
THE EMERGENCE AND DEVELOPMENT OF HONG KONG ENGLISH

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to critically review previous studies on Hong Kong English (HKE) and examine the future research focus on this issue. Three historical stages are outlined to evaluate the emergence of HKE: the early era of English in Hong Kong, the late colonial era of HKE, and the post-1997 era of HKE. Two issues emerge from the evaluation of HKE. One is the negative attitude towards HKE, the other is whether English or Cantonese should be the medium of instruction in schools and universities. Although it can be concluded that HKE has already developed into a unique variety in the world, the future research focus could be on language attitude and the medium of instruction.

Keywords: *Hong Kong English, Englishes, Cantonese, diglossic, emergence.*

Introduction

Hong Kong attracts a number of sociolinguistic scholars and researchers from the post-war era to the post-colonial period because of its social-historical transition. Even within this territory, there are many debates on the issue of language policy. English, as the only official language in the early years of Hong Kong becoming the British colony, still plays an important role in the domains of politics, economy, and education. On the other hand, English used in Hong Kong tends to have its own characteristics, which are gradually becoming more and more systematic. Under these circumstances, the existence of a Hong Kong English (HKE) seems to be a concept

that will be proved and recognized by degrees. However, there is an anxiety in Hong Kong that the standard of English has been likely to decline in the last few decades and this situation might become worse because of the change in language policy after the transfer of sovereignty.

This paper examines the language issue in Hong Kong and focuses on how Hong Kong English (HKE) has changed in the last few years, especially pre- and post-1997. Since the territory is such an international area, it is inevitable that it is necessary to consider how other languages, in particular Cantonese and Putonghua, affect the matter of language in Hong Kong. It may be possible to examine the future development of HKE through this analysis.

Section One: The early era of English in Hong Kong

Hong Kong was part of China before the Second Opium War. It is located in southern China next to Canton¹. As Hong Kong belonged to the Guangdong Province at that time, it is likely that the development of English in Canton at that time was therefore the early stages of the development of Hong Kong English (HKE). Hong Kong became a British colony after those two wars and its language matters became distinctive from mainland China, which eventually became the People's Republic of China.

Bolton (2002) notes that English in China has a long history. Early in the eighteenth century, English was used in Canton (Guangzhou), a key trading area.

Between the mid eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, this kind of English gradually developed from Canton English, which was spoken as a jargon, to Chinese Pidgin English, which was still widely used in the south of China. Losing the First (1839-1842) and Second (1856-1860) Opium Wars forced China to open more and more cities and ports to western countries. The use of English also spread out from that time and the expansion of English contributed to the development of English in China. In addition, mission schools founded in Hong Kong and other places in China played a significant role in increasing the number of English speakers. Since people could now gain access to English through formal education, Hall (1944, cited by Bolton, 2002, p.5) stated that Chinese Pidgin English began to decline from the 1890s.

The early mission schools were centralised in Hong Kong and Macau (Bolton, 2002). It is believed that these schools had a great influence on both the development of Hong Kong English and the education system. *Anglo-Chinese schools*, which originated from the mission schools, is a label for schools in which “English is the declared teaching medium and the printed medium for most textbooks” (ibid, p.32). This English-focused educational tradition seems to be an obstacle for the present Hong Kong language policy, which is attempting to make changes. This issue is explored more in a later section.

After Hong Kong was occupied by the British, its language policy was also changed. Tsou (1996) quotes Articles 50 and 51 of the Treaty of Tientsin of 1842 to demonstrate the status of different languages.

Article 50:

All official communications, addressed by the diplomat and Consular Agents

of Her Majesty the Queen to the Chinese Authorities, shall, henceforth, be written in English. They will for the present be accompanied by a Chinese version, but it is understood that in the event of there being any difference of meaning between the English and Chinese text the English Government will hold the sense as expressed in the English text to be the correct sense. This provision is to apply to the treaty now negotiated, the Chinese text of which has been carefully corrected by the English original.

Article 51:

It is agreed, henceforward the character 'T' (barbarian) shall not be applied to the Government or subjects of Her Britannic Majesty in any Chinese official document issued by the Chinese Authorities, either in the capital or in the provinces.

It is thought that these two Articles illustrate the prestigious status of English and established the diglossic situation in Hong Kong. In a long period of being a British colony, the emphasis on English usage made Chinese, which means Cantonese here, an inferior language in Hong Kong. However, from a different standpoint, this diglossia also provided an opportunity for the development of Hong Kong English.

Section Two: Hong Kong English in the late colonial era

The diglossic situation in Hong Kong

The late colonial period refers to the time from the mid-1960s to the change of sovereignty. It is believed that this period has played a crucial part in Hong Kong's history, as during this time the economy in the territory thrived. After WWII, Hong Kong was more like a refugee district, accommodating people mainly from Canton and Shanghai (Harrison & So, 1996). However, these refugees were from the pre-eminent commercial centres in China, and they brought the capital and labour force to build a wealthier and more successful commercial centre. Other factors, such as a favourable geographical location, were also interwoven to achieve prosperity in

Hong Kong (ibid).

The majority of people in Hong Kong speak Cantonese because Hong Kong people were traditionally people from Canton. Gibbon (1987, p.1) believed that Hong Kong was largely a racially homogeneous city because '98% of the population was Chinese' in 1981 and '88% of the population' speaks Cantonese' in the 1979 census. However, Hong Kong is also a multi-ethnic community because of the large number of immigrants, mostly from areas around Canton or Shanghai. Tsou (1996) categorised the Chinese in Hong Kong in five linguistic groups: basic Cantonese speakers, Szeyap speakers, Chiuchow speakers, Hakka speakers, and out-of-staters. A comparison of data collected in 1996 and 1971 respectively saw that the latter four groups tended to shift their languages to Cantonese (ibid).

Although English was set to be the dominant language in Hong Kong in the early era of colonialism, the language shift within Chinese and the large number of Cantonese speakers put pressure on language policy in Hong Kong. The Government had to acknowledge the lower status language, namely Cantonese, in 1967, because of the riots that broke out that year. English was still the only official language, whereas Cantonese was widely used in non-official domains (Tsou, 1996). Tsou pointed out that this actually revealed "a drive towards an expansion of English use in upper-middle class families"

The diglossic situation lasted until the approach of 1997. A case study of code switching in the Hong Kong Legislative Council is typical (Yau, 1997). The years 1991 to 1995 were a transitional period, during which the code-norm was blurry.

Code switching behaviour was inevitable, because a new code-norm was being established. The prestigious status of English was shaky in this pre-handover period and Cantonese seemed to be reinforced. However, English still exerts influences on every domain in Hong Kong, to a large extent.

The emergence of Hong Kong English (HKE)

The concept of Hong Kong English as an entity probably arises from a tendency of the last two decades to regard world Englishes as different new local varieties. Kachru (1997, cited by Bolton, 2005, p.18) suggested a model *three concentric circles* to categorise these new Englishes: *the inner circle*, such as New Zealand; *the outer circle*, such as the Philippines; and, *the extending/ expanding circle*, such as China. His classification depends on whether English is used as a native language (ENL), a second language (ESL), or as a foreign language (EFL). Although the concept of new Englishes may seem to be a challenge to the traditional Eurocentric belief, it indeed provides the basis for an explanation of Englishes emerging and developing in postcolonial areas and countries.

Furthermore, Schneider (2003) proposes a new framework *the dynamic model* to examine the emergence of new Englishes. The model expands the notion of ENL, ESL, and EFL into STL (settlers or colonisers) and IDG (indigenous). So English speakers who used to be defined as non-native speakers from *the outer circle* can also be classified as ‘first-language English speakers’ (Schneider, 2003). Then he divided the progressive process of the emergence of new Englishes into five stages: foundation; exonormative stabilisation (as in Fiji); nativisation (as in Hong Kong);

endonymative stabilisation (as in Singapore); and differentiation (as in Australia and New Zealand). Hong Kong is at the third stage, which shows a new variety of English has appeared and developed to a certain degree.

Joseph (1996) evaluated the concept of HKE from the aspect of public anxiety about the decline of the standard of English in Hong Kong. Although the masses have been worried about the deterioration in the standard of English over the last few years, the census result shows that the percentages of English speakers significantly increased from 1983 to 1993 (Table 1).

Table 1: 1983-1993 Surveys: Language Repertoires

Question: What language can you speak now?		
Language variety	1983 (Chinese Population)	1993 (Whole population)
Cantonese	98.5%	91.9%
English	43.3%	65.8%
Mandarin (Putonghua)	31.9%	55.6%
Chiu Chau	9.3%	5.2%
Hakka	7.5%	6.0%
Sze Yap	6.3%	3.3%
Fukien	4.2%	4.1%
Shanghainese	4.1%	2.7%
Cantonese dialects	4.7%	2.5%
Others	3.6%	3.6%

(Cited from Bacon-Shone and Bolton, 1998)

It is admitted that this data is problematic, as the 1993 census included all people living in Hong Kong. For example, a group of Filipinos counted for more than 1% of the whole population (Joseph, 1996). Nevertheless, other survey results argue against

the standard of English being in decline.

Table 2: 1983-1993 Surveys: Knowledge of English

Question: How well do you know English [↵]		
Response [↵]	1983 [↵]	1993 [↵]
Not at all [↵]	33.1% [↵]	17.4% [↵]
Only a few sentences [↵]	23.5% [↵]	21.7% [↵]
A little [↵]	36.2% [↵]	27.2% [↵]
Quite well [↵]	4.8% [↵]	26.6% [↵]
Well [↵]	1.4% [↵]	3.3% [↵]
Very well [↵]	0.4% [↵]	3.8% [↵]
Not applicable/missing [↵]	0.6% [↵]	- [↵]

(Cited from Bacon-Shone and Bolton, 1998)

As showed above in Table 2, the percentages of good English speakers, including the categories of ‘Quite well’, ‘Well’ and ‘Very well’, also dramatically rose from 6.6% in 1983 to 33.7% in 1993. In contrast, the number of ‘bad’ English speakers, comprising the groups of ‘Only a few sentences’ and ‘a little’, moderately decreased from 59.7% in 1983 to 48.9% in 1993.

The growing number of English speakers with relative proficiency and the unreduced anxiety about the decline in the standard of English were viewed as two sides of the same coin for Joseph (1996). Actually, the fall in the standard of English that the masses expected indicates the emergence of a new variety. Joseph (ibid) analysed HKE standardisation from three aspects: linguistic form, status, and function.

The first issue that should be assessed is whether HKE has a distinctive linguistic

form or not. There are a number of articles stating this viewpoint. Chan (2004) outlined the syntactic problems for Hong Kong students when learning and producing English noun phrases, because of the differences between English and Chinese (meaning Cantonese here). Hong Kong students seem to encounter similar problems and produce similar mistakes while studying English. According to Gisborne (in Bolton, 2002, p.141), the features of HKE relative clauses are also evidence proving the distinctive syntax of HKE. Actually, this influence of Cantonese on HKE can be seen elsewhere. Hung (in Bolton, 2002, p.119) presented the unique phonological features occurring in HKE. Stibbard (2004) echoed and expanded these systematic characteristics of the phonology of HKE, though he also pointed out the negative attitudes to this Hong Kong pronunciation.

Secondly, the status of HKE is unlikely to be publicly approved. As recognised by Stibbard (2004) in his research into the phonology of HKE, Hong Kong people's attitudes towards the HKE pronunciation are negative. Other studies, such as Luk (1998, in Stibbard, 2004) and Li (1999, in Stibbard, 2004), also noted that a native pronunciation and Standard English are preferred in Hong Kong, whereas Hong Kong people have a very low esteem for HKE. But Joseph (1996) argued that this negative attitude towards HKE is unsurprising, because all other post-colonial countries share the same experience. In other words, a new variety was never well recognised in Singapore or Malaysia. The local recognition of new Englishes may take several years or decades 'after the withdrawal of the colonial power' (Joseph, 1996). Moreover, Joseph argued that 'the initial steps towards the creation of that status are not

discernible'. The chance of getting into a university in Hong Kong is higher than before since the educational reforms of the 1970s. The English level of university students is thought to be better, although their English is rated by expatriate and foreign-educated teachers as deficient. Joseph (ibid) views this phenomenon as a sign that 'a local standard is in operation'.

Thirdly, it is said that the language status influences and is influenced by the language function (Joseph, 1996). In other words, the more domains a language can be used in, the higher its status. Alternatively, a language's status determines what functions it can employ. As stated earlier, the linguistic hegemony of English gradually changed when approaching the end of colonialism. From being the only official language to sharing that status with Cantonese, the future function of HKE is still under discussion. In particular, Hong Kong is not entering a typical post-colonial era and should not be analogous to the case in Singapore (Stibbard, 2004). However, Joseph (1996) argued that HKE can serve as a token of Hong Kong. After losing its British identity, a simple Chinese identity is unlikely to be a substitution. The unique identity of Hong Kong was realised in the mid 1970s, because of the barrier between Mainland China and Hong Kong during the Cultural Revolution. Cantonese employed in official functions pre-1997 continues the process of identity distinctness. If the non-Mainland identity were suppressed by the promotion of Putonghua over Cantonese, HKE might become a part of Hong Kong's linguistic identity. Chan (2002) defended this viewpoint and suggested that English 'serves to distinguish Hong Kong people from Mainland Chinese'.

From his analysis of three aspects of HKE standardisation, Joseph (1996) concluded that a decline in the standard of English in Hong Kong actually gives space for the emergence of HKE. In addition, Bolton (2002) explained HKE from other criteria proposed by Butler (1997, cited by Bolton, 2002, p.44): accent; vocabulary; history; literary creativity; reference works such as dictionaries; and style guides. Some of those characteristics are more or less included in the previous analysis, whereas the last two points are distinctive. Bolton takes many examples to prove that there are a number of creative works published by Hong Kong writers and some reference works are forthcoming. Notwithstanding this, it is also believed that the future development of HKE largely depends on language policy and Beijing's attitude.

Section Three: Hong Kong English post-1997

Two years before the handover, the Hong Kong government has already attempted to change the language situation by pronouncing a new language policy: "...develop a civil service which is biliterate in English and Chinese and trilingual in English, Cantonese and Putonghua" (Lau, 1995, cited by Bolton, 2002, p.35). One of the most important changes was the promotion of Putonghua. Putonghua has served as the official language in Mainland China since the establishment of the People's Republic of China. Hence its encouragement can be seen as a sign of decolonialisation. However, the long history of English usage and the large number of Cantonese speakers make it difficult to put the policy into practice. The issue of the medium of

instruction is a good example for exploring the language problem in post-1997 Hong Kong.

Although there were schools that taught in Chinese in the colonial period, education in English was thought to be dominant. This strengthened the diglossic situation and the high status of English in Hong Kong. With 1997 approaching, the Hong Kong government decided to change the language status and mother-tongue education was more emphasised. Only 114 of 460 secondary schools continue to use English as the medium of instruction (Bolton, 2002). The other 346 secondary schools were forced to change to educating in Chinese, or rather, to be precise, colloquial Cantonese and written traditional Chinese. This prompted a number of debates that defended education in English.

As the most widely used lingua franca in the world, English is overwhelmingly preferred by the majority of parents and students. Besides, English still plays a role in the domain of employment and the media. As Hong Kong people with a good education were chiefly the elite in the colonial era, professionals mainly employed English. Even the return of Hong Kong to Mainland China did not affect the use of English in professional domains (Evans and Green, 2003). An attitude study (Lai 2001) also showed that Hong Kong students hold a very positive view of English for future academic or career development. As a co-official language after the change of sovereignty, Cantonese became superior to English (Lai 2001). Although parents accept the effectiveness of education in Cantonese, they are still worried this may decrease students' level of English. Furthermore, the status of Cantonese is in

question from the increasing promotion of Putonghua after the handover.

Putonghua is the national language in PRC and its use considered to be ‘a gesture of solidarity and decolonisation’ (Lai, 1999). Whelpton (1999) pointed out that in future Cantonese may be influenced from two sides. Firstly, Cantonese might be replaced by Putonghua. Secondly, Cantonese might be a case of ‘language suicide’ because of more and more frequent contact with Putonghua. According to the statistics (Leung and Wong, 1996), the teaching of Putonghua is expanding into nearly all levels of primary and secondary schools.

On the one hand, mother-tongue education represents the post-1997 language policy in Hong Kong. It has tended to change the diglossia into a trilingual situation (Lai and Byram, 2003). Namely, it is hoped that people will ‘speak fluent Cantonese - the home language of the majority of people of Hong Kong, Putonghua - the national language and standard spoken language, and English- the international lingua franca’ (ibid). On the other hand, the issue of educational policy also reveals the problems for HKE. It is doubtful whether there is room left for HKE. What is more, Hong Kong is not a typical post-colonial area like Singapore or Fiji, if ‘typical’ means an independent country.

The change of political powers implies favouring a different variety. Although Hong Kong was promised that nothing would change for fifty years after the handover, according to the Basic Law, the promotion of the national language, Putonghua, was inevitable, to remove the colonial taint of Hong Kong and to establish a national identity. Moreover, with more and more frequent contacts with Mainland China in

both business and politics, the need for Putonghua is likely to increase. However, the attitude study made by Lai (2001) suggested that ‘Putonghua will only be learned as a third language in Hong Kong, mainly for its instrumental value’, whereas English still plays an important role in many domains. As a result, it is possible to say that HKE will continue its development unless a strong counter-policy is put into practice.

Conclusion

Because the social-historical transition happened at the end of the last century, Hong Kong has become an attractive place for socio-linguists to analyse how different languages, mainly English, Cantonese, and Putonghua, were and are coping with the new situation before and after 1997. This paper has focused on the development of English in Hong Kong. From the evaluation of three different historical stages and previous studies, Hong Kong English is gradually being viewed as a new variety. However, there are still two questions remaining to be resolved, and these could be the focus of future research: the status of HKE through the analysis of attitudes towards HKE, and whether English or Cantonese should be the medium of instruction in education.

Note:

¹ Canton was the name of the province used in Qing Dynasty. It’s similar to Guangdong Province which is officially used at present. Guangzhou was and is the capital city of Canton/Guangdong Province. The significant change is that Hong Kong used to a part of Canton, but it is not a part of Guangdong Province now. Therefore, when Canton is mentioned in this article, it indicates an area which includes Hong Kong.

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