Hong Kong English: Creation, Characteristics, and Identity

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Introduction

British colonialism is the main explanation for many modern-day 'New' or 'World' Englishes — second-language varieties of English. One region ceded to British forces in the nineteenth century was Hong Kong: a South-East Asian territory part of the Qing dynasty that was suffering the effects of widespread opium trade. By 1859, pre- and post-colonial contact and trade amongst British personnel and Hong Kong locals had spawned a 'Chinese pidgin English' (Bolton 2000: 267). Upon British rule, this was followed by compulsory education of Standard English (Setter, Wong, Chan 2010: 105), eventually developing into what we know today as Hong Kong English (HKE).

These unique circumstances of HKE's development have led to a World English with distinct non-standard morphosyntactic properties, and HKE has become a marker of significance and source of identity for many HKE speakers. In this essay, Hong Kong English will be explored with a focus placed on its background, salient language features, and reputation in local contexts.

Sociolinguistic Context

Prior to colonisation, the Chinese dialect of Cantonese was the main language spoken in the Canton region, and remains the most dominant language spoken in Hong Kong today[1]. The contact language used to trade with British ships was initially referred to as 'Canton jargon' until it was deemed a 'pidgin English' in 1859 (Bolton 2000: 267). Thereafter, English was made the official language, and spread via teachings in mission schools and communally

1. 88.9% of the population aged five and over declared Cantonese their usual spoken language in a 2016 census: https://www.gov.hk/en/about/abouthk/facts.htm

through expatriate interaction with locals (Phillipson, Raquel, Gube 2011: 3).

English schooling was made compulsory in the 1970s (Bolton 2000: 269) and by 1996, English knowledge[2] rose to 38.1%, and as of 2016 the figure stood at 53.2% (Census and Statistics Department 2017). Today, Hong Kong upholds a 'Biliterate and Trilingual' policy with the aim of citizen proficiency in written Chinese and English, and speech in Cantonese, Putonghua, and English.

It should be noted that HKE's existence is not universally recognised: Luke and Richards (1982: 55) assert there is 'no such thing as Hong Kong English.' An argument against this claim will be given in the section Folk Attitudes upon discussion of attitudes towards HKE.

Morphosyntactic Properties

While there are at least 61 prominent morphosyntactic features of HKE (Wong 2020), this essay will only examine three salient features, based on research from Setter, Wong, and Chan (2010). The first is the frequent omission of the *-s* suffix for pluralisation. Utterances that do not discern plurality such as

(1) ... I'm glad that I've got all these experience

(2) there will be giraffe (Setter, Wong, Chan 2010: 45–46)

are commonplace. It is hypothesised this morphological feature is a simplification of standard English morphology and inherited from Cantonese grammar, in which pluralities are not necessarily marked. As HKE also exhibits sentences such as

2. *Knowledge* here is the ability to speak, read, and write the language

(3) all sort of dangerous things (46)

with irregular pluralisation, it was initially proposed that HKE's use of the *-s* suffix was random but motivated when nouns were preceded by a 'semantic reminder that the noun is to be marked as plural' (Budge 1989: 41). However, data from Setter, Wong, and Chan (2010: 46) demonstrated that even with strong reminders, HKE speakers did not always include the plural suffix. Given this, the authors summarised their observations of plurality:

> ... the seemingly random plural marking of nouns in Hong Kong English can be subcategorised into three types: (a) singular count nouns are used in their bare form; (b) the plural suffix is missing from plural nouns; and (c) the plural suffix is used to mark singular nouns. (47)

Another feature is the use of double morphological markings, such as **more better* and **didn't telled*. Setter, Wong, and Chan (2010) believe this is due to the high frequency of irregular inflected forms in standard English, e.g. *go / went / gone; bad / worse / worst; etc.* (48). Their proprietary survey data supported this, with double morphological markings having 'close link[s] to the irregular morphology of Standard English.'

A third, syntactic feature of HKE is a phenomenon known as 'tense-switching:' where one verb tense is used consistently in an utterance until the speaker suddenly switches to a different tense for no apparent reason (Setter, Wong, Chan 2010: 49). Such examples given by the researchers include:

(4) and we can we we could touch it but we cannot open it

(5) he drove us there and then we we spent hours over there and pick something we like and usually I discuss ... (50)

The data overall supported a preference for present tense in an utterance with a switch to past tense, or vice versa. This feature is also common in Singapore English (SE) (50), just one other contact language which shares HKE features.

Similarities to Other Englishes

As mentioned, HKE and SE share the use of inconsistent verb tense in utterances. In addition to this, SE also exhibits non-standard pluralisation: Deterding (2007: 42) notes that while the *-s* suffix is occasionally omitted for plural nouns, SE adopts a 'logical approach to classification of nouns,' where SE tends to employ the suffix when nouns are countable, and do not when nouns are not (42–43).

In addition to SE, a number of Asian/Australasian Englishes seem to exhibit the above three HKE features, such as Malaysian, Fiji, and Butler English, in addition to Torres Strait Creole (Wong 2020). One interesting explanation of this is given by Gisborne (2009) which suggests that systemic transfers from specific substrates — namely Sinitic — can lead to similar feature pools in New Englishes owing to the non-finiteness of Chinese (154, 166).

Folk Attitudes

As mentioned, there is disagreement surrounding whether HKE is 'real,' namely by Luke and Richards (1982). This belief is not entirely incongruent with that of some HKE speakers: a survey by Edwards (2015) of 307 ethnic Chinese Hong Kong university students revealed 41% of students did not believe HKE to be a 'real variety of English' (190), with one

student's justification: "*... just that the accent, pronunciation and intonation may sound "Hong Kong" doesn't mean it should be counted as an independent variety*" (195).

But Luke and Richards' (1982) argument that HKE is not 'real' is likely a product of its time, as most of the bases of the argument can be challenged by drawing on modern research. The claim that there are 'no in-group needs for spoken English within the Chinese population outside of the educational system' (55) is at odds with data from Edwards (2015) in which almost 20% of students attributed 'peer influence/in-group communication' as the reason they spoke HKE (197). This shows there is a need for informal in-group HKE, and the target community for English is not a 'foreign and non-indigenous population' (Luke and Richards 1982: 55).

Furthermore, the result is a counterexample to the premise that 'English in Hong Kong ... is reserved for certain restricted functions in society.' And given HKE's morphosyntax and borrowed Cantonese lexis (Bolton 2000: 279), HKE is no longer 'modelled exclusively on British or American norms' (Luke and Richards 1982: 55) as is claimed. Evidently, the argument against HKE's existence is not as robust in the context of modern research repertoire, and may not discredit HKE as a World English as strongly.

Aside from the debate on HKE's legitimacy, data from Edwards (2015) suggest HKE having ties to a Hong Kong identity (185) — among respondents who claimed they spoke HKE, around 30% believed speaking HKE represented a Hong Kong identity (190), and 52% affirmed they 'liked speaking HKE' because of culture or identity (198). One question raised by Phillipson, Raquel, and Gube (2011: 8) was whether HKE would 'disunite Hong Kongers and mainland China.'

Regarding post-handover tension between the People's Republic of China (PRC) and Hong Kong, Edwards (2015) suggested HKE speakers may continue using HKE to 'differentiate themselves' from a PRC identity (205). As the author notes, this idea of HKE as a distancing device from a PRC identity is supported by Chan (2002: 282) who concluded that HKE 'distinguishes [Hong Kong people] from their mainland counterparts.' From the above studies, HKE can be observed as a marker of identity for HKE speakers, at least in the context of ethnic Chinese tertiary students.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this essay has examined HKE's sociolinguistic background, morphosyntax, and select attitudes towards HKE to demonstrate its depth and significance for HKE speakers. An initial pidgin English born out of necessity, HKE today has matured into a World English with distinct and shared morphological features that holds intrinsic cultural value for its speakers. As examined, HKE morphosyntax is identifiable but not entirely demystified, and as research concerning HKE is not plentiful nor sparse, there is still room for further investigation. As Hong Kong nears entire PRC control, it will be interesting to see if HKE's ties to identity strengthen or fade.

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