There are several predominant variants of both written and spoken Chinese. The written variants are Traditional and Simplified Chinese, and well-known spoken variants include Mandarin, Cantonese, and Taiwanesen Hokkien. Although these variants are related, they do not have perfect mutual intelligibility, and their use is strongly influenced by historical, political, and geographical issues. As a result, understanding the relationship between these written and spoken variants, and the appropriate circumstances for selecting one variant over another, is vital to successful translation and linguistic validation of COAs targeted for use in populations that speak and write modern Chinese.

Modern spoken Chinese is divided into at least seven major dialectal groups containing over 200 dialects. Although many of these spoken dialects are not mutually intelligible, historically, there has been a common writing system underlying the spoken variants. Written Chinese is composed of logograms, or characters, consisting of many individual strokes with a hierarchical organization. The majority of these characters consist of two parts: a semantic component (the “radical”) conveying general meaning and a phonetic component suggesting a pronunciation, although written Chinese is not an alphabetic script [1].

This common written system officially diverged in the 1950s into two variants, Traditional and Simplified Chinese. In mainland China, development and use of Simplified Chinese was promoted by the People’s Republic of China, one goal being to increase literacy by greatly simplifying the forms of the most common Chinese characters so they would be easier to write and learn. Simplified Chinese is used and taught across the majority of mainland China, and is also commonly used in Singapore and Malaysia, with the worldwide number of users currently estimated at more than 1.3 billion. Traditional Chinese, a synonym referring to the system of writing that existed prior to the establishment of Simplified Chinese, was retained as the dominant written form in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macau, and is also typically used in overseas Chinese communities, with a worldwide number of users estimated at 50 million. Traditional Chinese characters are more complex than their Simplified counterparts, on average having 30% more strokes among common characters, and nearly twice as many strokes (100% more) for less common characters (see Table 1 for a comparison of words written with each variant) [2]. Although Traditional Chinese is considered more difficult to learn, users contend that it better preserves the rich history and traditions of the Chinese written language, with this perceived loss being one among many tensions that arise between associations with the written forms, and additional written variants specific to certain regions (e.g., written Cantonese and Hokkien) further complicate the process of selecting a language for translation. There is little systematic relationship between spoken variants and their underlying written forms, and additional written variants specific to certain regions (e.g., written Cantonese and Hokkien) further complicate the process of selecting a language for translation. Together, these factors necessitate careful consideration of the written variant and the subject population requested to participate in research and linguistic validation of COAs in locations where modern Chinese is used. Furthermore, these factors suggest that the development of “worldwide” translations, intended for speakers across multiple countries, may be difficult in the case of modern Chinese, and that a country or population-specific translation may provide the best results.

CONCLUSIONS

There are at least two other Chinese written variants. One of these is specific to Hong Kong and Macau, and is a written form of Cantonese. As vocabulary differences between Cantonense and Standard Mandarin are estimated to be as high as 30%, written Cantonense diverges dramatically from both the Traditional and Simplified Chinese variants, and appropriate consideration of both context and target population should be exercised when selecting this written variant for translation [7]. An additional written form of Hokkien exists, and is used in Taiwan, the Fujian province of mainland China, and in areas of Malaysia and Singapore. Written Hokkien is still an unstandardized system, with many variations across communities and places of use, and is typically used for informal and non-administrative purposes. All the same, written Hokkien is regularly encountered in novels, songs, and other media, and may be considered for use in the appropriate context and location [8].

REFERENCES