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HONG KONG ENGLISH

Exploring Lexicogrammar and Discourse from a Corpus-Linguistic Perspective

May Wong

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For Arthur

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Hong Kong English: An Overview

Abstract Wong offers a much-need summary of the sociocultural background of Hong Kong English (HKE) and the profile of its structural features. Focussing on lexicogrammar, the chapter also draws attention to features relating to pronouns and nouns, tense and redundant grammatical elements and uses a typological perspective to facilitate a better understanding of substrate influence from Cantonese. As well as looking at the ways in which HKE has emerged, Wong explores the methodological implications of corpus linguistics in World-Englishes research. 'The profile of structural features in Hong Kong English' concludes with a brief overview of detailed case studies of different aspects of this variety of English undertaken in the subsequent chapters of the book *Hong Kong English: Exploring Lexicogrammar and Discourse from a Corpus-Linguistic Perspective*.

Keywords Socio-cultural background of Hong Kong English • Corpus linguistics • ICE-HK • Structural features • Typological profile • Substrate influence

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1.1 Introduction

Situated on China's south coast and being a former British colony, Hong Kong is renowned for its 'East meets West' tradition in which English and Cantonese are the two main languages of the city. This language situation has created the conditions for Hong Kong English (HKE) to become a newly emerging, nativised variety of English. As Joseph remarks, HKE is 'well along the path of emergence' (2004, p. 139) and growing recognition 'will be a future development' (2004, p. 149). In fact, the status of the variety has been hotly disputed over the years. Some twenty years ago Luke and Richards (1982, p. 55) denied the existence of a distinct 'Hong Kong English' variety in favour of clearly exonormatively oriented 'English in Hong Kong'. This attitude has been widely supported by teachers and linguists alike in the 1990s (Li 1999, p. 95; Tsui and Bunton 2000; Pang 2003). However, the role and status of the English language in Hong Kong is now being revalued and redefined after a seminal work edited by Bolton (2002) was published on the subject. As Bolton (2003, p. 50) suggests, the label 'Hongkong English' first appeared in an article of the South China Morning Post—a local English newspaper—published in 1987, highlighting the fact that the variety is an 'incipient patois' and it 'cannot avoid absorbing the characteristics of the vernacular, especially one as vibrant as Cantonese [i.e. the native language of Hong Kong people]'.

While English is acquired through formal classroom instruction as a second/foreign language (i.e. an L2 variety type in this questionnaire), as Gisborne (2009, p. 150) rightly points out, 'it is not fair to state that HKE is a simple L2 variety which is acquired afresh with every generation'. Ever since English was used in Hong Kong, it has been adapted to the new local context by its indigenous users so that new forms and structures have been developed in phonetics and phonology, in the lexicon and in syntax,[1] which are, arguably, transmitted informally from one generation of HKE speakers to another. There are some sporadic studies exploring the phonetic/phonological aspects of this variety of English (e.g. Hung 2000;

[1] See Bolton (2000) for a guide to published research relevant to the study of HKE and Wong (2012) for an overview of major morphosyntactic features of HKE.

Peng and Ann 2004; Stibbard 2004; Setter 2006; Lim 2009), as well as its lexicon (e.g. Benson 1994, 2000; Carless 1995; Evans 2015; Wolf and Chan 2016). However, the grammatical description of HKE has been hitherto under-represented. Notable exceptions are Budge (1989) on the variable marking of plurals; Gisborne (2000) and Suárez-Gómez (2014) on the distinctive patterning of relative clauses; Lee (2001, 2004) on the usage and functions of modal verbs; Noël and Van der Auwera (2015) on a quantitative analysis of changes in the use of modals and quasi-modals in newspaper texts; Wong (2007, 2009) on tag questions and collective nouns; Yao (2016) on cleft constructions. These linguistic changes at different levels of description can be subsumed under the notion of 'structural nativisation' that is, 'the emergence of locally characteristic patterns and thus the genesis of a new variety of English' (Schneider 2007, pp. 5–6). As local norms have emerged and are now increasingly accepted as part of a localised variety of English, present-day HKE can be viewed as being nativised (see, for example, Setter et al. 2010; Evans 2011).

1.2 Sociocultural Background

Hong Kong is basically a monoethnic society with over 95 % of its total population being Chinese. In this regard, Chinese (in particular, Cantonese) is considered in this chapter as the dominant and substrate language whereas English is a non-dominant language. Despite being the non-dominant language, English has always held an official and very important position in Hong Kong. While Cantonese is spoken as the usual language by the majority (89.5 %) of the population (Census & Statistics Department 2011),[2] and has long been viewed as the language of solidarity and community ties (Cheung 1985; Lai 2009), English is seen as the language of success leading to higher education and better career prospects (Joseph 1996, 1997; Evans 2009). It is also valued as a global language and thus if Hong Kong is to gain a firm foothold in the

[2] Table A111 of the 2011 Population Census, 'Proportion of Population Aged 5 and Over Able to Speak Selected Languages/Dialects, 2001, 2006 and 2011', available at http://www.census2011.gov.hk/en/main-table/A111.html (accessed 14 June 2016).

international economy, good English skills in its workforce are considered to be essential. Given these circumstances, the Hong Kong government continues to stress the importance of English in its language policy for education after the return of Hong Kong to China, as evidenced in the compulsory benchmarking of all English language teachers (Qian 2008).

A detailed account of the language situation in Hong Kong has been given in Bolton (2000; 2003, pp. 93–99). Under British rule, the English language was 'the official language of government, the official language of law, and was *de facto* the more widely used medium of secondary and university education' (Bolton 2003, p. 93). It is not until 1995 that the Hong Kong government adopted a new language policy, which aimed to make its civil servants 'biliterate' in both English and Chinese and 'trilingual' in English, Cantonese and Putonghua (Lau 1995, p. 19). While this policy seems to give due emphasis to the Chinese language (both spoken and written forms), probably as a result of the 1997 handover to Chinese sovereignty, it has had a huge impact on the medium of instruction in primary and secondary schools in the territory. Throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, the government allowed individual schools to decide the teaching medium, leading to an increase in the proportion of 'Anglo-Chinese' schools, schools that advertised themselves as English-medium institutions and in fact did not provide a total immersion in an English-based education (Johnson 1994, p. 187). In those schools, Cantonese was used to teach almost all subjects but the majority of textbooks were in English and students took English-medium examinations. However, in a bid to promote the use of Chinese in the run-up to the handover, the government announced that in future around 100 secondary schools (some 22 %) would be allowed to use English as the medium of instruction (Kwok 1997).

One of the results of this language policy change is that the majority of schools are now using both spoken Cantonese and English (together with both Chinese and English textbooks) in a 'mixed mode' practice of teaching. Not only does it give rise to the emergence of 'Hong Kong English' (Mundy 1978; Strevens 1980; Todd and Hancock 1986; McArthur 1987, 2002), it also sets the scene for researching into notable structural features of this newly emerging variety of English, which is likely to be influenced by the substrate language, Cantonese. Furthermore, the use of English is increasingly common in certain socially conditioned contexts from the 1980s and

1990s onwards. There are a large number of Filipino domestic helpers in Hong Kong, who speak English to their employers, which makes it necessary to use English in the home. In fact, as cited in Gisborne (2009, p. 154), the 2006 Population By-Census (Census & Statistics Department 2006) shows that the percentage of the population claiming to speak English as either their usual language or as an additional language rose from 38.1 % in 1996, to 43 % in 2001, to 44.7 % in 2006. The figure has further risen to 46.1 % in the 2011 Population Census.[3] When it comes to English proficiency, the latest government survey suggests that in 2012 over 60 % of the population claimed to have 'very good', 'good' or 'average' competence in spoken English (Census & Statistics Department 2014). Now that English is increasingly in contact with the languages of the indigenous populations in domestic environments, it appears true enough to suggest that HKE is a variety with its own norms and its own local speech community.

1.3 Positioning the Book with Two Previously Published Monographs on HKE

The first ever monograph about HKE is Professor Kingsley Bolton's (2002) edited collection of scholarly articles addressing a wide spectrum of topics ranging from the sociolinguistic issues and distinctive linguistic features to the largely unnoticed creativity of literary texts. The significance of this first book is that it brings to the attention of the importance of recognising the newly emerging 'nativised' status of HKE to most of the people in the territory.

About a decade later, Setter et al. (2010) provide an up-to-date survey of current use of the variety. The book describes HKE as a linguistic phenomenon from the perspective of language structure and historical, sociocultural and sociopolitical development. While their book appears to be an invaluable contribution, it adopts a rather broad approach to the study of the variety. As stated in the blurb, it aims to 'provide an overview

[3] Table A111 of the 2011 Population Census, 'Proportion of Population Aged 5 and Over Able to Speak Selected Languages/Dialects, 2001, 2006 and 2011', available at http://www.census2011.gov.hk/en/main-table/A111.html (accessed 14 June 2016).

of all aspects of HKE in a style designed for undergraduates and general readers'. Very differently in terms of purpose and scope, what I hope to accomplish in this monograph is to provide in-depth case studies of a specific linguistic feature that is of significant importance to HKE with the target audience of graduate students and fellow researchers in the areas of World Englishes and Corpus Linguistics. As will be outlined shortly in the following chapter, although the issue of tag questions has been addressed in both Setter et al. (2010) and the current monograph, the former gives a two-page description of the feature whereas this book devotes a whole chapter to the subject. Aside from this contrast, the obvious point of departure consists in the kind of data used for analysis. This book is among one of the first few attempts (e.g. Bolton and Nelson 2002) to study HKE based on naturally occurring corpus data (both spoken and written) in the International Corpus of English (see the next section), while other studies either use invented or anecdotal examples or transcribed spoken data gathered from laboratory settings such as the map tasks employed by Setter et al. (2010). As Groves (2012) points out, the issue of representativeness is always taken for granted in previous studies of English in Hong Kong; she states that 'both the speakers and their speech samples chosen must be representative of the variety they speak, as this will affect the outcome of the research' (Groves 2012, p. 29). To ensure that research data is truly representative of any particular new English variety she suggests using the International Corpus of English, which 'already includes a wide range of text-types and proficiency levels' and 'avoids problematic issues such as how to get naturally occurring data' (Groves 2012, p. 42). Therefore, the Hong Kong component of the International Corpus of English, which will be outlined in the next section, represents a major step forward in the research of Hong Kong English.

1.4 The International Corpus of English (The Hong Kong Component) (ICE-HK)

In this book, I used the Hong Kong component of the International Corpus of English (ICE-HK), which was made publicly available in March 2006 (Nelson 2006a). The ICE-HK project was initiated in the

Table 1.1 Composition of the spoken ICE-HK

Dialogue	Monologue
S1A (413,287 words): PRIVATE (direct conversations and telephone calls)	S2A (126,857 words): UNSCRIPTED (spontaneous commentaries, unscripted speeches, demonstrations, legal presentations)
S1B (255,286 words): PUBLIC (class lessons, broadcast discussions, broadcast interviews, parliamentary debates, legal cross-examinations, business transactions)	S2B (119,793 words): SCRIPTED (broadcast news, broadcast talks, non-broadcast talks)

early 1990s (Bolt and Bolton 1996). The ICE-HK corpus follows the common design of other ICE corpora worldwide, containing approximately 1 million words and including both spoken and written data using a ratio of 1.5:1 (Nelson 2006b, pp. 736–737; see also Nelson 1996). Tables 1.1 and 1.2 summarise the compositions of the spoken and written ICE-HK respectively.[4]

Bolton and Nelson's (2002) account pioneered the analysis of segments from the ICE-HK corpus for studying linguistic features of HKE. Certain linguistic features, vis-à-vis, the suprasegmentals of the Hong Kong accent, the noun phrase structure, phrasal verbs and coordination are highlighted as potential research areas. In its present form as a part-of-speech tagged corpus, ICE-HK does allow for partial interrogation of these features and provides a promising avenue for more sophisticated investigation alongside other levels of annotation such as syntactic and prosodic annotation (see McEnery et al. 2006, pp. 33–43 for the state-of-the-art description of these annotation types). Hence, the corpus is as a long-awaited, wide-ranging resource for empirical research into HKE, particularly in the context of lexicogrammatical and discoursal features, which this book seeks to explore at length.

In 2013 Professor Mark Davies of Brigham Young University created and released the Corpus of Global Web-based English (GloWbE). The GloWbE (Davies 2013; Davies and Fuchs 2015) is composed of 1.9 million words from 1.8 million web pages from 340,000 websites in

[4] See Wong (2010) for a full description of the composition of the ICE-HK corpus.