Speaking in Hong Kong English: A Study of the Attitudes to and Perceptions on Hong Kong English among Local Primary and Secondary School Teachers

Anrou Z YUAN

Abstract

Unill today, Hong Kong English (HKE) is still an emerging language variety that has yet to receive consensus and acknowledgement in academia. Thanks to the increasingly sophisticated language policies imposed, the prevalent use of English in schools and offices, and the increasing attention placed by researchers all over the world, the spotlight has been shed on HKE by local Hongkongers as well.

Previous research projects have primarily relied on language policies and linguistic frameworks to predict and outline the future of HKE, and investigated the relationship between HKE and identity within the general public through interviews and surveys. I have put my focus on teachers' attitudes and opinions, since they are the ones to decide how and what to present for their students, actively influencing the positioning and stance of future generations of Hong Kong people.

This thesis is built upon and expands the conclusions made by projects in the past on locals' attitudes towards HKE. In this study, I have interviewed ten teachers at ten local primary and secondary schools with diversified bandings, sponsoring bodies, and mediums of instruction. Open-ended questions were asked in the interviews. The discussions and analysis are divided into four parts: (1) an overview of English language policies and proficiency, (2)

teachers' understanding and attitudes on HKE, (3) pedagogy with the redefinition of standard English and knowledge, and (4) education inequalities and language identity.

Despite the fact that teachers in general do not find HKE negative, they have to strike a balance between teaching flexibility regarding the insertion of cultural elements, and the examination requirements announced by the Education Bureau. It is also undeniable that HKE is not a language variety used by every single Hong Kong citizen. Certain features in speakers' socioeconomic and education backgrounds are apparent, and the use of HKE marks a specific identity and social stratification within Hong Kong society. The thesis provides insights into rethinking language variety as a medium to challenge imposed standards and as a lens to unveil nebulous social othering in Hong Kong.

Introduction

Hong Kong English: definition, features, and examples

On 1 July 1997, Hong Kong ended its colonial era and was officially established as a Special Administrative Region of the People's Republic of China (PRC). To suit ever-changing social dynamics and global transformation, the education system of the city has experienced drastic changes. These include changes in the examination systems, the abolishment of Liberal Studies, and modifications made in the syllabus on different subjects. Meanwhile, English sustains its high social status and remains the focus and essence of Hong Kong local education (Chen and Carper 2017). Approximately 29% of local secondary schools (113 out of 391, excluding international schools and private secondary schools) and most university programmes are English-medium instruction (Sing Tao Education 2022; Education Bureau

2023), which stems from post-colonial language planning and the city's positioning in the global market.

Along with the standard variety of English assigned by the Education Bureau and taught in schools and universities, there is also a local variety called Hong Kong English (HKE). To clarify, HKE is different from Kongish, which is another variety that is also common in Hong Kong. The latter is unintelligible to other English users due to their unfamiliarity with Hong Kong local culture and limited knowledge of Cantonese, which marks the major difference between the two varieties (Sewell and Chan 2017). An example is given as follows:

> Kongish: Dim gai gei, Dim gai gei, Dim gai wui gum gei? Gor problem hai where? (Kongish Daily 2016)
>
> Literal translation : Why, why, why would this be the case? Where is the problem?
>
> HKE: Why the situation is like this? Where is the problem?

HKE is influenced by Cantonese grammar in the sentence structure, for example the fixed expression "is like this" shown in the above example. As for Kongish, it not only contains English words but also romanisation of Chinese words like "dim gai" (why) and Cantonese exclamation terms like "gei" (question word, no literal meaning), which non-Cantonese speakers would find it unintelligible.

HKE is an emergent variety of English that has its own distinct features in phonetics and phonology, morphosyntax, as well as discourse and lexis (Setter 2010). Scholars have conducted studies with the aid of linguistic frameworks to recognise HKE as a distinct variety among World Englishes. Under the World Englishes framework suggested by Susan Butler, characteristics of English varieties are analysed through five perspectives, including "standard and recognisable pattern of pronunciation", "particular words and phrases", "a sense of historical tracing", "literature written without apology", and "reference work by the language

community" (Bolton 2003). Regarding the first three criteria, HKE can be considered as a valid variety. A typical HKE accent can be recognised by speakers, and a number of localised features are typically shared (Bolton and Kwok 1990). For vocabulary, there are studies focusing on a distinct Hong Kong vocabulary, for example the study by Susan Butler and the Australia-based Macquarie Dictionary which works on vocabulary compilation for Asian English varieties (Bolton 2003). Examples of entries for Hong Kong include the following: (Bolton 2003)

> *Ah* | noun Hong Kong English an informal term of address: AhSam | AhChan
>
> *Cage* | noun 1. An enclosure made of wires or bars, in which animals or birds can be kept 2. Anything that is like a prison 3. In Hong Kong, a partitioned bedspace in an apartment, rented by the very poor -verb 4. To put someone or something in, or as if in, a cage: The prisoner was caged in his cell. The occupants of a cage (definition 3) are known as cageman, cagewoman, cagedwellers or cage people and it is short for cagehouse, the translation of the term in Chinese.

As for the historical aspect, the colonial history of the city explains the language contact tracing, and the recognition of "Hong Kong identity" including the continuity of English education shows the language and the people are no longer linked by colonialism but the identification of a "cosmopolitan" (Baker 1983; Abbas, 1997).

However, limitations can be found in the latter two criteria. For literary creativity, creative writing in HKE is not encouraged, and opportunities are not common in the local context (Chan 1994). Reference work that acknowledges the existence of HKE, such as dictionaries and study guides, is insufficient to build a legitimate framework for the variety (Bolton 2003). HKE and other varieties, such as Indian English and Singaporean English, are categorised as a mix entitled "Asian English" (Bolton 2003). Moreover, documentation and

recognition of HKE remains the efforts of professionals (Bolton 2003). The low participation of the language community, i.e., the Hong Kong general public, indicates a long way ahead for HKE to be classified as a legitimate variety with the consensus of the majority.

The significance of English in Hong Kong society might not be reflected in daily communications, but its dominant role in academics and the workplace cannot be denied (Bacon-Shone, Bolton and Luke 2014). Hong Kong people, especially the well-educated population, spend a significant segment of time studying and working in English. In investigating HKE and the workplace, Stephen Evans suggests that the "acceptance of an indigenised variety is closely connected to its status in society and community attitudes towards it, particularly those of the political and professional elites" (2001: 294). Meanwhile, from a cultural aspect, society celebrates bilingualism in Hong Kong, to highlight the uniqueness of Hong Kong identity and to separate it from PRC identity (Edwards 2015). Therefore, my project aims to analyse the development of a local English variety to understand society and culture across generations. Specifically, in this project, I explore the perceptions of and attitudes towards HKE among secondary and high school teachers in Hong Kong.

I perceive the enhanced attention on English varieties as a challenge placed on the "standardness" as well as the ownership of English. In the sociopolitical aspect, the standards of English are identified generally as British English (BrE) and American English (AmE). While also being identified as "inner circle" regions, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand have gradually claimed their ownership of English. One of my informants, an English teacher with 18 years of teaching experience, said, "English does not belong to any country, it belongs to everyone on this Earth." Both experienced and fresh teachers agree with this comment, with the former claiming ownership in a historical aspect and the latter claiming it from a sociocultural aspect. This will be further discussed in Chapter 3. This direction is inspired by Amanda Foo and Ying-ying Tan, who examine Singaporean English (2019). Since English is

the mother tongue of most Singaporean children, it is considered a neutral inter-ethnic lingua franca in that multi-ethnic country (Foo and Tan 2019). Therefore, on the one hand, English speaking is a linguistic environment they find comfortable, where modification and utilisation of English with autonomy is allowed; on the other hand, they believe Singaporean English is a poor and broken variety (Foo and Tan 2019). Linguistic ownership combines the concepts of "authority" and "legitimacy," implying "the degree to which (people) project themselves as legitimate speakers with authority over the language" (Higgins 2003: 315). As the coverage of English expands globally, more cultural groups begin to claim their power over language standards and the use of English through the establishment of varieties. The link between the two phenomena is especially common in the discussion on English varieties in post-colonial nations (Foo and Tan 2019). Hong Kong's case could also be analysed by these concepts. Criticising one's own variety as broken emphasises the authority of so-called "native speakers" in English, which disempowers other cultural groups and should never be encouraged (Foo and Tan 2019).

Moreover, Foo and Tan's discussion of language identity unveils the social values of Singaporean English, which represents the people, the society, the history and the culture (2019). This is related to my research question particularly in the context of Hong Kong's position as a special administrative region in China. Hong Kong differs from Mainland China and other parts of the world, which is reflected in the unique development of language varieties. Out of my expectation, HKE not only shows the differences between Hong Kong and the rest of the world, but also indicates class stratification in Hong Kong society. While citizens encounter English to various extents in their daily lives, HKE is in fact not a variety of English used by everyone. Due to the class differentiation subtly presented by the local education system, HKE appears to be an indicator showing the identity of users, indicating neither the highest nor the lowest social class. The details of this are discussed in Chapter 4.

Research Question and Methodology

The main research question that has motivated my project is how local primary and secondary teachers consider HKE as a local variety of English. I wanted to know their opinions on what HKE means to Hong Kong people and society, as well as how they present this variety to their students. There are two main reasons for selecting teachers as my informants. First, I wanted to know their perceptions, which should be affected by the linguistic training they received. All of my informants, except Helena who works as a teaching assistant, hold linguistics and pedagogy degrees from either local or overseas universities. The idea "all varieties of a language share the same status and value" is mentioned explicitly in their education (suggested by Isolde and agreed upon by other teachers). I wanted to learn their approaches to handle the contradictions between this core principle in linguistics and the reality, which takes social, political, and economic factors into account.

Second, the multilingual educational setting in Hong Kong is closely related to the standpoints on language teaching of different social groups, including the teachers, the parents, and the students. To strike a balance between language tools for daily communication and professional occasions, Angel Lin suggests that both mother-tongue and English education should be local students' fundamental education rights (1997). English, as a cultural and linguistic capital, is obtained by learners under the influence of social context (Flowerdew and Miller 2018). Teachers take an active role in determining how the legacies of this current generation will be explained, perceived, or continued into the future. I was inspired by a quote from a local artist in a workshop related to environmental protection: "Eventually, we will protect what we love, love what we understand, and understand what we are taught". The same applies to language. To deduce the future of HKE, it is necessary to know how the variety is presented to students and thus be able to infer their attitudes towards it.

I have carried out literature reviews for broader understanding of the social and educational situations in the past, the current education setting, and discussions of social issues including educational inequality and identity. My study has been conducted mainly in the form of semi-structured face-to-face individual interviews focusing on the informants' understanding, their teaching and daily life experiences, as well as perception towards English teaching and HKE. I planned to conduct participant observations in different schools. Though I enquired at local schools and afterschool tuition classes to learn about teaching materials and students' application of both standardised English and HKE, some rejected my invitation and some did not respond to my email. In total, I have conducted 10 interviews. They were audio-recorded and lasted for one hour on average.

Table 1: Background of the interviewed teachers

Teacher	Teaching Role	School	Year of experience	Gender
Giselle	English teacher	Primary school (mainstream)	5	F
Isolde	Chinese teacher	Primary school (ethnic-minorities)	1	F
Helena	English teaching assistant	Primary school (mainstream)	2	F
Sebastine	English teacher	Secondary school (Band 2, co-ed, CMI, subsidised)	4	M
Ophelia	English teacher	Secondary school (Band 1, co-ed, CMI, public)	20	F

Seren	English teacher	Secondary school (Band 1, male, EMI, elite)	10+	F
Algernon	English teacher	Secondary school (Band 2, co-ed, CMI, subsidised)	18	M
Cordelia	English teacher	Secondary school (Band 1, co-ed, EMI, subsidised)	20	F
Mathilda	English teacher	Secondary school (Band 1, co-ed, EMI, private)	8	F
Leopold	English teacher	Secondary school (Band 1, co-ed, EMI, public)	5	M

Chapter overview

This thesis is organised in five parts. In Chapter 1, I provide an overview of language policies in Hong Kong and the English proficiency of Hong Kong people. Tracing back to the colonial era and education policies utilised by the British Hong Kong government, we can see the similarities and differences in understanding the rationale behind the current education phenomena while exploring the position of the city on the international stage. Together with the ideas provided by my informants, I present a comprehensive evaluation of English in Hong Kong today.

Chapter 2 contains the personal opinions of my informants on HKE and the analysis I made based on their comments. Different features are examined while portraying HKE. In this chapter, my informants share not only their attitudes towards HKE, but also the possible criteria for its emergence. The multilingual setting contributes to the significance of English which is comparable with the dominant daily language, Cantonese, in some social contexts, for example, academic and workplace settings. On different occasions, HKE and standardised English serve different functions.

In Chapter 3, I discuss how pedagogy relates to teachers' opinions of HKE. Since HKE is not in the teaching requirements issued by the authorities, teachers have the flexibility to arrange class content according to their own focus. 8 out of 10 teachers mention that compared to AmE and BrE, HKE is closer to daily life, which is helpful in bridging students' experiences to language classes. Language ownership and challenges placed on global English standardisation are also discussed. I see how teachers move between grey areas to provide the students with a comprehensive vision to take language varieties into account, to guide them to choose the appropriate lens to understand the language and the society.

In Chapter 4, I investigate educational inequality and Hong Kong identity as reflected by language standardisation strategies today. Factors including familial status, educational resources, and socialisation do play a role in language learning and the validation of language varieties. HKE, as a variety lying between Cantonese and standardised English, marks the specific social position of its user – neither the highest nor the lowest in terms of socioeconomic status. From this aspect, I reconstruct the relationship between language and society that unites and generates cultural identity. The concept of the "other" is applied in this chapter.

In the last chapter, I review and conclude the discussion. By reviewing the main findings, I outline the overall rationale of the thesis, with more on my personal perceptions. I

also suggest possible directions for future research, including comments that not addressed in this thesis, which can be considered as future project avenues.

Chapter One: Overview of English Language Proficiency in Hong Kong

In 1862, English was included for the first time in the Hong Kong education system by the colonial government as a compulsory subject in schools. The first public examination for all secondary school graduates was conducted in 1932. Through the Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination and Hong Kong Advanced Level Examination to the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education Examination (HKDSE), the significance of English has been maintained and even elevated over the years.

Research on the proficiency of Hong Kong people's English is very limited. The latest statistics released by the government is the 2021 Population By-census (Census and Statistics Department 2021). It was said that 55.3% of locals who are aged 5 and over can speak English. A study conducted by the Social Science Research Centre of the University of Hong Kong in 2015, which is one of the most recent as well, shows that 56% of locals can speak English well, and 52.7% can write English well (Bacon-Shone, Bolton, and Luke 2015).

In this chapter I offer a brief picture of the current language reality in this city, in accordance with the thoughts of the teachers I interviewed. The terms "band" or "banding" are used in the discussion. To cater to students with different learning abilities, the Education Bureau divides all secondary students into three tiers, namely Band 1 (the best in academic performance), Band 2, and Band 3. Locals thus roughly regard schools with respective bands of students as different "bands" as well. From teachers' diversified background, opinions from multiple perspectives can be analysed.

Combined with the sociocultural and historical factors, English stands in a unique position that connects with every individual in Hong Kong. Even though one might not speak

or understand the language, English seeps through many aspects of life, for example price tags in the shops and announcements played repeatedly in MTR stations. I asked for comments from the teachers, to begin the interviews by evaluating the local linguistic profile. From their observations in daily life as well as teaching, they provided me with diverse ways to consider the proficiency of English among local Hongkongers. Through further explanations and more examples, teachers suggested possible reasons behind the current conditions, highlighting diversities in society, and describing the general trend of language development.

One of the reasons behind their diverse opinions is teachers' different expectations towards their students. Cordelia, as the English subject leader in a band 1 EMI school with 20 years of experience, highlights that teachers expect a certain level embodied in the students according to the reputation and banding of schools. "New teachers will have the concept like 'you are a student from this school, so these grammar points or vocabularies should be familiar.' Expectation mismatch is not rare."

One Side of the Story: Worsening English in Hong Kong

Firstly, teachers describe the fading English-speaking culture within the city. Seren, an English teacher at an elite secondary school with more than 10 years of experience, compares the current English atmosphere to the old days, especially during the colonial era. "People will be surprised when they meet someone who can speak English fluently, but it was simply normal in the past." Taking the cultural ideologies and habits of locals into account, Seren pointed out that this is not mainly because of the lack of confidence to express oneself, but the fundamental incapability due to limited language exposure.

> "I am surprised that the word 'ambulance' on my son's toy is spelt wrong. Even if government officials sometimes pronounce other's names mistakenly, more and more

people, especially the younger generation, might think publications need not hold a high standard and be less careful. No one proof-reads, or in some sense no one really cares."

Seren finds this low awareness of correct English to be a saddening fact, since the mindset would hinder the growth of children, and to a larger extent the reputation, the core culture, and the future development of the city.

Other than a decrease in social expectations, Seren also considers the change of citizens' background: population dynamics in recent decades are one of the reasons for the fading English-language culture:

> "The portion of the grassroot population is increasing due to migration. Parents who have a lower education level are busy at work, they cannot provide children with sufficient English resources, let alone mentioning parents who do not realise the need and urgency to acquire the language at a younger age for the children."

Personally, I think there is one more point on demographic change. In fact, quite a lot of middle-class Mainlanders move to Hong Kong to provide better education for their children and they will likely attend elite schools like Seren's, where teachers also observe the trend. Instead of recognising the superior position of English, those parents might cherish Mandarin as well, with students urged to have high competency in both languages. As a result, part of the attention is directed towards these other language, and the significance of English is not as celebrated as it was in the past. Many teachers, including Seren, have mentioned the socioeconomic class of students as a factor influencing their English ability. Though many learning resources can be found in city libraries and online, familial support is still essential, as I will discuss in Chapter 4.

Secondly, the usage of grammar patterns and vocabularies is increasingly limited. "If students have spent a portion of time in English, it would not be very bad. A certain fluency

can be achieved, yet whether those expressions are natural would be another issue." Seren highlighted the formation of "robotic" patterns in language application. By "robotic", she means that students and other English users tend to use fixed expressions frequently and are unable to modify usage naturally. When students learn through classes instead of daily contact, shortcomings are significant in these teaching methods of second language acquisition.

Cordelia shares a similar point of view in this context. Since she defines "good" as accuracy in delivery, she too thinks Hong Kong people's English is not good. "Students can use beautiful words, but obviously many recite without thorough understanding, which leads to the situation that it just does not fit the context." Like Seren, she mentions that while languages are acquired from textbooks, no underlying linguistics or sufficient explanations are taught. Furthermore, Cordelia discusses a "teaching tradition" that emphasises grammar. "The trend of prioritising grammar and omitting style is shaped. The flexibility of formality and genre, as well as room for creativity are neglected." She does not think that this ise the right way to teach:

> "An example, showing how rigid teachers can be. When I pronounce a word in dictation tests for junior primary school students, I would accept all spellings that have the same pronunciation as correct answers if no specific context is given. Like spelling 'murmur' as 'mermer'. I see it as a sense of phonics. When the student can classify what sound for what spelling, it shows that phonics is taught properly. This is in fact necessary which should be trained during kindergarten and junior primary education. The same applies to other linguistic rules and areas."

Apart from the worsening English proficiency of local Hongkongers, some teachers also highlighted the polarisation of English proficiency among Hong Kong people. Other than Seren and Cordelia, Mathilda, an English teacher at a private EMI school for 8 years.

commented that although locals are accustomed to English in the practice of code-switching, fluent communication solely in English tends to be a struggle. Therefore, she also categorises Hong Kong people's English proficiency as negative. "Although I am always teaching Band 1 schools, I am aware of the diversities among local students. Some Band 2 and 3 students I have encountered in the past can hardly spell basic words, which in some extreme cases the 26-letter alphabet is unfamiliar". She shares her experience as an examiner in the Territory-wide System Assessment. "None of 4 students in a band 3 school speak in that 10 minutes for group discussion. Band 1 students may not be speaking really sophisticatedly, but at least something can be shared. You can see, this is the other end of the spectrum."

From teachers at higher band schools, I can see the high standards they put on English learners, which I believe is closely related to their learning experiences and social class (or social class they encounter most of the time in their daily lives). It is understandable that they find the present situation disappointing, because this is not the society and English atmosphere that they once experienced in the past in their socioeconomic and educational circle, as Bacon-Shone suggests in Chen and Carper's work (2015). When I was a secondary school student, I considered my English level bad among Hong Kong people, since I could not write sophisticated essays or speak fluently with an American or British accent like my friends. I assumed that people in my circle were exactly the demographic pattern in the whole society. Similarly, elites, including schoolteachers with more than 10 years of teaching experiences I interviewed (like Seren and Cordelia), who can speak English and received EMI education in the 1980s or 90s do not represent all of Hong Kong. Yet, the expectations in their minds persist, creating a perspective criticising the worsening language skills of local Hongkongers.

The Other Side: Appreciated English in Hong Kong

Among teachers at non-elite schools, for example my informants who teach in Chinese Medium of Instruction (CMI) schools and local primary schools, I recorded comparatively positive comments. First, teachers compare Hong Kong to other Asian regions. Sebastine, an English teacher at a local Band 2 CMI school with 4 years of experience, considers Hong Kong people's English proficiency relatively advanced. Even though English is not the primary language in Hong Kong, he is confident that dealing with it is not challenging for most of the local students he teaches. Algernon, also an English teacher at a local Band 2 CMI school for 18 years, is relatively neutral. "It depends on who we are compared with. Among Chinese and most Asians, we are above average. Yet, our situation is not comparable with Singaporeans – English is mostly bounded in our language classes." From Algernon's opinion, I am further convinced that English proficiency is generally evaluated by comparison. Therefore, the counterparts selected by the teachers reflect their expected proficiency in Hong Kong people. To explain, my informants never criticise Hong Kong people by comparing ourselves to Americans or British, because it is not reasonable to compare second language learners with first language ones. Yet, although Singaporeans are also native English speakers, Singlish is not recognised as an international standard among English varieties. Furthermore, since Singapore is an Asian country, the ground for comparison will be more appropriate. When one simply compares Hong Kong with other Asian countries, I think this shows the informants consider English less important locally – its position in Hong Kong is more or less similar to that in other Asian countries.

Second, informants focus on the practicality of English to determine people's proficiency. Giselle, a primary school English teacher, also gives a positive comment. "It is totally fine for us to handle daily communications, though the grammar and pronunciation are sometimes inaccurate." She mentioned that people are generally very clever, they can make

complicated words and sentences easily. Making use of body language is one such trick. Ophelia, who has been teaching at a local Band 1 CMI school for 20 years, shares a similar opinion. She comments that the proficiency as "quite good", thanks to the historical and educational experiences the city has gone through. By comparing today to the past, she thinks the overall English proficiency among Hong Kong people has risen. As for Isolde and Helena, who teach at primary schools, they believe that English proficiency among Hong Kong people is of high standard. Isolde suggests that, especially in the workplaces of customer and professional services, Hong Kong people are good at listening and understanding English. Helena shares her opinions regarding the pragmatic feature of Hong Kong people's language pattern. "Hong Kong people are direct and practical, it makes work easier. Language is always a tool for communication, so I believe those who can use it efficiently can be considered as 'good at English'."

In Katherine Chen and Gray Carper's research on "Multilingual Hong Kong", Professor John Bacon-Shone of the University of Hong Kong holds an opposite viewpoint to Seren's, explaining the underlying reason for the deterioration of Hong Kong people's English (2015). Until 1969, the University of Hong Kong was the only university in Hong Kong, in which only a very tiny portion of students from EMI elite schools were admitted for tertiary education (Chen and Carper's 2005). Thus, the average English proficiency of university graduates then was higher than that of their counterparts today (Chen and Carper 2005). Indeed, the percentage of HKDSE candidates—the examination determining university admission in Hong Kong—who receive an offer from local universities has increased in general, from 25.79% in 2012 to 40.43% in 2023, with the highest, 49.28%, in 2021 (Joint University Programmes Admissions System 2024).

From these teachers and scholars, I realised that they look into the situations by putting English as a minor language in Hong Kong people's lives. Communicative accuracy will be

more than enough while evaluating our abilities, they maintain; after all, it is mainly for working. They believe Hong Kong people's English is not deteriorating; rather, it has been improving among lower social classes, making it unfair and unreasonable to compare the current level with the smaller elite population in the past, who were the only group of people proficient in English.

Chapter Two: Teachers' Understanding and Perceptions of HKE

Understanding of HKE

With reference to the teachers' knowledge of linguistics and their observations during application of English in daily life, I asked them what kinds of features would spring into their minds when we mention the term "Hong Kong English" as an emerging English variety. Teachers suggested characteristics in various aspects. I will elaborate their opinions in three areas, namely vocabulary and expressions, pronunciation including accent, and grammar.

Vocabulary and expressions

Most of my informants mentioned the use of cultural-specific terms and vocabulary associated with HKE. Mathilda provides examples such as "cha chaan teng"—a type of local Hong Kong restaurant, a term which has entered the local English-language lexicon. Speakers add in new terms that are unfamiliar in standardised English contexts to cater to the communication needs of specific geographical and cultural items. Giselle, an English teacher with 4 years of experience in secondary school teaching and currently working as a primary school English teacher, mentions the frequent use of terms which translate Cantonese slang and expressions directly, for example "laugh die me" and "add oil" which carry similar meanings as "laugh out loud" and "come on (as encouragement)". Certain knowledge in Cantonese and Hong Kong culture is necessary for understanding; therefore, she believes that to some extent, HKE is limited to internal communication.

Isolde, a newly graduated teacher who teaches Chinese in a primary school for ethnic minorities, holds a different opinion. She believes HKE can accommodate external communication, speakers with no knowledge in Cantonese and local culture can also interpret

it, since the differences in grammar and vocabulary usage between HKE and standard English are small. She catagorised unintelligible expressions as Kongish, and demonstrates the merge of British English and Cantonese in HKE with a line from a local film. “When speaking ‘none of your business’, the first word is stressed to be pronounced as ‘nan of your business’.” While “nan2” is a Cantonese swear word, variations in HKE might not affect the intelligibility of the conversations, yet Hong Kong people will be able to understand more than the literal meanings, realising the inside-joke and pun of the expressions. I hold the same understanding of HKE as hers: if cultural-specific concepts are translated appropriately, Cantonese romanisatised terms can also be HKE. It is a common language for us, the Hong Kong people, united by Cantonese-derived HKE. HKE, in this case, is more related to practices and intentions. Cordelia talks about the use of Cantonese slang such as “long time no see”, which is a typical example mentioned by most of the teachers during the interviews, on that has even gradually gained recognition from other countries as standard usage, and has become an entry in the Cambridge Dictionary. Indeed, HKE does not always have English grammar as a base, but is still intelligible to foreigners. Locals should find it easier to understand, but it is not as exclusive as Kongish, where Cantonese knowledge is very necessary.

Next, HKE includes the application of sophisticated yet unnatural terms in standardised Englishes. “Students make things complicated to try to show sophistication for better grades,” says Seren, who regards this application as a general misconception among students. “For example, it is fine to say ‘toilet’, or ‘bathroom’, or ‘restroom’. Calling it a ‘lavatory’ is slightly weird.” To most local students, English is their second or even third language. They learn how to speak according to what is written in books from classes, not how first language speakers communicate through natural immersion. To reply to “how are you?” by saying “I am fine, thank you, and you?” has been mocked by many as a common example to show the limitations in language-learning by second language speakers.

Sebastine describes the learning process as “mechanical” due to the heavy educational pressure. Expressions like “in a nutshell” and “in conclusion” are often used with incorrect grammar and in the wrong context during exams. Like Cordelia, he believes some students learn English via reciting to speed up the progress in exam preparation. Consequently, they can hardly utilise the language as a tool to communicate and get in touch with other cultures. He emphasises that simple English is always more than enough for foreign conversation. Helena, a teaching assistant at a primary school with two years of experience, has a similar observation. Hong Kong people tend to feel safe doing things by sticking to “samples” and past experiences, using phrasings such as, “If you have any enquiries, please feel free to contact (name) at (location)” in school notices and “This is the end of my presentation, thank you for listening” in presentations. Once she sees these lines, she will guess the writer is probably from Hong Kong. I am not sure if there are any similar “samples” in other regions, which is probably a common struggle encountered by people who learn English as a second language. Living in this rapid metropolis with low tolerance for mistakes, Hong Kong people are afraid of divergence, and this hinders creativity in language usage. HKE is described by Sebastine as “canned” (罐頭式), which is a direct translation of a Cantonese expression, showing the high similarity of use between users like that of the contents in a can produced by standardised procedures in factories.

To add to this, Helena sees HKE as “direct” for communication. This is favourable for locals at work. She gives an example to show the conciseness of HKE. “Local teachers would say ‘Can you help me on…?’, while NET teachers are likely to say ‘Can you do me a favour? Can you…?’” In Cantonese communication culture, there are no complex and long greetings, discussion will begin right after a “hi”. Helena appreciates the efficient and practical feature demonstrated by HKE, accommodating our workplace culture.

Pronunciation including accent

Giselle mentions sounds including [th], [r], and [l] that are rather iconic in the Hong Kong accent. Isolde also comments on the HKE-style pronunciation of nasal sounds; many skip the use of [n] to pronounce [l] instead. The confusion of these consonants is also described in a paper summarising the pronunciation of HKE (Deterding, Wong and Kirkpatrick 2008). The scholars discuss the trend in which people tend to pronounce Cantonese words beginning with [n] by the sound [l] (Deterding, Wong and Kirkpatrick 2008).

Algernon points out the use of exclamation words in HKE. Terms including “wor” and “la” take a significant role in Cantonese communications: small variations in tones can mean a considerable difference in the meaning or the attitude of a speaker. This is a feature to express underlying meanings efficiently, so Hong Kong people also apply it in English to facilitate communication with minimum effort. To exemplify, “ok wor (Cantonese tone 1)” and “ok wor (Cantonese tone 3)” are radically different in meaning: the former means “wow, this is good”, while the latter signifies “He/she said this is good, yet I did not say so. So, if any undesirable situation takes place, I should not be blamed.”

On the other side of the spectrum, some locals are keen on learning the accent of speakers who treat English as a first language (mainly AmE and BrE), perceiving nativeness as professionalism. Helena dislikes the “semi-American” tongue-rolling style that she notedduring her university years. This was not only because of the arrogance and superiority displayed by some certain students, but also the lower intelligibility that affects the pace of communication. Algernon also suggests that Hong Kong people’s current preference for the AmE accent is influenced by Hollywood films.

Grammar

Ophelia mentioned that HKE grammar is the main area affected by Cantonese. Many locals tend to use English vocabulary with Chinese grammar. Isolde suggests that the weak grammar capability of Hong Kong people is evident in HKE. Neglect of tenses and the missing -s in plural forms of nouns are common. Another common mistake, as mentioned by Seren, is that many Cantonese native speakers would say "me and my friends" instead of "my friends and I". The understanding of the expression might not be hindered, yet these usages are "wrong," as Seren commented.

Although HKE features in grammar are different from the variations used by first language speakers, Cordelia emphasises Hong Kong people's specific pursuit in accurate grammar. Despite being able to communicate in English fluently, HKE speakers are considered by some people to have low competence in English because of their distinct grammar pattern. She finds this comment depressing, and thinks that grammar should not be prioritised to this extent. My informants have diversified comments on whether HKE grammar patterns are "wrong" or "distinct", and to me it sounds like personal preference upon their definition of "correctness". Seren chooses to strictly follow standardised BrE in class. Ophelia prefers students to follow standardised grammatical rules, but mot as strictly as Seren.

Analysis

After all, languages are for communication. Hong Kong people cherish efficiency, as Leopold, an English teacher at a local public school, suggests. People prefer to make use of their knowledge to express "the most by the least", i.e. using the fewest words to present their ideas concisely. "Since we know both Cantonese and English, we can select the helpful parts to facilitate conversation." He believes people's choices contribute to the framework and form of HKE. This is an important reason why I personally do not see HKE as a "broken" variety or

a consequence of being “semilingual”, which means not capable in either Cantonese and English (Lin 1997). It should be understood exactly the opposite – only proficient speakers can move flexibly between the two and make communication easier. With more students being admitted to tertiary education (the highest percentage of admission is recorded in 2023 since the establishment of the HKDSE Examination in 2012, in which 39% of JUPAS candidates received an offer from local tertiary institutions), the users and coverage of HKE are increasing within the city.

A common pattern in HKE is one in which English words and Cantonese grammar are applied. A single English word can cover many implications, making it easier to search for the right word for a certain meaning. Also, specific terms are often named in English, so the locals often actually do not know the Cantonese name of certain items, for example academic theories and office tools like “scanner” and “espresso machine”. To add to this, as Giselle and Isolde both point out, in digital communication typing English is faster than typing Chinese characters. On the other hand, Cantonese grammar gains an edge in efficiency when compared to English: there are no changes in verb tenses and no differences in nouns for plurality. As Giselle suggests, variations all aim at making things easier.

Language is fluid, as is HKE. Algernon mentioned he cannot come up with a definition or categorisation of HKE, as English is always changing and mixing. HKE has experienced and will continue to experience different changes, and its legitimacy as an individual variety is challenged by scholars (Setter, Wong and Chan 2010; Edwards 2015) as well as the public. To look at the transformation of HKE and other English varieties, we can get a picture of how local languages and lingua franca contact and influence one another, as well as how societies and cultures develop under globalisation and its intersections.

Perceptions of HKE

Most (7/10) of my informants find HKE positive and interesting while the rest stay neutral. Although HKE is not allowed in formal assessments, teachers welcome the development of the variety. In the following section, I elaborate the perceptions of my informants to note that this does not necessarily reflect their teaching strategies in class. As Cordelia mentions, her identity as a teacher often reminds her not to put students' academic grades in the HKDSE at risk, despite her huge interest and preference towards HKE.

I find that while both fresh and experienced teachers embrace and claim the variety with a positive attitude, their reasoning is rather different. For experienced teachers, English has been considered part of Hong Kong since they received their education during the colonial period. As one of the three official languages, English has been in use since the beginning of the colonial era. Therefore, Hong Kong should be entitled to claim the ownership of its English variety, as HKE is a product of the autonomy granted by historical and political factors. As for fresh teachers, they emphasise that "English does not belong to any specific country". Being born and raised in a generation where English acts as a lingua franca, they believe every cultural group has the power to modify the language according to their language habits, "tailor-made" to express cultural-specific items, while at the same time bridging communication with the outside world.

Seren thinks using languages with creativity is not a bad thing, as long as it is not used in formal occasions. The boys in her class often do direct translations of Chinese sentences especially during English class when Chinese is banned for communication between classmates. For example, for the phrase "okay la", the literal meaning expressed is "okay", but their emotions are highlighted by the tone of "la" ("la" in tone 1 means "it is not bad but not that

good as well", with tone 3 means "I'm done, stop urging me", with tone 4 means "I am done and I am showing you", and with tone 5 "are you done?"). When all parties in the communication understand the jargon or underlying meanings, conversations are more fun and interpersonal relationships can be facilitated. Likewise, Giselle believes HKE brings up a common understanding and inside jokes of the society via language, and thus the sense of belonging and cultural identity can be cultivated.

Algernon redefines the term "standard", questioning the concepts of "language standardisation" and "language ownership" (Foo and Tan 2019). Given that English does not belong to any country, he maintains that standards are assigned in a local context instead of being a global consensus, with AmE standards being solely for Americans, and Australian English standards limited to Australians as their audience. He discusses his acceptance of HKE in terms of pronunciation; as lomg as one's accent does not affect understanding, HKE accent is definitely acceptable. "Accents of the Northern and Southern Americans are different even when they are from a single nation!" While he places a question mark on the legitimacy of "standard", his intention is to challenge the knowledge structure placed on the rest of the world by Americans and Europeans as to "proper English."

Function

Teachers have different ideas in terms of the functions of HKE. Some emphasise the superiority of the recognised varieties of English , for example BrE and AmE, in a formal context; others embrace the use of HKE in all aspects of Hongkongers' lives. I see a general pattern behind their opinions. Similar to their comments about the local language reality, teachers of EMI and higher band schools prefer limiting the use of HKE to daily informal communication. These teachers believed that word choice and grammar accuracy reflect people's general awareness of language use, and thus their carefulness on other tasks. Higher

band teachers assume that communicating professionally with sophistication is a core language skill that their students should acquire. The average ability of their students seems to shape teachers' expectations, and a flexible switch between "standard" English and HKE has been assumed for their students and for most Hongkongers.

Isolde graduated from a band 1 EMI secondary school that strictly prohibited the use of HKE in formal communications. Seren finds students' robotic conversations in exams to be disappointing. Problems arise especially when they can only reply to comments by saying, "I (don't) agree with you". This is not a mistake in meaning, but the register of conversation is omitted. Mathilda points out the used variety indicates the relationships and intimacy of speakers, so applying it in informal communication will be more suitable. Cordelia does not prefer HKE outside daily communication, yet she observes that the variety is more accepted by the public in the context of popular culture, including local comedies like "Over My Dead Body" and several episodes in "Come Home Love: Lo and Behold". She appreciates the changes in dynamics, and expects the development of HKE will be on a positive track if no more external resistance arises.

Algernon and Sebastine belong to the latter group, with high acceptance of HKE. They hold a totally opposite perspective to Seren's, commenting that if the expressions are understandable for all parties in communication, HKE expressions and fixed sentence structures are acceptable in both formal and informal situations. For example, Sebastine does not find saying "long time no see" in formal contexts problematic. Ophelia holds the same view, and mentions that English learners should not use HKE but rather adopt a more traditional learning approach. The varieties used, in some sense, are indicating one's English ability. A foundation of standardised English knowledge must be built at the very beginning. Adding creativity and fine-tuning the usage would be up to speakers' later preference.

Mathilda compares HKE with standardised BrE or AmE, emphasising that the former is not necessarily inferior. Perhaps it is not as recognised in formal conditions, but this does not matter much in normal day to day communication. She gives an example of external communication. “If we are using HKE in other countries, as long as others understand it, everything will be fine. Yet be careful, it might be a sign ‘you do not belong here/ us’. It is not a circumstance of discrimination but just a matter of cultural identity. So, you might need to think about what image and identity you want to show to others.” Her comments have led me to look into the concept of “other”, as will be discussed in Chapter 4.

Cantonese largely affects the use of English by locals in terms of language habits and attitudes, mainly in how messages should be structured, and why messages have to be sent. While we get used to certain sentence patterns and tie them together with “being polite”, we stick to our past experiences even though we have switched to another language. The “weird” and “unnatural” use of HKE may somtimes be tinged with formality in conversations, as can be deduced when sentences are translated directly into Cantonese for review. Also, many English messages are for information exchange and other practical purposes, so being concise and timesaving will be appreciated. As HKE can hardly demonstrate different registers, Helena suggests the limited literature and arts value of HKE. The development of arts and literature in HKE is not focused, and indeed its variety is insufficient for this function.

Language changes according to speakers’ needs. One of the reasons why we try to preserve our language and its varieties is because we can observe cultural ideologies and features through them. HKE reveals Hong Kong culture, while being itself part of that culture. Tracing its progress, it will probably still takes some time for HKE to be regarded in consensus and serve a larger set of functions for its language community.

Chapter Three: Pedagogy & Redefinition of Standard English and Knowledge

HKE has cultural meanings that bridge English and the social context of Hong Kong. All of my informants expressed their willingness to include HKE elements in class to enhance the linkage between English and students' daily lives. Through advertising strategies of language schools and themes of popular language teaching videos on social media, I found topics that attract many views; "natural alternatives to replace HKE expressions" is one of them. For example, topics like "how to say, 'I have no time' and 'you go first' naturally" (Tam 2023) are discussed by local YouTubers in sharing standardised English usage with the aid of HKE via educational channels. In the following, I illustrate how local English teachers try to introduce HKE through culturally specific elements and language habits like grammar, and develop tailor-made teaching strategies to enhance students' learning motivations and performance.

Teachers struggle to balance their students' varying levels, learning objectives of schools, exam requirements of HKDSE, and keeping their class's interest. I will first briefly describe the composition of HKDSE English Language requirements. The assessment is divided into four components: reading, writing, listening with integrated skills, and speaking. The reading paper includes a compulsory section and an elective section, each with two levels of difficulty. Similarly, the writing paper includes a compulsory part with a single topic for all candidates and an elective part in which the candidates can choose one out of eight questions. The marking scheme is divided into three aspects, namely content, language, and organisation. In the third paper, listening tasks are the same for all candidates, whereas the integrated skills are assessed through two elective parts. Lastly, for the speaking assessment, candidates participate in 10-minute group discussions in a group of four, followed by an individual

response question. The grading system is composed of four areas, namely pronunciation & delivery, communication strategies, vocabulary & language patterns, and ideas & organisation. Due to the level and motivation differences among students in one class, schoolteachers need to pay attention to the majority, while trying their best to take care of the minority of their students. They are expected to make the class interesting and informative, at the same time not too exam-oriented since teachers are not supposed to deliver "education" as utilitarian, Sebastine comments. The interviewed teachers were still able to make good use of HKE in class for teaching purposes.

The first pedagogic feature is the preference for including HKE elements in junior secondary classes. Not only can these students understand HKE with flexibility thanks to the English foundation built in primary school, but they also have some time to prepare for the HKDSE. Seren encourages her students in Form 4 and below to speak more with foreigners, prioritising real-life communication and immersion in learning. She once brought her students to a restaurant where they could only speak English for ordering and inquiries. Students are encouraged to speak, and HKE terms and grammar like "we want some water" are always accepted in such informal situations as long as communication remains fluent. With this experience, her students came to realise that knowledge in class is not enough to express themselves concisely. She encourages trial and error; after all, examination performance does not always equate to one's actual ability. These out-of-classroom activities are exclusively for junior students, since Seren fully understands the pressure from the public examinations they face. For senior students, she never stops students from reciting and practising exam skills, and she tries to show more "down-to-earth" materials like films and dramas to her students, to train their sense of English as much as possible. For these students, HKE is one of the tools to maintain their interest towards language learning. In Cordelia's class, she asks her students to proofread email writing samples to polish their senses of formal writing. For example, students

like to use the terms like “double-confirm” and “please kindly help…”, so Cordelia will explain why they are not preferred in standard formal writings, and introduce proper alternatives. She always emphasises that those are not wrong words, but simply not the best ones when taking the genre and register into account. Also, apart from the past papers and examination preparation materials, HKE readings and sharing add some interesting elements, which serves as a break from the tedious and pressurised studying. Cordelia shares articles about Hong Kong popular culture using many HKE vocabulary, i.e. culturally-specific terms like “cha chaan teng” (Hong Kong style restaurant) and “mo lei tau” (nonsense features in local films), and encourage discussion in class as oral and writing practices.

HKE is more likely to be used in the classes of experienced teachers and those who teach in higher band EMI schools, where teachers can choose to do so. In the schools of Seren, Cordelia, and Mathilda, no textbook is used in class. Teachers can design their classes, as long as the process fits within the learning objectives announced by the school, which allows students from different classes to take the same sets of examination papers according to the same schedule. More extracurricular activities can be conducted, and so it is easier for teachers to make good use of HKE for educational purposes. Simultaneously, those teachers still hold certain rules and standards. For example, HKE is not accepted in academic writing , and the usage of HKE without any grammar rules as foundation is strictly prohibited by Cordelia. She proposes the importance of grammar, which is again exactly what the HKDSE assesses. She prefers not to define grammatical mistakes as “wrong”, instead saying that they are not common language habits and asking students for “better alternatives”. Mathilda agrees that grammar sometimes serves as an indicator of one’s language ability, but she believes the rules are not as strict as often imagined. An acceptable range is presented, including a certain creative use of HKE, and teachers guide students accordingly.

For teachers teaching at lower band schools, they believe students' ability to express themselves accurately should always come first. After mastering the correct use of expressions and grammar rules, students are free to use HKE as their personal preference. Yet, Sebastine and Algernon realise that many students choose to use advanced vocabulary and grammar patterns in examinations without fully learning their appropriate usage. This might be caused by their simply reciting the sample essays from after-school tuition classes. The copying and pasting of HKE terms from those essays is not acceptable, for example using "long time no see" and "well received with thanks" in the wrong contexts. In view of the weaker English foundation and understanding of students in lower band schools, teachers prefer sticking to the standardised usage "to put students in a safe position," as Sebastine suggests.

The second feature is that teachers' acceptance of creativity in oral skills is higher than in writing. The nature of these different types of communication is key to understanding this. In Hong Kong, English is the major workplace language, especially in written form. Ophelia explains her focus on monitoring students' correct use of tenses. Not only because of HKDSE, but also students' "assumed working ability", which is indicated by the formality and registers of their writings. She admits that exams are always products of capitalism, fitting into the expectations and needs of society. Oral communication is mostly not as formal as black-and-white documents, so intelligibility comes before sophistication. Sebastine believes that expressing accurate emotions is more important than having perfect pronunication. Students must show the appropriate tone in role plays enacting discussions with friends or with their bosses. Culturally-specific terms will also be more accepted, like calling the Mid-Autumn Festival the "Mooncake Festival" and describing pretty girls as "goddesses". Nonetheless, Cordelia believes that HKE pronunciation is not ideal, so she still tries her best to train her students to have better English pronunciation. The HKE accent not only gives examiners a bad

impression, but also shows that the students have failed to understand the stress-time rhythm of English.

As most of my informants agree, students in fact may have no awareness of the varieties of English they are using. Students will have no reason to look down on HKE when compared to other more recognised varieties of English; as a result their confidence and capability of English is affected by sociopolitical factors only to a limited extent. If a rigid understanding of "right" and "wrong" is introduced, this may hinder the students' ability to use the language flexibly and creatively.

How examination systems affect the learning of English?

There is a saying in Hong Kong that studying is not the only way to success, but the way with the highest possibility to success. (嘅 佢 嘅). Consequently, students and parents put a lot of effort in earning the grades displayed on report cards. The social meanings of grades is highly significant; examinations are seen not only as an evaluation, but also an arrow to point to every individual student's direction and destination. I discussed the local examination systems and requirements with my informants. They describe it as a "necessary evil" – a system necessary to determine who can obtain the opportunity of receiving tertiary education, yet often in the format of "asking a monkey, an elephant, a bird, and a fish all to climb a tree" (asking students with different talents to take the same test). Given that most of the local teachers received their educations in Hong Kong, they are well aware of the limitations of the examination system. Ophelia expressed her regret that, even as a teacher, she herself could meet all the requirements and expectations of the HKEAA, the Hong Kong Examination and Assessment Authority. Therefore, it is improper to ask the students to do so. Algernon also mentioned that he does not prefer treating marking schemes

as the only answer. Acquiring basic English through learning is actually enough, and hitting high marks in exams is not always necessary.

Teachers believe that the change in the examination system has significantly affected the teaching syllabus and students' learning motivation. When there were five years of HKCEE education and two years of HKALE education, there was an additional year to complete the syllabus assigned by HKEAA. Both Seren and Sebastine claim that the current HKDSE syllabus is not that different from HKALE, but students have to complete everything in six years rather than seven. With the faster teaching pace to cater to these requirements, the differentiation between stronger and weaker students is more apparent, which makes it difficult to manage different levels of students within the same class. Moreover, the system requires almost all students to complete a 6-year secondary education. It loses the filtering function of the earlier HKCEE, transforming the completion of the six-year secondary education and the pursuit of a university degree into a norm among students. Those who choose to quit school for work or occupational training are considered as special cases, which tend to receive negative and critical comments.

Algernon believes the change is not beneficial to students' motivations. A single public examination imposes a discouraging attitude towards English – it becomes a one-off test in which continuity in polishing is not necessary once after they get into university. This is also one of the factors contributing to the polarised English abilities among Hongkongers. According to my own experience as a local student, many university students claim their English level has deteriorated since Form 6 when they worked to reach their "limit" and prepared for the HKDSE Examination, despite the fact tertiary education in Hong Kong is mostly in English. Giselle has had the same experience as I have. "They still realise the significance of English and believe there is room for improvement, yet in general not much effort is made to improve."

Mathilda is the only teacher who believes her pedagogy has not been greatly influenced by HKDSE requirements; her teaching experience in private schools may be one of the reasons for this. Not only do private schools have more educational resources, but they also offer students more choices, for example taking the International Baccalaureate (IB) as a university entrance examination instead of HKDSE. Her school divides students into two batches, 50% HKDSE and 50% IB. Different requirements lead to different expectations, as well as different strategies to accommodate the examination systems. IB sections allow higher flexibility, and the standardisation of marking schemes is less significant. HKE elements which are independent of the examination requirements can be added. Mathilda believes that, after all, English classes are for teaching English, instead of being exam-oriented to please the examiners. Moreover, most of the students from private schools have more diversified learning resources and capital, and thus have more opportunities for language immersion, which leads to a higher English proficiency. Given the different profiles of their students, Mathilda's attitudes differ from those of other informants.

HKE as Hong Kong culture and knowledge

The introduction of HKE in class reflects teachers' willingness to justify the culturally specific use of this variety of English. Teachers who have received training in linguistics avoid using such terms as "standard" and "native" to describe a language. As Algernon emphasised, a standard is only applicable in a regional and local context.

At the beginning of this project, I believed that HKE should be a variety used by most of the general public in the city. "Long time no see" and always answering "how are you" with the single answer "I am fine thank you, and you?" by everyone (generally as taught by textbook, since "how are you" is seldom asked in a Cantonese context; greetings are made with alternative phrases, such as "Have you eaten yet?") are cultural icons of Hong Kong, I had

thought. Yet I began to realise, agreeing with the teachers I interviewed, that most locals actually have no idea about the varieties of English. For example, on the one hand, they like eating “fish and chips” (BrE), and on the other they enjoy watching “movies” (AmE). With globalisation and the spread of American culture to the rest of the world, Hong Kong is not the only place experiencing this situation. Teachers mention the increasing prevalence of American English and the increasingly blurred line between varieties of English.

English, as reflected in its name, has its origin closely bound to England, but it has gradually claimed its international position as a lingua franca through colonisation and globalisation. Take the local examination system in Hong Kong as an example: Cordelia tells me that BrE is stated clearly in the guidelines for teachers by the HKEAA, as the standard in English teaching. It is therefore common and understandable that local students tend to view BrE (and sometimes also AmE) as the only acceptable way of speaking English. Given the general local schooling culture of obedience and mistake avoidance, the mindset of BrE as a “model answer” is thus shaped. As these students grow up and come across different social dynamics and popular culture, their experiences might contradict with what they have learned since childhood. More and more people support the view that “English belongs to the world”, as Sebastine mentions.

A language variety is a type of situated knowledge (Haraway 1988); its nature of being a “partial” reality is essential in shaping the whole picture, i.e., the English language is much broader than the definition identified by the British, the Americans, the Hong Kong government, or other parties that claim to be the “authority”. English carries social and cultural meanings of different parts of the world, and these elements are showcased and passed on in its varieties. Some of the interviewed teachers, as well as some of the critics and members of the general public, take the average English ability among university students in the past as the average ability among all Hong Kong citizens in the past, as Professor Bacon-Shone addressed in the

Multilingual Hong Kong project interview (Chen and Carper 2005). This is linked to Algernon's idea of "standards". We can observe the development of the language in shifts of power dynamics through changes regarding respective language features and varieties. Donna Haraway suggested the concept of "vision". She believes that the understanding, including modern science, towards the world today is dominated by a "conquering gaze" of white males, which is then claimed to be authoritative and universal, which is in fact male and European-dominated (1988). I see language in a similar light. Earlier in history, English was used by certain cultural groups, including British and Americans. While English has been introduced to the rest of the world, it not only serves as a common communication tool, but also a medium to transport the cultural and social influences of its earlier "owners". When a language starts to spread geographically, it starts to change as a result of local cultural and linguistic influences. Rather than judging the changes to be "mistakes", modern linguistics emphasises the equity between varieties, claiming different standards for different cultural groups. However, this concept has yet to be accepted by the majority of Hongkongers. Thus, the ideas to be instilled and taught to the younger generations become crucial factors in influencing the development and future recognition of Hong Kong English as a language variety. The encouraging fact is that Hong Kong teachers, at least most of my informants, are working hard in proving the legitimate position and value of HKE.

Chapter Four: Education Inequalities and Hong Kong English Identity

Although English education is assigned as a public right in Hong Kong (Curriculum Development Council and the Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority 2021), the acquisition and the capability of one's English nonetheless carry social meaning. Hong Kong people are often impressed by a fluent "native" accent like BrE or AmE. An equal sign is drawn, or at least a relationship is established, between fluency and professionalism, especially in the workplace. This is one of the major reasons why many local teachers tend to follow the language rules that fit in global consensus in teaching, since avoiding creativity is in some sense avoiding mistakes. HKE is generally not appreciated in formal occasions. I believe the reasons are not solely limited to the international nature of communication between parties where speakers must ensure their counterparts from different regions find their language intelligible, but also because of an othering effect between the so-called "social elites" and the general public. The former group can be categorised by factors including one's socioeconomic status and education level. With reference to educational realities, Lin suggests that huge differences between children with different familial backgrounds and thus educational resources are further enlarged by a generally insufficient support for English education (1997). Not only is the importance of English highlighted, but educational inequality in society is also revealed by this. English maintains the prestige and status of social elites, but also excludes people who are less privileged from climbing up the social ladder (Flowerdew and Miller 2018). To look at this more positively, English spoken with a fluent "native" accent and following accepted language rules can serve as an entrance ticket to the world of capital (largely contributed to by the commercial sector), offering every player upward mobility.

Education includes both school education and family education; I will discuss these two aspects separately. Schools in higher bands usually benefit students in two major ways: both the resources provided and positive peer influence among students. Since the former might be more related to the financial situation of schools, I put the focus on the latter. As Algernon and Sebastine both mentioned, students in their schools (Band 2 CMI schools) seldom communicate in English, sometimes even answering questions and asking for explanations in Cantonese during English class. Although students in Cordelia and Mathilda's school (Band 1 EMI schools) do not use English as a daily communication language either, they follow the rules strictly in classes and are keen on practising their speaking skills with friends and classmates. At the same time, students in higher band schools are more capable in helping one another to improve and polish language skills. In Seren's school (a Band 1 EMI elite school), there is a hidden mechanism to divide students into classes – students with similar strengths, for example, those who are good at English or Mathematics, are put in the same class. Not only can teachers cater to students' levels more easily, but students are also encouraged to help one another. A positive learning atmosphere is created, and students in the same class can learn and progress together. Arousing similar learning dynamics in lower band schools is not easy, since the students' talent might not be in academics. They might need more assistance from teachers, not to mention help from others. As a result, students in higher band schools will have better results in public examinations and parents are thus more willing to push their students into higher band schools. A virtuous cycle for those high band schools thus occurs, and regrettably a vicious circle for their lower banded counterparts. Eventually, students from higher band schools are more likely to be intentional users of HKE.

Who can get into higher band schools? The answer is obvious – the chances of children from families with higher social status are much higher than those from families with lower status. This links to my next discussion, on family education. Teachers agree that support from

parents is essential in the learning process. The majority of parents realise the importance of English in the world, and care about their children's grades in English. Tuition classes, supplementary exercises, or asking children to speak English at home are often strategies that they follow. But the level of support is greatly affected by the socioeconomic status of families.

At the same time, to support children's learning in the family, first, and of utmost importance, parents need to have an awareness that they need to help. Although many parents are willing to help, Seren came across parents who place all the responsibility for academic education on schools. She pointed out that the immersion duration of those students would be limited to school hours, which is insufficient. After the examination grades are released, those parents might blame their children or even their teachers for not performing as well as expected. Some parents might then encourage their children to devote more time to science subjects like mathematics and physics, in which grades can be improved through short-term intensive training, to obtain a better overall grade in examinations. Consequently, not only do the students' English levels deteriorate, but the importance of English in their minds is also diminished.

It is favourable when parents can help, but this difference among families is further enlarged by class differences. Algernon does not think that the learning resources available to students from different families greatly vary, with the help of the internet in the current digital era. However, a key point is that the ability to choose appropriate references from loads of unverified online materials is not easy for students as learners. Many parents are willing to spend a significant portion of household income on children's education, including English after-school tuition classes. But parents with higher incomes can go for centres with better reputations and select the teaching method that suits their children the best, in accordance with their distinctive learning habits and preferences. Moreover, some parents speak with their children in English at home, which in general only parents from higher social classes who

receive more comprehensive education can do. The consolidated foundation, shaped with the aid of schoolteachers, tuition class teachers, and parents, provides students with the "capital" to engage with the language, thus paving the way for access to HKE.

The Cultural Uniqueness of HKE

When expressing their personal ideas towards HKE, many of the teachers mention it is a component of the local culture. The requirement for speakers to have knowledge of both Cantonese and English, as well as the awareness of local culture and social issues, creates common topics exclusively for Hong Kong people. As the aforementioned viewpoint of Mathilda reveals, the variety does not aim to enforce stereotypes, yet it undeniably creates an othering concept of "who belongs to my city?", or more concisely, "who belongs to my cultural group?"

Indeed, the city of Hong Kong is not composed of a single cultural group, and the attitudes towards HKE and other English varieties reveal the forms of attachment that we carry towards this city. As Seren indicated, one's English ability and varieties of usage create a subtle indication of one's social class. HKE, interestingly, lies in the middle and marks the linguistic identity of Hong Kong people who belong to a rather specific position – neither the highest nor the lowest in social class. Some parents are likely to overlook the significance of Cantonese, and many children from upper social class families can hardly speak the language. Most importantly, that group of people does not find this problematic. Of course, when one does not have knowledge of Cantonese, he or she therefore cannot understand or produce the underlying cultural or linguistic elements of HKE in sentences.

I once chatted with a researcher in the Department of English at my university, whose project focuses on the attitudes the locals towards different varieties of English. As a non-local, she was very curious why certain interviewees deliver a rather negative attitude towards

Cantonese, given that they were born and raised in this city. We came up with a hypothesis, which I believe to be more or less true: that a certain group of people (likely to be the elites in the society) perceive their inability in Cantonese as marking their superiority, "different" from the general public. Cantonese is considered inferior, as is HKE as well. The two are reckoned as the languages of the lower social classes in this society. A division of "us" and "the other" is created by the language and variety used. I, as a person who experienced the local public education system, do agree that the relationship between local students from the public and the private education systems is interesting, and is somewhat hostile. We take different paths to get into universities, and the diversities in experiences shape different or even opposite perceptions towards many elements in society, for example social structures and norms, as well the attainment of opportunities.

Take examinations as an example. The Chinese Language in the HKDSE has always been regarded as "the devil's paper" due to its great difficulty. However, we need at least a level 3 in this subject to meet the minimum requirements for an offer from local universities. In other words, many students lose the chance to receive tertiary education due to an unsatisfactory grade attained in the Chinese Language in the HKDSE. According to statistics from the Education Bureau, 11158 out of 39819 students (28%) failed this subject in 2022 (Education Bureau 2022). As for students from private and elite schools, the option of taking the IB is offered. The IB system allows non-ethnic Chinese to apply for tertiary institutions in Hong Kong, and the Chinese Language examination can be exempted. Yet because of the high school fees required by schools that provide IB teaching, this is not a choice for everyone in Hong Kong society. Some of my friends from private and elite schools do not understand why the majority of Hong Kong students are so goal-oriented and pragmatic. I believe probably the answer is that we need to perform as well as we possibly can on the HKDSE, since we never know if there will be another chance in the future in case we miss the current one. This

difference is great, separating those student from the highest class and those from the middle class into different sub-cultural groups within the city.

In terms of language socialisation, children learn to interpret and convey social meanings through day-to-day communication, which is indeed a core skill in social interaction that they have to acquire, as a member of a specific cultural group (Paugh 2015). The ability to adhere to grammatical rules and apply appropriate language varieties is not only helpful for effective communication, but also as a product trained and consolidated via daily practices (Paugh 2015). The case of HKE shows the negotiation between personal preferences and social expectations in grammar and vocabulary choices. Taking into account the social meaning and advantages carried by "native" English expressions, we can see that the ability to access "native" varieties provides Hong Kong people with the opportunity to choose their identity, and some are willing to do so because of different factors including socioeconomic and ideological ones. As a result, the celebration of BrE and AmE "standards" makes certain students and Hong Kong people strive to be an "insider" instead of the "other" in their desired sociocultural group. Lin suggests that the emphasis (or overemphasis) on English in academic and professional spheres is hindering children's recognition of their indigenous linguistic and sociocultural identities and resources (1997). Moving away from HKE to access BrE or AmE is indeed a path to climb upwards in the social class structure, providing people with a chance to select their identity. But this may or may not be successful; one may or may not be recognised by the "upper" social group. As Giselle said in our interview, "you can get into the higher group you want to be at first glance, but on second thought and continuous experiences afterwards, you can fake no one, including yourself." Many Hong Kong people lie in the middle in this divergence, and they are perhaps among the most likely speakers of HKE.

Conclusion and Directions for Future Research

In considering language conservation, oftentimes Hongkongers stand up for Cantonese. Hong Kong English is not in the spotlight, and the complexity and social meaning reflected by this language variety are often ignored by diversified stakeholders and by the whole community. Meanwhile, however, an increasing number of scholars are raising worldwide awareness as to the importance of recognising local language varieties. In this thesis, I have discussed the value of HKE behind the façade of the stereotypical label of "mistaken grammar and pronunciation". My research has examined the role and status of HKE in local society as perceived by Hong Kong primary and secondary education teachers, the ones who determine what HKE looks like and will look like within our community. Among existing studies of HKE, the voices of those who work in the frontlines of the local education system are often not apparent. They are closer to the younger generation, who have plenty of first-hand observation and experience to be shared and heard.

HKE indeed belongs to Hong Kong people and society, but this discussion is not only limited to Hongkongers and Hong Kong. By redefining what "standard" means, we can challenge the international ownership of English and the right to change the usage of English according to our own habits and sociocultural context. Yet, even though the teachers I interviewed remain positive towards the introduction of HKE in schools, the struggle between flexible class contents and rigid examination rubrics cannot be ignored. It is likely that, in the near future, HKE and standardised English will continue serving distinct functions and occasions, with enhanced possibilities for HKE to be embraced and employed. As time goes by, more and more of us will realise that HKE is not mistaken or broken; it is not the reflection of deteriorated English ability, but the power and knowledge to make good use of language tools to accommodate our own needs and wants and identities. I am convinced that the

reclaiming of language rights is not limited to cities in the post-colonial era like Hong Kong, where attitudes of the authorities are crucial in pushing the discussion forward. Compared to other countries, where citizens might incline to certain standardised varieties as well, the preferences shown in examinations further consolidate stereotypes placed on HKE by the public. I regard this as over-standardisation as hindering the development of HKE. We need scholars, the public and the government working together to secure the significance of language varieties, and to protect the unique cultural elements that make us different.

The recognition of HKE not only symbolises the right to knowledge production and standardisation by Hong Kong people, but also represents a specific cultural identity. We HKE speakers compose a sociocultural group in Hong Kong society, thanks to our particular common familial and educational backgrounds. The "othering" effects that take place to build a distinctive cultural group through language variety are clear, no matter if members choose to be there or are categorised as being there. Language variety, especially accents with higher indexicality compared to other HKE characteristics, is commonplace in differentiating one's class level and socioeconomic group. As a result, the encouragement of HKE gradually leads to the increased self-identification of our group, asserting that we are not worse than the upper class, at least in terms of what we are speaking. Though accent is the first thing that springs to many people's minds when talking about HKE, it is interesting to note that the teachers mention many cultural-specific expressions while describing HKE. This difference in focus is perhaps due to their profession, in which attention is put on components such as grammar and collocation, beyond pronunciation alone. Also, while HKE is not commonly used in writing, I do not see that this implies that locals consider HKE to be negative. Hong Kong people do not only write for ourselves, but also for others to know more about our cultural group. We embrace our cultural identity at the same time introducing it to others. Indeed, I look forward to the

future development of HKE creative writing and literature.. From language to society, we seek ways to preserve distinctiveness while connecting with the international arena.

While doing this research, I was surprised to find that the teachers (including my English teacher during senior secondary school) perceived HKE in ways different from what I had imagined. I hated HKE and was ashamed of it for more than 10 years since primary school, and had assumed that they looked at it in the same way. Consequently, I missed out on fully understanding the fruitful sociocultural implications of English varieties all over the world. I plan to continue my study to further investigate the reality of language and education in my city of Hong Kong, and I hope to continue in this research to provide the public with an approach to take a closer look into language socialisation, enhancing our awareness of language identity, both for Hong Kong and for other regions to raise a voice to redefine what English, in all its wonderful variations, can be.

References

Abbas, Ackbar. 1997. *Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.

Bacon-Shone, John, K. R. Bolton, and Kang Kwong Luke. 2015. *Language use, proficiency and attitudes in Hong Kong*. Hong Kong: Social Sciences Research Centre, The University of Hong Kong.

Baker, Hugh D. 1983. "Life in the cities: The emergence of Hong Kong man." *China Quarterly*, 95, 469-79.

Bolton, Kingsley et Kwok, Helen. 1990. "The dynamics of the Hong Kong accent: Social identity and sociolinguistic description." *Journal of Asian Pacific Communication* 1(1): 147-172.

Bolton, Kingsley. 2003. "The sociolinguistics of Hong Kong and the space for Hong Kong English." *World Englishes* 19(3): 265-285.

Census and Statistics Department. 2021. "2021 Population Census Use of Language by Hong Kong Population." https://www.census2021.gov.hk/doc/pub/21C_Articles_Use_of_Language.pdf

Chan, Mimi. 1994. "Hong Kong." In. Pp. 405-443 in *Traveller's Literary Companion to South-east Asia*, edited by Alastair Dingwall. Brighton: In Print Publishing.

Chen, Katherine and Carper Gray. 2017, 2005. *Multilingual Hong Kong: A Sociolinguistic Case Study of Code-Switching*. Documentary film, 30 minutes. USA: Films for the Humanities and Sciences.

Curriculum Development Council and the Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority. 2021. “English Language Curriculum and Assessment Guide (Secondary 4 - 6).” https://www.hkeaa.edu.hk/doclibrary/sba/hkdse/eng_dvd/doc/hkeaa_eng_lang_final.pdf

Deterding, David, Jennie Wong and Andy Kirkpatrick. 2008. “The pronunciation of Hong Kong English.” *English World-Wide* 29(2):148-175.

Education Bureau. 2022. “Table 5: HKDSE Analysis of results of candidates in each subject.” https://www.hkeaa.edu.hk/DocLibrary/HKDSE/Exam_Report/Examination_Statistics/dseexamstat22_5.pdf.

Education Bureau. 2023. “Hong Kong: The Facts – Education.” https://www.gov.hk/en/about/abouthk/factsheets/docs/education.pdf

Edwards, J.G. Hansen. 2015. “Hong Kong English: attitudes, identity, and use.” *Asian Englishes* 17(3), 184-208.

Evans, Stephen. 2001. “Hong Kong English and the professional world.” *World Englishes* 30(3), 293-316.

Flowerdew, John and Lindsay Miller. 2018. “Social Structure and Individual Agency in Second Language Learning: Evidence from Three Life Histories.” *Critical Inquiry in Language Studies* 5(4), 201-224.

Foo, Amanda Limin, and Ying-Ying Tan. 2019. “Linguistic insecurity and the linguistic ownership of English among Singaporean Chinese.” *World Englishes* 38(4): 606–629.

Haraway, Donna. 1988. “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective.” Pp. 236-240 in *Anthropological Theory for the*

Twenty-First Century: A Critical Approach, edited by Bolles, A. Lynn Bolles, Ruth Gomberg-Muñoz, Bernard C. Perley and Keri Vacanti Brondo. Toronto: University of Toronto Press

Higgins, C. 2003. "'Ownership' of English in the Outer Circle: An alternative to the NS-NNS dichotomy." *TESOL Quarterly* 37(4), 615–644.

Joint University Programmes Admissions System. "Main Round Offer Statistics." Accessed 24 February 2024, https://www.jupas.edu.hk/en/statistics/main-round-offer/.

Kongish Daily. Posted January 2016 at Facebook. https://www.facebook.com/KongishDaily/posts/many-boss-day-day-say-e-di-90-after-gei-university-graduates-keoi-dei-gei-englis/666631866812068/

Lin, Angel M.Y. 1997. "Hong Kong Children's Rights to a Culturally Compatible English Education." *Hong Kong Journal of Applied Linguistics* 2(2), 23-48.

Paugh, Amy L. 2015. "language Socialization." Pp. 125-139 in *The Routledge Handbook of Linguistic Anthropology*, edited by Nancy Bonvillain. Abingdon-on-Thames: Taylor & Francis Group.

Setter, Jane, Cathy S. P. Wong, Brian H. S. Chan. 2010. *Hong Kong English*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press

Sewell, A., & Chan, J. 2017. "Hong Kong English, but not as we know it: Kongish and language in late modernity." *International Journal of Applied Linguistics* 27(3), 596-607.

Sing Tao Education. 2022. "　教

(Important News on Education: A Total of 7 Secondary Schools are excluded from the list of English-medium Instructed)." Sing Tao Daily, January 3, 2022.

https://std.stheadline.com/daily/article/2431863/%E6%97%A5%E5%A0%B1-%E6%95%99%E8%82%B2-%E6%95%99%E8%82%B2%E8%A6%81%E8%81%9E-%E4%B8%AD%E4%B8%80%E8%87%AA%E8%A1%8C%E6%94%B6%E7%94%9F%E7%94%B3%E8%AB%8B%E5%B1%95%E9%96%8B-%E8%90%BD%E8%BB%8A-%E4%B8%AD%E5%AD%B8%E5%A2%9E%E8%87%B3%E4%B8%83%E6%89%80.

Tam, Melody. “太沒禮貌了！原來這 5 (That’s Rude! These 5 English expressions are in fact offensive, stop using them!)” Filmed November 2023 at YouTube. Video, 11:25. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MGkvlUlakTw

Tam, Melody. “你 嗎 3 (Seriously? Pay attention on the usage of these 3 English expressions!)” Filmed December 2023 at YouTube. Video, 12:02. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fj7SHv4Jhw4