
Teaching and using English in Hong Kong, China, and the world

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A profile of the current language situation in Hong Kong and its environs

[An adapted and enlarged version of a talk-cum-discussion with graduate students of the Department of English in Baptist University, Hong Kong, on 21 March 2005]

THERE ARE, as it were, three levels in the title of the discussion, each going further 'out' from Hong Kong, although the direction and perspective could as easily have been reversed, moving 'inwards' from the world to China to Hong Kong, one of history's most successful social, cultural, political, and economic anomalies. There could equally easily have been *four* levels: Hong Kong, China, *Asia*, and the world, a framework that would even then have been simpler than, say, 'London, England, the United Kingdom, the European Union, Europe at large, and the world', but much the same as 'Lagos, Nigeria, Africa, and the world' or 'Los Angeles, California, the United States, and the world'. All such clines are significant in the discussion of English as a world language, and *ET* would welcome comparable studies.

The trouble with this approach is that it is *Anglocentric*, saying a lot about English worldwide but not usually enough about world, regional, and local patterns of language, in which patterns of English may be extensive but are only a part, and, in terms of an entity like China, still a pretty minor part – whatever all the recent China-related articles in *ET* may suggest to the contrary. In addition, one may end up saying little about the other languages in wide use in places like London, Los Angeles, Hong Kong, or, say, Lagos in Nigeria in Africa, where the British imperial legacy has remained

in many ways as sharp as in Hong Kong. In Nigeria, the vast majority of the many languages in daily use are (of course) West African, but the *national* Nigerian language is *English* (a European import), which means that Lagos has in fact a lot in common with Hong Kong, although official status and use may be managed differently.

Thus, English isn't the *national* language of Hong Kong, which is defined as a *territory* formerly separated from China but recently re-incorporated as a special administrative region (SAR), so that in a real sense it is 'inside' China (despite its special status) while China is 'inside' Asia. As a result, Hong Kong for some purposes behaves as if it were sort of not quite in China and is for most purposes in direct, unmediated contact with the rest of the world. And, as it happens, the Chinese of Hong Kong is different from that of, say, Beijing and Shanghai, though not Guangzhou. In this it is unique.

Broadly speaking, however, there is a common geopolitical pattern worldwide to which Hong Kong conforms: going from local through one or more intermediate levels to global. As a result one can say three rather special things about English in Hong Kong that many, perhaps most, people in the territory would agree with:

First, English has been in Hong Kong for a long time, because Hong Kong was part of the British Empire, all of which is true but less relevant as time goes on, because Hungarians and Russians and mainland Chinese were never colonized by either the British or the Americans but are *at least* as busy acquiring and

using English for global purposes as any HongKonger. They are not however doing it out of love or cultural fascination (although such factors may be significant for some people), but, like the Hungarians and Russians, for pragmatic reasons like commerce, science, and technology.

Second, I could also say, as many do, that English is not particularly well used in Hong Kong, and no one in the territory would be surprised if I said it. But millions of people in many places (including native speakers in the UK and the US) are routinely accused of not treating the language properly. In Hong Kong, however, the critics' knives are particularly sharp, and often put to use. For example, if I innocently say (as a linguist) that a certain expression is more or less unique to Hong Kong – that is, if I say in effect that it is a *Hong Kongism* – some local people would automatically label it bad English and make a mental note not to use it again (at least in front of foreigners), on the long-standing principle that any distinctively Hong-Kong expression must by its very nature be bad English.

Third, it is also commonly said that English is badly taught in Hong Kong, because most school teachers have a shaky knowledge of the language. Even if this were true, it wouldn't make me despair, because English is not always well taught in many places, including where it is the mother tongue. However, what the critics imply is that it is *appallingly monumentally* badly taught in Hong Kong. It is almost as if they take a kind of perverse pride in how bad the teachers are. But then I've heard this before, in other places where I have lived and worked. I've heard it in Glasgow in Scotland, in Birmingham in England, in Bombay in India, in Quebec in Canada, and in various parts of the United States. Indeed, if I believed everything I've been told I would believe that English is pretty consistently the worst-taught language on earth. Yet it thrives like a weed, and more money is spent on teaching it (mainly badly, some would have it) than has ever been spent on any other language.

So what might the truth be? Not an easy question, but some kind of answer is possible. One can begin, for example, by locating the use, teaching, and learning of English, particularly in Hong Kong, in two ways:

- We can say, in historical, cultural, and colonial terms, that the British came to HK, used English here, in government and business,

and what they left behind when they officially went away was a large number of people who used a wide range of English, from very bad and 'Chinglishy' at one (low) end through to very British and *élite*, learned either by being educated in England or in a number of excellent local schools (with fine gradations in their prestige and social implications).

- Or we could say something linguistic like 'the general English usage in Hong Kong is a variety in its own right – even a microcosm of English as the language is used worldwide', and we could both use the label 'Hong Kong English' and consider both how this term is interpreted in Hong Kong and elsewhere and how it relates to other phrases in widespread current regional use. For example:

- 1 How does 'Hong Kong English' relate to 'China English'?

(Note: Not *Chinese English*, although this term is also current. The term *China English* is however nowadays heavily favoured in mainland China, as articles by Chinese language scholars in *English Today* have for years clearly demonstrated.)

- 2 How does it relate to 'Asian English'?

(Note: Few people use this term and those who might are unlikely to suggest that there is anything uniform about kinds of English Asia-wide (from the 'Middle East' to Japan).)

- 3 How does it relate to 'World English'?

(Note: although in increasing use, this term is still something of a convenient catch-all expression lacking technical precision.)

- 4 How does it compare with 'Singapore(an) English'?

(Note: HongKongers often watch whatever happens in the Lion City with close attention.)

- 5 What are its links with 'British English'?

(Note: They are close, but everyday English usage in Hong Kong is as distinct from the many kinds of British English as any other post-colonial variety.)

- 6 To what extent is it influenced by 'American English'?

(Note: Like most other places, the answer is at least 'considerably'.)

All of these are complex and significant matters, complicated further by how people use such terms. For example, what happens when

two people are talking (anywhere in the world, probably in English) and both find themselves using the term 'Hong Kong English'? When they do this, are they sharing a term whose meaning is much the same for both? Or could one be using it more or less informally as a handy label, much like 'American English,' while the other is thinking of a variety which is inherently describable by scholars and might even be acceptable among linguistic liberals as a variety of English in its own right? Is it likely that they will at any point try to define the term so that each knows what the other intends when using it? Improbable, to say the least.

To take up a point touched on above: Hong Kong is in Asia, and may contribute to some kind of general 'Asian English', or at least, and more likely, an 'East Asian English'. However, the very word *Asian* poses problems here. What do people mean in Hong Kong when they talk about 'Asians'? I am not sure. Interestingly enough, in the UK, the term *Asian* tends to refer primarily to people from the Indian sub-continent, whereas in the US it tends to refer to Chinese, Japanese, Koreans, and Filipinos. Arabs, Malays, and others are also manifestly Asian in geographical terms, but not necessarily in terms of social usage.

If however all these nationalities and ethnicities are Asian, what might a comprehensive 'Asian English' be like? Does such a thing exist? Or if it doesn't, *could* it exist? Do numbers of HongKongers and other Asians have views on such things? The issue is complicated by the lack of a clear western-hemisphere focus in the term 'American English,' which does not usually mean the English of all the Americas rather than only of the US, and maybe Canada (whether Canadians like the idea or not). There is also the eccentricity of proposing a 'European English' (which might be perceived as in effect excluding the Englishes of the British Isles, the term being restricted to the usage of non-native European speakers of the language, from Scandinavia to the Mediterranean and the Caucasus – and, in the North Atlantic, only Iceland).

There are however four particular elements under discussion here: English, Hong Kong, China, the world. We can note that the entity 'Asia' is in fact not normally included, and probably by and large most people wouldn't think of including it. Asia is too big and too varied, and we cannot, at the moment at least, imagine what a comprehensive 'Asian English'

would be like, just as we can't imagine a specific 'European English', although we *can* imagine an 'American English', because the English of the US *does* in fact dominate and shape the usage of the whole of the Americas, including such other languages as 'American' Spanish, Portuguese, and French.

The usual view of English is that it is a language, just as Chinese, Arabic, Italian, and Japanese are languages: that is, it stands alone, and is not part of anything larger (being an 'Indo-European' language does not matter in this context), although there are lesser entities inside it, just as Putonghua and Cantonese are 'inside' Chinese, or Moroccan Arabic and Iraqi Arabic are distinctive parts of Arabic at large.

Are languages always equal? Ideally, yes, in humanistic terms, and certainly among intellectuals and social liberals, but not necessarily everywhere and for every purpose: Arabic for example is regarded by Muslims as special, because it is the medium or vehicle, in written form in the Koran, of the word of God. For them, therefore, Classical Arabic is simply too special to be the same as other languages. Are all varieties of a language like Arabic or English *equal*? Perhaps, ideally, in humanistic terms, but for many people they are by no means equal. Koranic or Classical Arabic wins over all other Arabics, Mandarin tends to win over other all other kinds of Chinese, and when known as Putonghua it has a key role in the People's Republic that no other Chinese 'dialect' (in effect no other member of the Chinese language family) can compete with.

And some languages, it would appear, to use Orwell's phrase, are more equal than others. They may be unequal in terms of numbers of users and how widely they are distributed, but such a situation does not depend on anything *inside* the language itself: that is, it is extrinsic, not intrinsic. It is social and cultural, affected in the main by at least two factors: numbers of users and width of distribution. As a result, something called 'Chinese' is the world's top language in terms of sheer size, whereas something called 'English' is the world's top language in terms of distribution and its current use as the world's lingua franca. The profiles of these two language giants are not very close.

So, whether we can say that Chinese or English 'wins' depends on our criteria, but, because there are these two distinct criteria (size for Chinese and distribution for English), there

Hong Kong's language profile

In colonial times

- 'Chinese' for the majority and, with English, a language of the courts (and meaning primarily Cantonese, other 'dialects', and the use of traditional characters in writing)
- English for a local professional and business minority
- such minority languages as various Chinese 'dialects' (such as Shanghainese, Hokkienese/Fujianese, and Hakka), Filipino for Filipina domestic helpers, and Gurkhali for Gurkha security men from Nepal

As a special administrative region of China

- Cantonese, recognised officially (but not yet widely in terms of the general public) as a distinct Chinese language in what the government sees (or hopes to see) as a fully 'bilingual and trilingual' society
- Putonghua used by both visiting 'mainlanders' and an increasing number of locals wishing to work in or with the rest of China, and taught in schools as the national language
- English, as used by British, American, and Australian expatriates, citizens of the Philippines (mainly women domestic workers and

nannies: Filipinas), other foreign residents and visitors, and as taught in schools both because of post-colonial social momentum and the use of English as the world's key international language

- Tagalog/Pilipino (used by a significant, mainly female minority, often mixed with Filipino English)
- Various South Asian languages, particularly Gujarati, Sindi, and Gurkhali

The majority of English teachers in schools are Cantonese who teach Cantonese-speaking school children, as a consequence of which local English is 'Cantonized' in pronunciation and contains 'Cantonisms' comparable to 'Indi-anisms' in Indian English. A minority of teachers of (or in) English are native English speakers, notably NETs ('Native English Teachers' on special contracts), with a variety of Anglophone backgrounds. At university level, the use of English as a medium of instruction involves teachers from many parts of the English-speaking world. As a result there is no longer a BBC-style 'macro-norm' for English in Hong Kong, but various 'micro-norms'.

Cf. *The Oxford Guide to World English*, 2002

have to be not one but two answers: Chinese and English (or English and Chinese) are the world's two leading languages, *but for different primary reasons* – a state of affairs that says a great deal about Hong Kong, because this 'special administrative region' of China uniquely interfaces with the two most significant languages on earth. However, life in Hong Kong is complicated by, as it were, having one English language to deal but, increasingly, *two* Chinese languages: Cantonese, the general mother tongue, and Putonghua/Mandarin. Or, in other words, it benefits (or suffers) from a condition known locally as 'bilingualism and trilingualism', a reality already being emphasized by the British before they left and by Tung Chee-Hwa's government after they left.

In effect, English in Hong Kong is a middle-class language used for business with the world beyond China, including the internet and emails, by the better-off as a medium of instruction for their children in 'international schools', and as a TV, cinema and theatre

option. An important consequence is that members of the widening middle-class seek to join this élite, via the English taught in Cantonese-medium local schools or, better still, English-medium local schools, or best of all schooling overseas and/or through more foreign travel.

There are however ways in which English resembles Chinese. Both are 'language complexes' rather than languages as the term has traditionally been used and understood. Indeed, because of the multiplicity within English, the Indian American linguist Braj B. Kachru in the 1980s successfully pluralized it+ as 'the Englishes' and as in 1998 I produced a book called *The English languages*, treating English as an actual or incipient family like, say, the Romance languages. We live in a world where there is both an English language complex and a Chinese language complex, and, uniquely, Hong Kong is a key location where all this complexity meets. That may prove to be good linguistic *fung-shui*. ■