic content. This distributional pattern supports the characterisation of the national-security layer as a frame — wrapping around the guide — rather than as a substance integrated into every aspect of English-language pedagogy. In the Chinese guide, by contrast, national-cultural content is woven into the pedagogic fabric itself: it appears in reading lists, writing tasks, and speaking contexts, not only in framing sections. This distributional difference is a further empirical warrant for the distinction between substantive and framed securitisation.

5.4 Collocation and metaphor: how each guide constructs culture and students

Collocational analysis reveals how each guide constructs its central objects. In the Chinese guide, □□ (culture) collocates overwhelmingly with □□ (Chinese; 15 collocations) and is frequently preceded by □□ (excellent; □□□□□□ appears 7 times), producing a monolithic, pre-emptively valorised framing of culture as national heritage to be absorbed. Students (□□) collocate predominantly with □□ (cultivate; 123 collocations), constructing students as *objects of cultivation*.

In the English guide, *culture* collocates with *different, other, intercultural, diverse* — a pluralistic, relativised framing — and *students* collocate with *develop, use, explore*, constructing students as *agents of activity*. The metaphor systems diverge accordingly: the Chinese guide deploys container/accumulation metaphors (□□, "build up," 26 times; □□, "foundation," 40 times) and nurturing/cultivation metaphors (□□, "cultivate," 12 times), organised in vertical, top-down structures; the English guide deploys

journey/progression metaphors (*progression, pathway*) and network/connectivity metaphors (*link, connect, integrate*), organised laterally.

The same ideological apparatus, then, is embedded in different pedagogical surfaces: cultivation and containment in Chinese; agency and journey in English. Chinese frames students as passive recipients of institutional cultivation; English frames them as active agents who develop, explore, and use language. These metaphor systems are not merely stylistic choices but encode fundamentally different conceptions of the learner–knowledge relationship: in the Chinese guide, knowledge is transmitted downward, accumulated, and internalised; in the English guide, knowledge is constructed through activity, connected across domains, and used as a tool. The same child, moving between subjects, thus encounters two different epistemological models — one vertical and absorptive, the other lateral and instrumental — even as both are framed by the same national-values template.

This collocational divergence has implications for how ideology may be textually positioned in each subject. Because the Chinese guide constructs students as objects of cultivation, the national-cultural content it embeds is textually framed as the substance of their formation — the very material of who they are to become. Because the English guide constructs students as agents, the national-security layer it grafts on is textually framed as a frame around their activity — though how students actually experience or take up this positioning remains an open empirical question beyond the scope of document analysis. The same ideological content, in other words, is textually positioned differently in relation to the envisaged learner depending on the metaphor system through which it is delivered. This is a further dimension of the asymmetry: not only what is said, but how the student's relation to what is said is constructed.

5.5 National versus global orientation

Both guides orient more national than global, but the difference is modest. By proportion, the Chinese guide is 60.8% national and 39.2% global (N = 234 orientation markers); the English guide is 56.8% national and 43.2% global (N = 125). By normalised density, the Chinese guide carries more national-identity markers than the English guide (22.5 per 10,000 characters vs 17.7 per 10,000 words), while global orientation is comparable (14.5 vs 13.4). The English guide is therefore less national in this domain by normalised density; its significance lies instead in the explicit national-security layer and its enabling framing. The two orientations — national and global — are not in zero-sum opposition in either guide but are held in a productive tension that the functional division of labour (Section 6) makes legible.

This finding complicates a common assumption in language-policy research that the heritage language is the vehicle of nationalism and the colonial language the vehicle of globalisation (Poon, 2013; Tsui et al., 1999). Table 1 shows that the Chinese guide has the higher national-identity density, but the English guide nonetheless incorporates national-security and national-identity vocabulary through a more pluralistic, enabling lexicon. What differs is both quantity and discursive quality: national orientation remains denser in Chinese, while in English it appears as a framed layer within an otherwise cosmopolitan pedagogy — central to the argument that securitisation is asymmetric rather than uniform.

5.6 Critical silences

CDA attends to what is systematically absent as much as what is present. Six contested terms appear zero times in both guides, in both time points: democracy (□□), human rights (□□), gender (□□), race/ethnicity (□□), colonial (□□), and Hongkonger (□□□). Cantonese (□□) appears once in the Chinese guide and is fully absent from the 2025 English guide (down from five in 2017), while Putonghua appears five times in the Chinese guide. These silences are stable across both subjects and both years, constituting a consistent structural absence on contested political vocabulary.

Following Billig (1995), these are not mere gaps but a form of banal nationalism: the curriculum reproduces a political frame not by asserting its alternatives as illegitimate but by routinely not naming them. The consistent absence of rights-based and identity-based vocabulary across both languages and both time points indicates that the securitising frame is not a recent imposition but a deep structural feature of the curriculum regime, intensified — not initiated — by the post-2019 reforms.

The Cantonese erasure deserves particular attention. Cantonese appears once in the Chinese guide (□□, 1 token) and not at all in the 2025 English guide, where it had appeared five times in 2017. Putonghua, by contrast, appears five times in the Chinese guide. The vernacular language of the majority of Hong Kong's population is thus present only as a marginal, near-invisible category in the Chinese guide and has been eliminated entirely from the English guide. While intent cannot be established from document analysis alone, this patterned omission is consistent with a structural feature of the biliterate-trilingual regime's hierarchy: Cantonese, lacking official written status, is the language that the policy frame can most readily omit. Its erasure from the English guide's 2025 revision — co-occurring with the addition of national-security vocabulary — is consistent with a textual reconfiguration in which the local is removed as the national is inscribed. Earlier work similarly connects Putonghua expansion with competing economic and identity projects in Hong Kong schools (Davison & Lai, 2007; Tam, 2012).

6 Discussion: asymmetric curricular securitisation

6.1 The functional division of labour

The findings support the concept of *asymmetric curricular securitisation*. National ideology has crossed into the English subject — confirmed by the emergent national-security and patriotic vocabulary (Tables 3 and 4). But the convergence is asymmetric: English imports Chinese-framed vocabulary, not the reverse. More precisely, the two subjects perform a functional division of labour in how they enact the ideological turn.

Chinese is the *substantive* national subject: ideology is embedded in the cultural content itself — □□□□ as monolithic heritage, dense obligation modality, cultivation metaphors, and the explicit naming of □□□□□□ (national identity) as a curriculum priority. English is the *framed and bolted-on* global-national subject: a national-security and values layer is wrapped around an otherwise enabling, skills-based pedagogy.

English preserves its enabling modality (1:2.05), its critical-thinking vocabulary (29 tokens), its learner-diversity provision (14 tokens), and its journey/network metaphors — and grafts national security (26 tokens) and patriotic vocabulary onto this surface.

This asymmetry is theoretically significant. It demonstrates that securitisation does not produce ideological uniformity across subjects; it produces *differentiated language-policy roles*. The same template — the shared CDC voice, seven priority values, and Generic Skills framework — is inflected differently through the symbolic economies of each language. Bourdieu's (1991) account of symbolic capital explains why: English and Chinese carry different accumulated symbolic value, so the same securitising content acquires different ideological force when grafted onto each. In Chinese, national ideology appears as the natural substance of cultural belonging; in English, it appears as an added, somewhat foreign layer wrapped around a cosmopolitan, agentic pedagogy.

The asymmetry also has a temporal dimension that the 2017–2025 comparison illuminates. The English guide's modality has become *more* enabling over time (1:1.91 → 1:2.05), even as it has imported national-security vocabulary (0 → 26 tokens). These two trajectories — increasing permissiveness and increasing securitisation — are not contradictory but complementary: the enabling surface is textually associated with a less conspicuous positioning of the securitising layer; whether this in turn makes the content more palatable or naturalised to readers is a question for reception-level research beyond this study's scope. A directive, prescriptive English guide that suddenly introduced national-security vocabulary would be conspicuous; an enabling, permissive guide that introduces it as one component among many in a skills-rich curriculum makes the same content appear as a natural extension of an already pluralistic pedagogy. This is the layered quality of asymmetric securitisation: the ideological layer is most effective when it is grafted onto a surface that does not appear ideological.

6.2 Two legitimate speaker figures

Read through the lens of legitimate language and speakerhood, the guides construct two legitimate learner figures. The Chinese national subject is a cultivated moral person, nationally identified, oriented to monolithic cultural heritage, and positioned as the object of top-down institutional formation. The English-speaking global-national subject is a skilled, agentic, cosmopolitan learner — oriented to cross-cultural communication and global competitiveness — who is nonetheless nested within a national-security framework and expected to internalise "proper values." The guides thus make available *asymmetrical learner subject-positions* — a global-competitor position through English and a national-subject position through Chinese — though how, or whether, students take up these positions cannot be determined from curriculum text alone. Research with international students in multilingual Hong Kong likewise shows that English-only ideologies are negotiated rather than simply accepted (Sung, 2022).

These two figures are not equally available to all students. The English-speaking global-national subject presupposes access to English-medium environments, international exposure, and the cultural capital to navigate cosmopolitan identity; the Chinese national subject presupposes identification with a monolithic formulation of Chinese culture that may exclude Cantonese-speaking, ethnically non-Chinese,

or bicultural students. The guides thus construct not only differentiated but *stratified* speakerhood: some students are better positioned to inhabit the legitimate figures each subject constructs than others. This stratification is particularly acute in Hong Kong's linguistically diverse classrooms, where non-Chinese-speaking students are required to learn Chinese as a second language while being addressed as national subjects through a guide that assumes Chinese-cultural belonging as the default. This extends evidence that Hong Kong's language-medium choices distribute status, opportunity and identity unevenly (Tse et al., 2007; Wong et al., 2025). Related work shows that South Asian families' limited access to Chinese and local educational knowledge can constrain children's opportunities (Gu & Han, 2021). Perceived accentedness in English and Mandarin is also tied in complex ways to Chinese and Hong Kong identification (Leung & Lee, 2024).

This dual subjectification aligns with Hong Kong's post-2019 political positioning, which requires both global economic competitiveness (served by English) and national allegiance (served by Chinese). The functional division of labour is not an accident of curriculum design but a policy logic that allocates ideological functions across languages according to their symbolic properties — a logic Tollefson (1991) and Shohamy (2006) would recognise as the production of inequality through apparently neutral language-policy instruments.

The dual subjectification also raises questions about curriculum coherence. If students are agentic, cosmopolitan, inclusive learners in English but cultivated, nationally identified, collectively addressed subjects in Chinese, the curriculum presents a bifurcated rather than unified learner identity. Whether this is experienced as tension, complementarity, or fragmentation requires classroom-level data — beyond this study's scope but flagged for future research. The policy text, at minimum, constructs a curriculum in which the learner's relationship to nation, culture, and authority is allocated according to the language of instruction — the mechanism, as the next section argues, through which securitisation operates asymmetrically.

6.3 Securitisation as asymmetric and layered

The concept of asymmetric curricular securitisation contributes to language-policy theory by specifying a mechanism: how ideological change travels across subjects in a multilingual curriculum. Three features distinguish it. First, securitisation is *layered rather than uniform*: it does not replace each subject's existing pedagogical surface but is grafted onto it, producing hybrid forms (the enabling-yet-securitised English guide). Second, it is *language-specific*: the heritage language (Chinese) absorbs ideology substantively, while the colonial/global language (English) absorbs it as a bolted-on frame — a sequencing consistent with the logic that the heritage language is the more tractable vehicle for national-cultural content. Third, it operates through *banal* as much as explicit means: the stable structural silences on democracy, rights, and Hongkonger identity indicate that the securitising frame is reproduced through routine absence, not only through the addition of patriotic vocabulary.

This formulation has comparative implications. Hong Kong illustrates how securitisation enters a multilingual curriculum through the heritage language first, then extends to the colonial/global language

— a trajectory that may be visible in other postcolonial contexts undergoing nationalist curriculum reform. Researchers should therefore ask not simply whether "the national turn" has reached a given subject, but *how* it has been recontextualised through that subject's symbolic and pedagogical properties. The available document evidence in Hong Kong is consistent with an asymmetric, differentiated pattern; whether this generalises to other postcolonial contexts requires further comparative research. This historical layering aligns with earlier accounts of Hong Kong's colonial and postcolonial medium-of-instruction trajectory (Evans, 2011).

6.4 Implications for policy, pedagogy, and research

The findings carry implications across three levels. At the level of language policy, the global-English/national-Chinese division reconfigures the symbolic hierarchy: English now carries both a cosmopolitan frame and a national-security layer, a tension teachers must navigate without explicit official guidance. The enabling modality of the English guide gives teachers permissive space, but the newly grafted values layer constrains the ideological horizons within which that permissiveness operates — "critical thinking" is policed differently in each subject.

At the level of pedagogy, the functional division of labour means students receive asymmetrical identity constructions depending on the subject. A child moving from English (framed as agentic, cosmopolitan, inclusive) to Chinese (framed as cultivated, nationally identified, collectively addressed) moves between ideologically differentiated subject positions. How teachers mediate this discontinuity in practice is an empirical question this study flags as urgent.

At the level of research, the most pressing question is longitudinal: will the English guide's enabling modality and diversity vocabulary survive successive editions, or contract toward the Chinese guide's directive, monolithic model? The present data show divergence, but divergence can reverse; longitudinal tracking is needed to determine whether asymmetric securitisation is a transitional phase or a stable structural feature. Comparative research in other postcolonial multilingual contexts undergoing nationalist reform would test whether the heritage-first-then-colonial sequencing generalises beyond Hong Kong.

7 Conclusion

This paper has examined whether Hong Kong's post-2019 ideological turn has crossed from the Chinese subject into the English curriculum. Through a corpus-assisted CDA of the 2023 Chinese and 2025 English primary curriculum guides — supplemented by a temporal comparison with the 2017 English guide — it finds that the turn has extended, but asymmetrically. National-security and patriotic vocabulary newly imported into English (national security 0→26; patriotic 0→4) confirms the curriculum-wide reach of securitisation, yet the two subjects diverge rather than converge on modality: English becomes more enabling even as it imports national vocabulary, producing a functional division of labour — Chinese as the substantive national subject, English as the global-national subject. Cantonese is fully

erased from the 2025 English guide, and structural silences on democracy, rights, and Hongkonger identity remain stable across both languages and time points.

The paper has argued that this pattern is best theorised as *asymmetric curricular securitisation*: a differentiated, language-specific mechanism through which national ideology is redistributed across school subjects according to their symbolic and pedagogical properties. This contributes to language-policy theory by specifying how ideological change travels across a multilingual curriculum — not uniformly, but through the layered, language-specific recontextualisation of a shared policy template. The findings are bounded by the absence of classroom data: they concern how policy texts construct legitimate language and speakers, not how teachers and students enact them. Whether English's enabling modality and diversity vocabulary will survive successive editions or contract toward the Chinese guide's directive model remains an open, longitudinal question — one essential to understanding whether the functional division of labour is a transitional phase or a stable feature of Hong Kong's post-2019 language-policy regime.

For language-policy research more broadly, the study suggests that analysts of multilingual curriculum reform should attend not only to the presence or absence of ideological content across subjects but to the *mechanisms of differentiation* through which that content is recontextualised. Asymmetric curricular securitisation offers one such mechanism: a framework for understanding how a shared ideological template acquires different force and positioning as it travels across languages with unequal symbolic capital — a dynamic that may prove analytically productive in other multilingual education systems where nationalist curriculum reform intersects with colonial language legacies. The Hong Kong case demonstrates that securitisation does not require uniformity to be effective; it requires only that each language subject carry its allocated share of the ideological burden, in the register that makes that burden most legible — and most naturalised — to the speakers it addresses.

Declarations

In accordance with the journal's double-blind review policy, author-identifying declarations (funding, competing interests, and author contributions) will be provided on the separate title page submitted alongside this manuscript. This study analysed only publicly available government curriculum documents; it did not involve human participants, and ethical approval and informed consent were therefore not required. The keyword dictionaries, coding scheme, and analysis scripts used in this study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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Figures

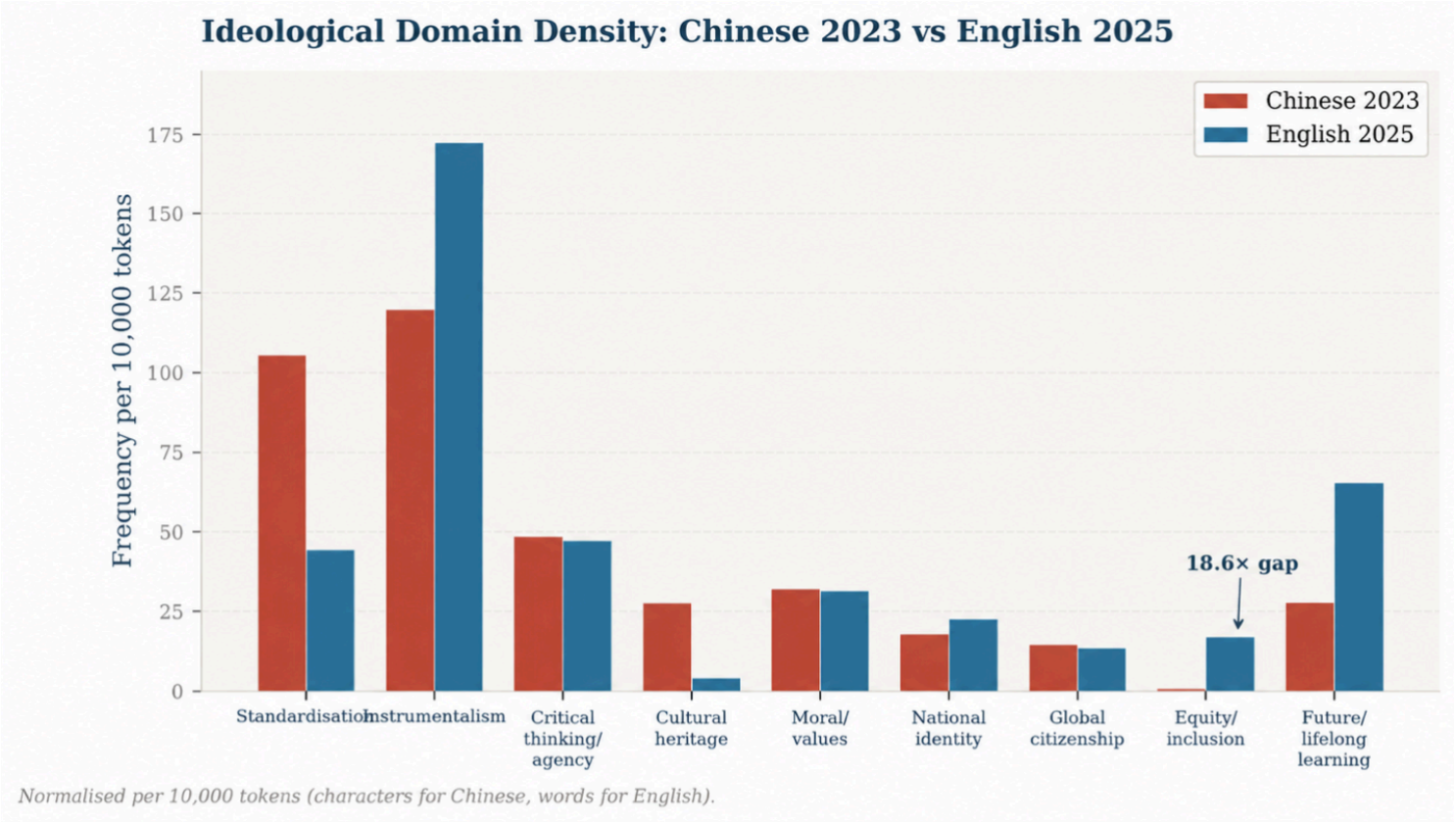


Figure 1

Ideological domain density: Chinese 2023 vs English 2025

Figure 1. Ideological domain density (per 10,000 tokens) across nine domains, comparing the 2023 Chinese and 2025 English curriculum guides.

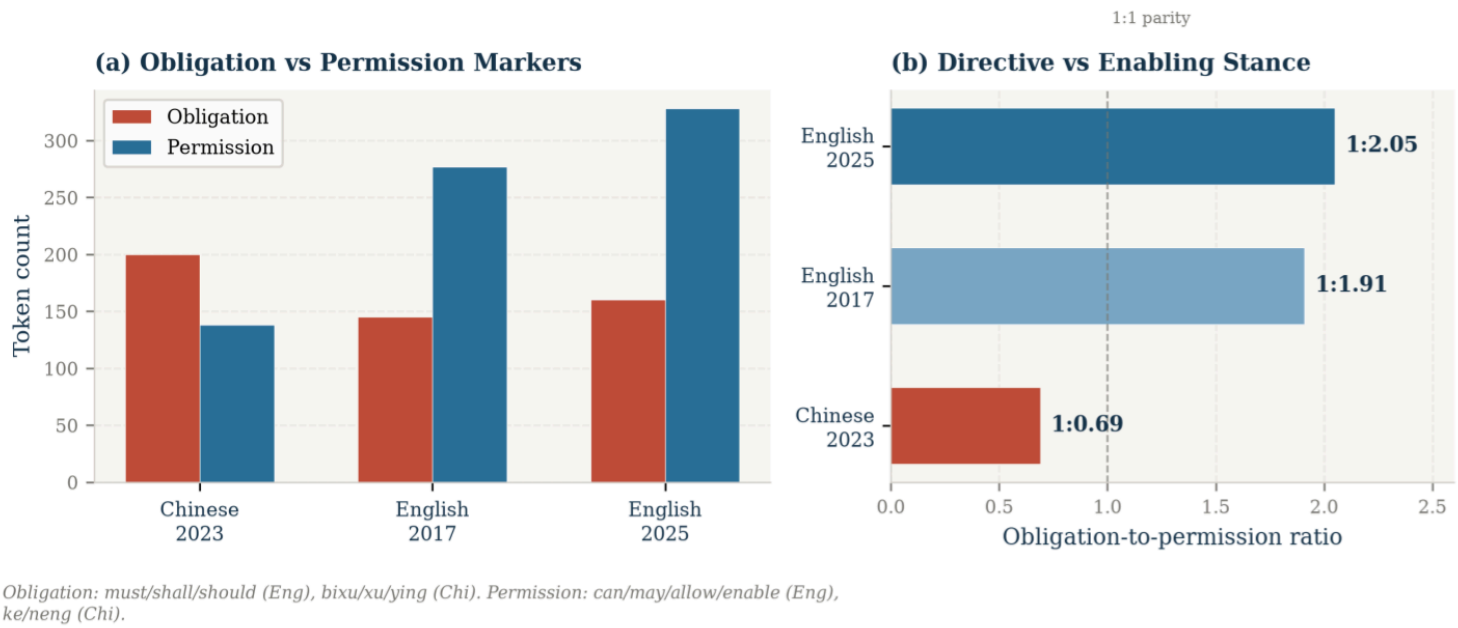


Figure 2

Modality profiles: directive (Chinese) vs enabling (English)

Figure 2. Modality profiles comparing obligation and permission markers across the Chinese 2023, English 2017, and English 2025 guides. Panel (a) shows raw token counts; panel (b) shows the obligation-to-permission ratio.

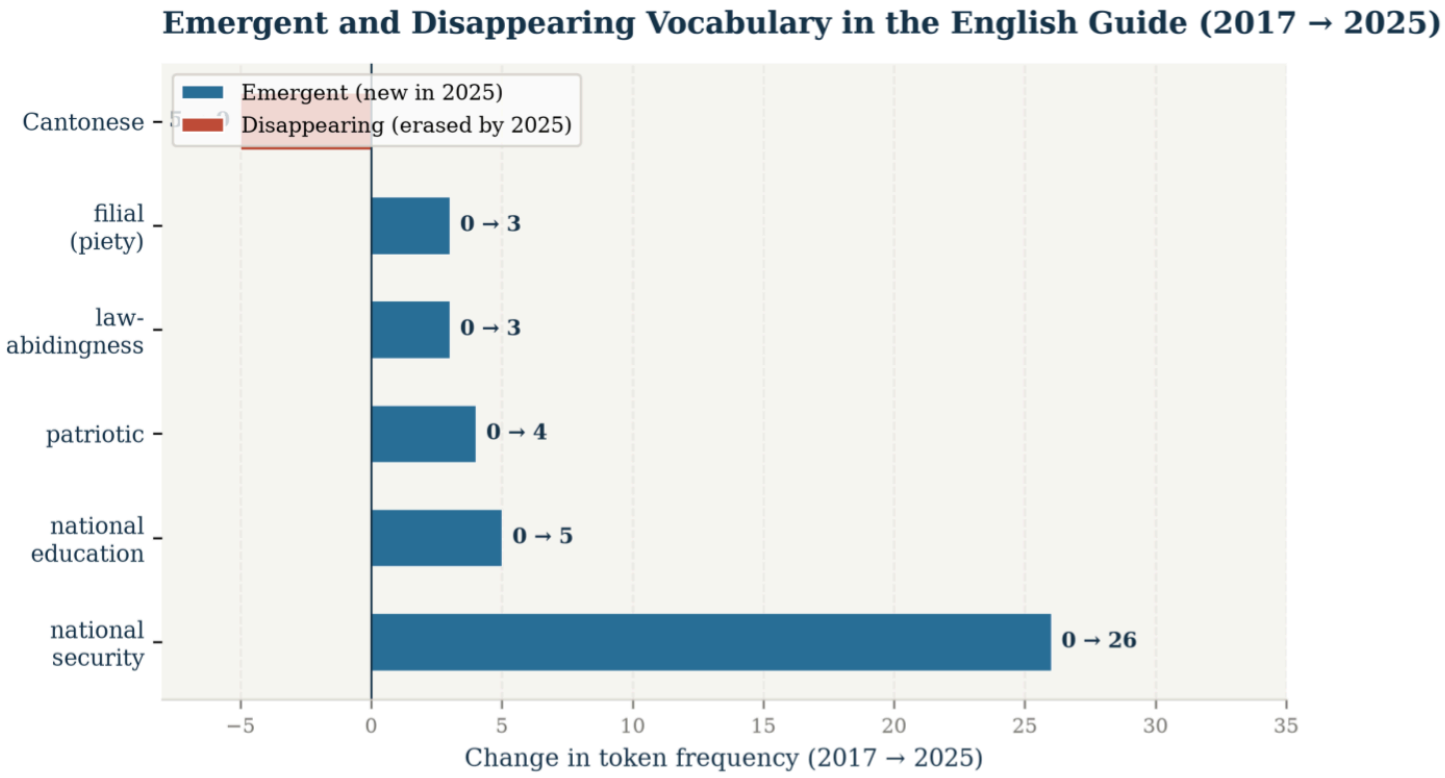


Figure 3

Emergent and disappearing vocabulary in the English guide (2017 → 2025)

Figure 3. Emergent and disappearing markers in the English Language Curriculum Guide, 2017 to 2025. Blue bars indicate vocabulary newly imported; terracotta bars indicate vocabulary erased.