

Article

English Speakers in Hong Kong

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Abstract

This paper argues it is no longer possible to refer to Hong Kong English speakers en masse as EFL speakers, nor can we say they speak a fully formed new variety of English called Hong Kong English (HKE). Taking into account the language(s) used for school, for work, for entertainment, and for socializing, we can see that Hong Kong's speech community is extremely heterogeneous, both regarding levels of English and degrees of English usage. A small but growing number of Hongkongers now report that they speak English as a native language. Hongkongers with white collar jobs have been found to write more English than Chinese while at work, making it reasonable to argue that they write English as a second language (ESL). Many Hongkongers seek out English-speaking social networks and choose to watch and listen to English-medium forms of entertainment, which means their English-speaking experience is very ESL-like. However, in addition to these variations, there are great differences in English speaking and writing abilities that correlate largely with socioeconomic status. Adding to this lack of homogeneity among English speakers is the fact that extremely few Hongkongers speak English among themselves outside of specific work or school contexts. This means that HKE is not yet a new variety of English, and will have a difficult time becoming one unless the linguistic habits of Hongkongers change. English language education should take all these individual differences into account, including potentially wide differences in the speaking, listening, reading and writing abilities among individuals themselves.

Keywords

Hong Kong English, Hong Kong, Asian Englishes, EFL, ESL

1 Introduction

Hong Kong is a city of roughly 7.5 million people located on the Southeast coast of China. According to the Hong Kong government's 2016 By-census (Hong Kong Census and Statistics Department, 2017), 88.9% of the city's population speak Cantonese as their "usual, daily language," but many Hongkongers also speak English. This region around Hong Kong has had contact with English speakers going back to the seventeenth century with the appearance of the British East India Company and missionaries (Schnieder, 2007). This contact resulted in the creation of Chinese Pidgin English, but it never evolved

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into a creole (Ansaldo, Matthews & Smith, 2010). Hong Kong's largest English influence comes from being a British colony for 150 years up until 1997. Currently Hong Kong is officially under Chinese rule, but, along with Macau, it has the status of a Special Administrative Region under the One Country Two Systems principle, which states that Hong Kong can retain its own system of government and rule of law until 2047. Hong Kong still retains a closed border that requires visa access from mainland China.¹ It also has its own flag, passport, and constitution, which is called the Basic Law. Many Hongkongers believe that the Chinese government is not fully abiding by the One Country Two Systems principle as promised. As a result, widespread, sustained street protests broke out in Hong Kong beginning in June 2019. These protests and political sentiments are related to English in Hong Kong because they have been shown to positively correlate with Hongkongers' identities as English speakers (Edwards 2016, 2018).

Hong Kong's long-term sociopolitical separation from mainland China has given it a distinct sociolinguistic history, one in which English has played a much greater role than it has in mainland China. English was the only official language of Hong Kong from 1842 until 1974, when Chinese was added as an additional official language without specifying any particular variety of Chinese. To this day, English remains firmly established in Hong Kong, enjoying a high degree of prestige and acceptance. It is the medium of instruction for the vast majority of courses taught in Hong Kong's eight government subsidized universities, which means that proficiency in English is a prerequisite to entering university. English is widely used in business and other work settings, especially in written communication, even among native-Cantonese speakers. As a result, the ability to use English is considered essential for success in education and in virtually all professional and service-related careers.

Linguists have conducted a great deal of research on English in Hong Kong, providing us with a clear and relatively uncontroversial description of its social functions and uses (e.g., Poon, 2010; Setter, Wong & Chan, 2010; Evans, 2010, 2016, 2017; Li, 2018). What remains unclear, however, is its status as a variety that is referred to as Hong Kong English (HKE). Linguists seem to agree that it is an emerging variety, but a clear and uncontroversial description of its current status as a new variety is still missing. This paper describes the issues involved and explains why it is not possible to clearly place Hong Kong within Kachru's (1985) well-known diagram of the Three Circles of English, or to use a single label (e.g., EFL, ESL, or new variety) to describe the English spoken by all bilingual members of the Cantonese-speaking majority. Based on these observations, readers should be aware that the term HKE is used ambiguously here to refer both to Cantonese-English interlanguage and/or to an emerging new variety of English.

2 English in Hong Kong and Hong Kong English

Most Hongkongers, including many educators, still hold exonormative standards, looking especially to British and, increasingly, North American English as standards to strive for. There is debate among linguists about the degree to which HKE has developed into a distinct, full-fledged variety. Most, if not all, agree it is not yet an official new variety because there are no native speakers of HKE (Setter, 2006), and that, unlike places such as Singapore, Malaysia, the Philippines, India, etc., few Hongkongers speak English among themselves (Li, 2018). Setter (2006: 767) made it clear that her use of the term "Hong Kong English" did "not attribute any special status for this variety as an official new variety of English," which indicates that she seemed to be using the term to refer to Cantonese-English interlanguage. Not all authors who use the term HKE have made their stance on its status clear. There does not seem to be much debate about whether HKE is emerging as a distinct variety of English; the question that remains is how far it has travelled along its path towards becoming one, and whether or not it is likely to continue to the point of becoming a variety as well established as others (e.g., Singapore English, Indian English, etc.). Not surprisingly, the question of HKE's status is multifaceted and difficult to answer. In addition

to numerous research articles, a significant number of books have been devoted to describing and discussing the status of HKE in great detail (Bolton, 2002, 2003; Setter et al., 2010; Cummings & Wolf, 2011; Evans, 2016; Edwards, 2018; Li, 2018). Interested readers can also refer to the recent book chapter by Bolton, Bacon-Shone and Luke (2020) and the references cited there. Setter et al.'s (2010, chapter 7) annotated bibliography of studies on HKE is also a useful reference, even though many studies have been published since then.

Many linguists have examined HKE's status as a new variety based on its phonological, lexical, and morphosyntactic features, and this will be discussed in the remainder of this section. Other authors have focused on sociolinguistic factors such as identity, language attitudes, social functions, and uses, which are discussed in the following section. Arguably, it is a variety's grammar that provides the strongest form of evidence for determining whether it is a language or an interlanguage, but despite all of the descriptions of HKE's features, some argue that these studies do not decisively determine its status of being either an interlanguage or a new variety (e.g., Hung, 2000; Deterding, Wong & Kirkpatrick, 2008; Setter et al., 2010). This is because interlanguages also demonstrate systematicity in their phonology and grammar. A key difference, however, is that interlanguage grammar changes through the various stages of the acquisition process. Based on this idea, one would expect an interlanguage to show individual variation due to the differences among adult speakers at different stages of acquisition, and I believe the individual variations seen in the data of HKE studies, plus the variations in the English of my own university students in Hong Kong, lean strongly towards HKE being an interlanguage rather than a new variety. Having said that, however, it should be noted that it could be both, because if there is a subgroup of native-HKE speakers among a majority of interlanguage speakers, this subgroup would not necessarily be easy to detect.

Regarding HKE's phonological features, Hung (2000: 337) said, "I do not think there is any dispute about the existence of an identifiable HKE accent," but then went on to say that this can be true "regardless of whether HKE is characterised as an 'interlanguage' or a 'new variety' of English." In other words, the fact that Hong Kong English speakers "share a common underlying phonological system" (ibid) is not evidence of HKE's status as a new variety of English. Furthermore, according to Sung (2015), the other grammatical features of HKE also do not provide incontrovertible evidence that it is a new variety. He said that compared to its phonological features, there is even less agreement among linguists as to whether many of HKE's grammatical features are unique to HKE; according to Sung (2015), some of these features are found in other new varieties of English (e.g., Philippine English, Indian English, and Singapore English), as well as what Mukherjee & Hundt (cited in Sung, 2015, p. 260) referred to as the "learner varieties" of English, and the remaining features may also be a product of the L2 acquisition process.

Some of the key findings about the grammatical features of HKE are presented in the remainder of this section. Readers will note that the participants of the majority of studies on HKE are university students. This is understandable since they are easily accessible to academics, but it raises questions about the degree to which these linguistic features exist in the English of all Hongkongers, especially considering the fact that there is variation even among university students themselves.

2.1 Phonology

Space does not allow a detailed review of all the studies on HKE phonology. For more details, interested readers can refer to the references cited below and the references cited in those works. None of the authors cited here committed to HKE being a fully developed variety of English, but all agreed that the English spoken in Hong Kong has recognizable phonological features that are consistent enough among speakers to make them a researchable object of study and analysis. Hung (2000) collected data from 15 first-year undergraduate students at Hong Kong Baptist University, who each read three lists of words. The total number of words was 281 and each list was read three times. Hung concluded that HKE

speakers use as few as 7 vowel contrasts. He discovered that certain pairs of distinct vowels in British Received Pronunciation (RP) were not distinguished by the HKE participants, being pronounced as single vowels, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Vowel Difference Between HKE and RP

Words	HKE vowel	RP vowels
<i>heed – hit, heat – hit</i>	/i/	/i:/ – /ɪ/
<i>head – had, bet – bat</i>	/ɛ/	/e/ – /æ/
<i>hoot – hood</i>	/u/	/u:/ – /ʊ/
<i>hawed – hod, caught – cot</i>	/ɔ/	/ɔ:/ – /ɒ/

(Hung 2000: 343)

In addition to the four vowels shown in Table 1, Hung's participants used three more vowels: /ɑ/ (*heart*); /ʌ/ (*hut*); and /ɜ/ (*hurt*). Hung noted that English varieties from other Asian countries, i.e., Singapore, Malaysia, China, and Japan, also have a simpler vowel system than British English, but that the distinction between /ɑ/ and /ʌ/ "sets HKE apart from the other varieties" (p. 344). He concluded this is likely based on the fact that the inventory of Cantonese vowels includes this distinction: [sam] ("three") vs. [sɑm] ("heart"). Hung concluded that the consonant inventory of HKE includes twenty contrasts, and is therefore also simpler than that of British RP. Some of its features clearly appear to demonstrate influences from Cantonese, such as distinguishing the voiced/unvoiced distinction of RP onset stops using an aspirated/unaspirated distinction. Nevertheless, Hung concluded that "[t]hough HKE shows the influence of Cantonese, its phonological system cannot be reduced entirely to the phonology of either Cantonese or English, but needs to be investigated on its own terms" (p. 354).

Deterding et al.'s (2008) study analyzed natural speech data collected through interviews. Their participants were 15 year-four English-major teacher trainees at the Hong Kong Institute of Education (now the Education University of Hong Kong). They found that the voiceless interdental "th" [θ], which does not exist in Cantonese, was sometimes pronounced as [f] word initially, and often pronounced as [f] word finally, while it was sometimes pronounced as [t] or omitted in medial position. Interestingly, the data showed speaker variation, because individual participants were fairly consistent in how they pronounced each of their own tokens of "th." Deterding et al. further point out that the use of [f] for "th" word initially is unique to Hong Kong English among South-East Asian Englishes. They speculate that this, along with some other phonological features of HKE, might demonstrate that it is "following some trends from Britain rather than adopting patterns that are emerging in the rest of South-East Asia" (p. 156).

Another feature considered unique to HKE is the conflation of [l] and [n] in syllable onsets. Hung (2000) reported a conflation in his data with no apparent pattern one way or the other, while Wong and Setter (2002, cited in Deterding et al., 2008: 160) found that replacing [n] with [l] was more common among their participants and concluded that this is likely based on the same [n] → [l] change that has recently occurred in Cantonese. Interestingly, Deterding et al.'s data includes only two tokens of conflating [n] and [l], again demonstrating a diversity of English pronunciations among the combined data of these three studies involving university students.

Setter (2006) looked at syllable duration, contrasting the speech of HKE speakers with that of British English speakers. She recorded class presentations that were given by 20 third-year undergraduate students at The Hong Kong Polytechnic University and contrasted this corpus with an existing corpus (SCRIBE) of read speech by British English speakers. She concluded that:

Hong Kong English speakers have smaller differences in the duration of weakened, unstressed, stressed, and tonic syllables than British English speakers as well as a much greater proportion of unstressed to weakened syllables than found in the British English data (Setter 2006: 780).

This can again be seen as an influence from Cantonese, which is a syllable-timed language.

Wee (2016: e68) examined the tonal patterns of HKE words by collecting data from 8 university students aged eighteen to twenty, who “use English fairly regularly in their daily lives (mostly at the university).” The subjects were recorded uttering a list of words three times, with each word occurring in utterance-initial, -medial, and -final position. After analyzing the data, he concluded that the tonal patterns used on HKE words should not be analyzed as stress patterns, as other authors have argued, but that they should instead be analyzed as lexical tone. He concluded that the system of lexical tone in HKE works as follows: word-initial boundaries are realized as a Mid tone; a High tone is used lexically in combination with any string of syllables; and a boundary Low tone is used to mark the utterance final position of declaratives. As far as I know, this is the only study that has proposed the existence of lexical tone in a(n) (emerging) variety of English.²

2.2 The lexicon

There is no doubt that HKE includes a number of distinct words. Table 2 lists some HKE words that were added to the 2016 version of the Oxford English Dictionary.

Table 2

New Hong Kong English Words Added to the 2016 Version of the Oxford English Dictionary

- **char siu** (*roast pork marinated in a sweet and savoury sauce, typically served sliced into thin strips*)
- **dai pai dong** (*a traditional licenced street stall, typically with a small seating area, selling cooked food at low prices; (now more generally) any food stall of this type*)
- **kaifong** (*an association formed to promote and protect the interests of a neighbourhood*)
- **milk tea** (*a drink originating in Hong Kong, made with black tea and evaporated or condensed milk*)
- **sandwich class** (*a class of people whose incomes exceed the limits for public housing but who cannot afford to purchase private homes*)
- **shroff** (*a cashier’s office or payment booth, esp. at a car park*)
- **siu mei** (*in Cantonese cookery: marinated meat roasted on a spit over an open fire or in a wood-burning rotisserie oven*)
- **yum cha** (*in Chinese contexts: a meal eaten in the morning or early afternoon, typically consisting of dim sum and hot tea*)

(OED Online, 2021)

Sung (2015: 261-3) cited and described many examples of HKE words from the literature. They can be categorized on the basis of their origin, and the following examples were all taken directly from Sung, with modifications to the wording of some definitions. Newly coined terms include: *Canto-pop* (Cantonese pop music), *Chinglish* (Chinese English), *mafoo* (lit. the stableboy; the prostitute’s manager), *NET* (native English teacher; pronounced “net”). Phonetic loanwords include: *cheongsam* (a long slim dress with slits along the lower sides), *gwailo/gweilo* (lit. devil man; foreigner, especially Caucasians), *mahjong* (a game played with tiles), *dim sum* (Chinese food served in tea houses), *laissee* (a red envelope containing money as a gift or for good luck). Loan translations include: *black society* (a Chinese secret society or triad), *snakehead* (a smuggler of illegal immigrants), *dragon boat* (the type of boat used for Dragon Boat Festival races). Words derived from other languages include: *coolie* (manual laborer) and

shroff (a kiosk or a payment counter), both from Hindi, and *catty* (a unit of weight equal to 604 grams) from Malay. Semantic shifts include: *body check* (a medical check-up); *to wish* (expresses future plans and hopes, rather than something unattainable or something one wants to be different); *back* (used in the work context in addition to the home context, e.g., “He’s not back in the office yet” means “He has not shown up to the office yet today”). Semantic shifts based on regional context include: *mainland* (those parts of mainland China excluding Hong Kong and Macau); *astronaut* (someone who emigrated out of Hong Kong and later returned to Hong Kong).

Cummings and Wolf (2011) published a dictionary of HKE words, which implies the existence of a large number of words unique to HKE. However, there are two reasons to question whether all the words in their dictionary exist in the mental lexicons of HKE speakers. The first reason is that it is not easy to tell whether some of these words are simply one-time borrowings from Cantonese, akin to code-mixing, or whether they are actually loanwords that have been fully adopted into HKE. For example, the dictionary includes anglicized pronunciations of Cantonese words, such as *mm goi (saai)* (“thank you”), *mm sai* (“don’t mention it; you’re welcome”), and *mo lay tau* (“nonsensical”), which are arguably one-time borrowings used in code-mixing. I say this because Cummings and Wolf cited examples they had found of all the words’ uses, and the cited examples of these particular words included English translations of their meanings, which indicates that whoever wrote those examples may have thought of these words more as Cantonese terms than as HKE terms. In contrast, fully adopted words like *gwailo* (also *gweilo*) (“Caucasian man”) and *sampan* (“a small flat-bottomed boat”) were both cited using examples that did not include English translations. It seems reasonable to assume that if a Cantonese-origin word is regularly used in English without being accompanied by an English translation, then it has been fully adopted into English. In contrast, if it is usually or always translated into English when used, then it has not yet been fully adopted into English. Having said this, it must be noted that English translations of Cantonese-origin words would only be required for non-Cantonese speakers. For native-Cantonese speakers, it is difficult to determine whether some of the Cantonese-origin words listed in Cummings and Wolf’s dictionary are recognized when used in HKE because they are part of the speakers’ HKE mental lexicons, or because speakers are readily able to link them to words that exist in their native-Cantonese lexicon.

This leads us to the second reason for questioning whether all the words in Cummings and Wolf’s (2011) dictionary are in the lexicon of HKE speakers, namely how the HKE speech community is delimited. Throughout this paper it is assumed that members of the HKE speech community are native-Cantonese speakers. The residents of Hong Kong who are native speakers of other languages do not use the phonological features discussed above in section 2.1 or the grammatical features discussed below in section 2.3. I have lived in Hong Kong more than thirty years. I speak advanced Cantonese and recognize most (but not all) of the words in Cummings and Wolf’s dictionary. Nevertheless, I am not a speaker of HKE as described in this paper. If a study were conducted to test which words in Cummings and Wolf’s dictionary are in the mental lexicons of Hong Kong residents, I would predict, based on my long-term though admittedly anecdotal exposure to Hong Kong residents with a variety of linguistic backgrounds, that Cantonese speakers and non-Cantonese speakers would form two distinct groups, and that these two groups would be familiar with two different sets of words in the dictionary, though of course many words would be familiar to both groups and there would be a great deal of in-group variation.³ If it is true that Hong Kong residents form two distinct groups, then there are in fact two distinct types of HKE: one that has the phonological and grammatical features described in this paper, plus a specific lexicon; and another that is primarily distinguished from other varieties of English by the existence of words that have a Hong Kong origin. Only the former type of HKE is the topic of this paper.

2.3 Grammatical features

The grammatical features of HKE described in this section are regularly seen in many, but not all, of my students’ writing, and to varying degrees. This again shows there is a range of diversity in the English

of local Hong Kong university students. Not surprisingly, many of the morphosyntactic features of HKE are traceable to features in Cantonese. For example, Setter et al. (2010: 44) said “[s]entences like ‘Comes home around six every day’ are common in Hong Kong English but rare in Standard English.” The missing subject reflects the fact that Cantonese allows omission of the subject in contexts where the speaker assumes the hearer knows who/what the subject is; in Standard English (SE) a pronoun must be used in such contexts. Another feature commonly seen in HKE is topicalization. An example of this is “Yes, this book, has” said in response to the question “Do you think he has this book?” (ibid). The SE response would be something like, “Yes, he has this book.” Note that in the HKE response (i.e., “Yes, this book, has”), the subject “he” is omitted and the object “this book” has been topicalized by moving it to the left of the predicate.

Another common feature of HKE described by Setter et al. is the lack of determiners preceding singular count nouns (e.g., “bought apple”). In SE, a count noun must either be preceded by a determiner or pluralized (e.g., “bought an apple”; “bought apples”). Yet another common feature is the use of a singular noun with a plural determiner, as in “all these experience” (Setter et al., 2010: 46). These features are not surprising since Cantonese does not have articles and does not morphologically mark nouns as plural. Setter et al. observed that plural marking and the third-person singular *-s* marking on verbs, which also is not a feature in Cantonese, appear to be used randomly. Sometimes they are not used when they would be used in SE, or they are used when they would not be used. This randomness indicates a lack of systematicity that one would expect to find in the grammar of a fully mature variety. Fuchs (2020) suggests that “[m]any of these [so-called random morphological marking] phenomena can be analysed not just as the addition or omission of morphological marking. An alternative systematic analysis is conceivable.” This is possible, and future research may discover some systematic patterns in HKE morphological marking that has not yet been discovered, but this is an empirical matter that must be demonstrated on the basis of linguistic data.

One interesting feature that *does* show some systematicity is marking some SE mass nouns as plural and *not* marking some SE count nouns as plural. In SE, the mass/count distinction is a grammatical feature that is often not based on the semantics of the noun. The noun “water” is intuitively a mass noun because it does not have individual parts that can be counted. In contrast, furniture is clearly divisible into countable parts, so intuitively it seems like it should be countable, but it is grammatically a mass noun in SE that is never marked as plural. HKE speakers tend to base the count/mass distinction on semantics, treating concrete nouns like “furniture” and “equipment” as countable, as in “you have to get all the equipments” (Setter et al., 2010: 60).

Sung (2015: 260) reported the use of SE intransitive verbs as transitive in HKE, e.g., “They always laugh me”; “He didn’t reply me.” Another feature he mentioned relates to the complement of “be” in an existential sentence of the form “There + be + complement.” In SE, the complement is always an NP, but in HKE, it can be a clause, as in the example “There are a lot of people died” (ibid). Again, both of these grammatical phenomena can be seen as influences from Cantonese, because the verbs *siu3* (“laugh”) and *daap3* (“reply”) can both be used transitively in Cantonese, and the complement of the existential marker *jau5* (“have”) can be a clause as well as a noun phrase.

3 The Functions and Uses of English in Hong Kong

English is used in many domains in Hong Kong and has many functions, and there is a wide variation in English usage in the lives of individual Hongkongers, ranging from virtually all English to virtually no English.

3.1 The education domain

Immediately after the 1997 handover, the Hong Kong Government announced that the medium of

instruction (MOI) for most secondary schools would be changed to Chinese, meaning Cantonese and written Standard Chinese. A minority of schools were allowed to exempt themselves based on teachers' and students' ability to teach and learn through the medium of English. At that time, almost 90% of secondary schools had been claiming to use English as their MOI, even though most relied to varying degrees on some form of code-switching or code-mixing. Chan (2002) said reactions from both parents and students against the government's decision were strong. "Students broke into tears when they found out that they had to learn in Chinese; somehow, they felt denigrated not to be able to study in English" (p. 271). This reaction no doubt stems partly from the fact that knowledge of English has a high instrumental value within Hong Kong's economy. But there are also sociocultural and, increasingly, sociopolitical functions of English that may be just as important to today's Hongkongers.

Since that MOI change in 1997, the number of English-medium schools has increased. According to Edwards (2017: 278), "at least 40% of local Hong Kong government secondary school students receive English medium of instruction for most of their subject areas." Li (2018) explained that parents are eager to have their children educated in English because knowing this international language is seen as a means of gaining upward and/or outward mobility. Some take this to the extreme, sending their children to an English-speaking country such as Australia or the UK. According to Sharma (2013, cited in Li, 2018: 4), Hong Kong supplied more students to secondary schools in the UK in 2012 than any other place around the world.

Seven of the eight government subsidized universities in Hong Kong officially use English as the MOI. The Chinese University of Hong Kong is the only university that officially uses both Chinese and English as MOIs. There are some subjects in all universities that use Chinese as the MOI, such as Chinese language, Chinese history, and Chinese medicine, but the vast majority of courses use English as the MOI. This makes English a requirement for academic success at the tertiary level, and is a major driving force behind parents doing so much to ensure their children learn English during their primary and secondary school years. Historically, Hong Kong's universities have not always strictly followed their own MOI policies (Walters & Balla, 1998; Li, Leung & Kember, 2001). However, a more recent study by Evans (2017), who looked at the implementation of MOI in the classrooms at The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, found that things appear to have changed. Evans reported that "most of the [student] participants' teachers evidently [made] a determined effort to instruct and interact with their students in English in lectures and seminars" (p. 606). Evans pointed out that one of the driving forces behind this is a change in the student makeup. In the past, teachers could assume that all the students in their classrooms speak Cantonese, whereas today's university classrooms include exchange students or local non-Chinese-speaking students. The result is that teachers must now use English as a lingua franca, regardless of their intent on following the official MOI requirements. My own experience over the past twelve years of teaching in two of Hong Kong's universities provides anecdotal evidence in support of Evans's conclusions; I can no longer freely speak Cantonese when giving contrastive examples in my course Contrastive Analysis of English and Chinese, because I can no longer assume all the students speak Cantonese. Just like the domains described below, the education domain has seen a steady increase in the use of English.

3.2 The work domain

In the 1980s, Hong Kong's economy transitioned from being manufacturing-based to service- and knowledge-based. As a result, today "there are hardly any office-based jobs in the white-collar workplace that do not require at least some knowledge of English" (Li, 2018: 3). Bacon-Shone, Bolton and Luke (2015) conducted a survey about language use, proficiency and attitudes, and one of the questions they asked of their 2,049 respondents was about the language(s) they used regularly with both colleagues and clients. 33.2% said they used English with colleagues and 48.1% said they used English with clients.

The increased number for clients reflects Hong Kong's function as an international business center and service provider. These numbers are significant because Hongkongers spend significantly more time at work than elsewhere. When asked about reading and writing at work, the use of English is even higher. The percentage of reading and writing English at work is quite consistent across the three domains of internal-use documents (85.8%), external-use documents (85.5%), and reading (86.9%). Importantly, all of these percentages are higher than they are for Traditional Chinese, which were 65.4%, 70%, and 77.8% across these three domains, respectively. Further confirmation of this comes from Evans (2010: 156), who surveyed 2,030 working professionals and concluded that his "findings indicated that English functioned as the unmarked language of internal and external written communication." Evans also concluded that the use and importance of spoken English had also increased since the transfer of Hong Kong's sovereignty in 1997. And even though Cantonese was spoken more than English at work, the respondents perceived spoken English to be only slightly less important than spoken Cantonese (p. 161).

3.3 The home and social domain

Johnson (1994: 182) said that Hong Kong Chinese code-mix English with their Cantonese, but that they "do not use English, as opposed to 'mix,' among themselves... There is no social or cultural role for English to play among Hong Kong Chinese; it only has a role in their relations with expatriates and the outside world." Since the time Johnson made these claims, the use of English by and among Hong Kong Chinese, along with its sociocultural importance, has clearly increased. In addition to that, it is likely that the research conducted between 1994 and today (most notably Evans, 2016 and Edwards, 2018) has revealed a more accurate and detailed picture of the uses and functions of English in Hong Kong.

A clear trend of a growing use of English is seen by combining data for the Hong Kong government's 2011 and 2016 By-censuses with previous census data reported in Poon (2010, pp. 14, 25).

Table 3

Proportion of Population Aged 5 and over Who Speak English...

	1961	1971	1981	1991	1996	2001	2006	2011	2016
...as usual language	1.2%	1.04%	-	2.2%	3.1%	3.2%	2.8%	3.5%	4.3%
...as another language	-	-	-	29.4%	34.9%	39.8%	41.9%	42.6%	48.9%
Total				31.6%	38.0%	43.0%	44.7%	46.1%	53.2%

Table 3 shows that from 1991 to 2016, the total number of people in Hong Kong who use English in their lives has increased from just under a third to over half, and this trend has likely continued to increase up to the present.

Another place where the use of English has increased is in the home. Li (1999) said that English is used very little in the home, but more recently, Poon (2010: 51) discovered that "English now is more frequently used in the home than it has been earlier as a result of English spread in Hong Kong." She explained that parents of higher socioeconomic status send their children to English classes outside of their own schools. These classes are taught by native-English speakers and include all ages, beginning with playgroups where children may be less than a year old. In addition, "parents may communicate with their own children in English rather than in Chinese at home, or the Filipino domestic helpers may be required to talk to the children in English" (ibid). She also said that:

[a]n emerging trend in Hong Kong pertaining to English use at home relates to Chinese

residents who emigrated to overseas countries (e.g. to Canada, the USA or Australia) for a number of years and who returned to Hong Kong after 1997. The children of these returnees were born overseas and do not speak Cantonese or cannot speak it well. They study in international schools in Hong Kong. Children communicate with their parents mainly in English, and the parents talk to them either in English or in Cantonese, or using codemixing and code switching, marking a language shift in the second generation of these returnees (Poon, 2010: 51).

My personal experience reveals that this is not only limited to children born overseas. My daughter went to one of the schools in the English School Foundation (ESF) system, which provides an English-MOI education from teachers who are native-speakers of a variety of SEs, e.g., British, American, and Australian. Some of her classmates' Cantonese-speaking parents spoke to their children in English growing up. Combining that with their all-English education resulted in many of them acquiring a level of Cantonese that clearly did not match their level of English. I am sure that none these parents intended for that outcome, but that they were just so focused on ensuring their children spoke good English, that they didn't think about their Cantonese until it was too late. This again demonstrates people's belief that English is essential for their children's success in today's Hong Kong and today's world. It is worth noting that, similar to those children who are born overseas and return to Hong Kong, the children who are born and raised in Hong Kong and go to ESF or other international schools beginning from kindergarten, also acquire native SE, not native HKE.

Bacon-Shone *et al.* (2015) confirmed this trend of using English at home, and they were able to put a number on it. 10.9% of their survey respondents said that for them English is "an important language of family communication" (p. 20). They proposed two of the same reasons offered by Poon (2010) (i.e., returning after years of living in an English-speaking country, and employing an English-speaking domestic worker). Of those respondents who had domestic workers in the home, 61.8% said they spoke English with them. According to the Hong Kong government's 2016 By-census, the vast majority of domestic workers are either from the Philippines (184,081) or Indonesia (153,299). Many of the Indonesian domestic workers speak Cantonese with their employers rather than English, but most of the Filipina (the vast majority are female) domestic workers speak English. Afendras (1998) noted long ago that Hong Kong's "domestic workers may be emerging as the main caregivers and, at the same time, as live-in English tutors for middle-class children."

Bacon-Shone *et al.* (2015: 20) speculated that more people may be speaking English at home because of "the growth of a middle class with an orientation towards bilingual and bicultural identity." This identity could also partially explain why 21.9% of the respondents said they regularly used English with their friends. The following section explains that this identity increasingly involves a sociopolitical component.

In addition to the growing use of spoken English within the home and social domains, there is evidence from yet another survey-based study that reading, writing, and listening to English occurs much more often than previously believed. Evans (2011: 40-41) concluded that "reading and writing in English occupy a considerable portion of many young Hongkongers' leisure time," and that they "are also exposed to a great deal of spoken English as a result of their interest in watching films and television and listening to music." It is not surprising that most of Evans's respondents said they felt that English was part of their lives. Furthermore, it is reasonable to predict that the huge increase in English programs available online since Evans's study has resulted in a significant increase in the amount that Hongkongers' watch and listen to.

3.4 Socio-political and identity-forming functions of English

English forms an important part of Hongkongers' identity and recent sociopolitical factors have increased

this importance. Edwards (2018: 111) discovered that more and more Hongkongers are claiming English as a native language, most in combination with Cantonese, and some in combination with both Cantonese and Putonghua.

Among HKSAR tertiary students, [identifying English as a native language] has increased from 23% in 2014 to 29% in 2017. Rates of identification were even higher among HKSAR secondary school students, at 35% (Edwards 2018: 111).

This indicates a clear trend upwards and has implications on how English speakers in Hong Kong are labeled, which is discussed in section 4.

Chan (2002) clearly articulated the critical role played by English in forming Hongkongers' identities:

[A]t the level of individual Hongkongers, the English language has become both a cultural and symbolic capital and, at the communal level, knowledge of English distinguishes Hongkongers from their counterparts in the PRC. This distinction is something that Hongkongers cherish, particularly after Hong Kong's reunification with the PRC in order to maintain a separate identity from the motherland (Chan 2002: 272).

Related to this, Edwards (2018: 92) said the research on Hong Kong's linguistic situation suggests that English is becoming a language *of* Hong Kong rather than merely *in* Hong Kong, "particularly in opposition or as means of creating a separate linguistic identity from the PRC." Chan's (2002) observation that Hongkongers see their knowledge of English as something that helps them "maintain a separate identity from the motherland" came before the umbrella movement protests of 2014, which, as demonstrated by Edwards (2016, 2018), increased many Hongkongers' sense of having an identity distinct from their mainland Chinese counterparts, with English playing an important role in this distinction. It is reasonable to assume that the political protests of 2019/20 have likely strengthened these sentiments and further increased this role for English.

4 The Problem with Labels

Evans (2016: 3-8) explained some of the problems with describing post-colonial Englishes in terms of Kachru's (1985) Three Circles of English, which is generally treated as a synchronic ENL-ESL-EFL model, even though it was "conceived largely in temporal terms, ...[and it is unable] to capture satisfactorily the heterogeneity and dynamics of English using communities in a rapidly globalizing world" (Evans 2016: 5). Evans's study was an attempt to address the dearth of empirical research on the extent to which English is used in Hong Kong's various societal domains. His study, along with others reviewed above, reveal the wide variance in English knowledge and use among members of the Hong Kong community, making it virtually impossible to put a single accurate label on the average Hongkonger's English. Illustrating this point, Sung (2015) argued that HKE is in phase 3 (i.e., the "nativization" phase) of Schneider's (2007) Dynamic Model, with some traces of phase 2 (i.e., the "exonormative stabilization" phase) still present. Sung (2015: 256) also pointed out that "[w]hile English is spoken as a second language (L2) by most Hong Kong people, there is a great variation in the English abilities of Hong Kong people," which means that any one label applied to English speakers in Hong Kong can only apply to one subsection of the speech community.

The research of Evans (2016), Bacon-Shone *et al.* (2015), and Li (2018), who all looked at English use at work, provided support for Li's (2018: 12) claim that "English in Hong Kong is arguably still more characteristic of a foreign language (EFL) in speech, while societal patterns of its use in writing make it more like a second language (ESL)." This is based on the fact that, unlike the situation in societies like Singapore and India, it is still comparatively rare for Hong Kong Chinese to speak English among themselves outside of specific work and academic contexts. This has thus far prevented HKE from developing fully into a new variety of English and justifies analyzing it more as L2-English. HKE is even

more likely to have an L2-status among the large sectors of the population who have working-class jobs that don't require much, if any, use of English, either spoken or written. Such people are also less likely to use English in their social networks, so the EFL label is probably the most accurate description of both their spoken and written English. Having said that, there is general agreement that HKE is an emerging variety (e.g., Schneider, 2007: 137-8). Whether or not it will fully emerge depends on whether Hong Kong Chinese continue to increase their use of spoken English among themselves in official academic and business contexts, as well as in the home and social domains.

Even if we consider HKE to be a second language, no one label readily applies. Hong Kong's ethnic Chinese community includes a small (but growing) number of ENL speakers, the number of which depends on how one defines the term "native" and whether or not one includes people simply based on the fact that they self-identify as native speakers (cf. Edwards, 2018). The remaining majority are not easily placed in either the ESL or EFL category, as explained in the preceding paragraph. On top of that, speakers' social networks and daily linguistic habits vary widely, and this should be taken into account when describing a person's English. Fuchs (2020: 285) was right when he said "the term 'Hong Kong English' is deceptively simple, [because it] hides a certain degree of variation." Fuchs also gave an overview of the influences on HKE from various sectors of the population. In addition to groups such as expatriates (especially British and American), southeast Asians, and Filipina domestic workers, he also pointed out the potential future influence from the increasing population of Mandarin speakers moving to Hong Kong from mainland China.⁴ It is difficult to predict how this may ultimately influence factors such as language policy in education, languages spoken at work, and social networks.

My own experiences as a speaker of L2-Cantonese offer a good analogy for some of the problems with labels. In Wakefield (2019), I describe my experience in Austin, Texas where I lived from 1985 to 1989, and where the large majority of my social life conversations were conducted in Cantonese. The standard way of describing this would be to say that I spoke Cantonese as a foreign language (CFL). While it is true that Cantonese was (and is) unquestionably a foreign language in Austin, it was not foreign within my own social life. From 1991 to 2002, I lived in Hong Kong and spoke very little English. The standard practice would be to say that I changed from speaking CFL to speaking CSL, even though in both situations I spoke more Cantonese than English. From 2002 until now, my move into teaching English and later into academia has resulted in a steady increase in my use of English. As an academic, most meetings are conducted in English and many colleagues prefer speaking English with me because it is an important part of their professional career identity, even outside of the English department and outside of the work context. On top of that, academics live notoriously isolated lives with a lot of time spent in front of a computer not speaking to anyone at all—as I'm doing right now while writing this paper in English. As a consequence, the time I spend conversing in Cantonese in Hong Kong today is only a very small fraction of the time I spent doing it in Austin 35 years ago.

These personal experiences of mine illustrate the problem with labels. It is not very informative to say I was a CFL speaker in the past and am now a CSL speaker. A description of my social networks and daily linguistic practices is much more meaningful. It is true that the labels CFL and CSL reflect a key difference in public surroundings, namely whether one regularly hears English vs. Cantonese spoken on a bus, in the street, etc., as well as the language one is most likely to use with strangers when eating out or shopping. However, overheard bits of conversations and comparatively ritualistic interactions with sales and service staff are not as important as the more meaningful, extended conversations one has with friends and/or colleagues on a daily basis. On top of this, the foreign- vs. second-language distinction is becoming less and less able to accurately reflect a person's external linguistic input. Thirty years ago in San Francisco, I watched more Cantonese videos than I did English television, and today's internet provides a virtually unlimited stream of both Cantonese and English podcasts and videos, allowing people to choose to listen to only one of these languages all day long if they so choose, regardless of where they live in the world. In addition to the vast differences among Hongkongers regarding their use

of written and spoken English at work and in their social networks, there are also large disparities in the choices that individual Hongkongers make with regard to what they listen to and watch. The freedom of language choice offered in this age of the internet adds to the difficulty of collectively labeling Hong Kong's English speakers, whether in terms of Kachru's (1985) Three Circles of English, or in terms of Schneider's (2007) five phases in the Dynamic Model.

5 Conclusions

Almost 25 years after the end of British colonial rule, English still enjoys a high level of prestige among Hongkongers and is a significant and integral part of many of their lives and identities, making it a language *of* Hong Kong rather than merely *in* Hong Kong (Edwards, 2018). It appears that virtually all Hongkongers place a high value on knowing English, whether for practical reasons, instrumental reasons, or for reasons of identity and social prestige. This drives many parents to spend a large portion of their incomes on English education for their children. It has been argued that discrepancies in people's levels of English "lies crucially in the amount of home support for it, which in turn is a function of disposable income in the family" (Li, 2018: 5). Private tutors, English-speaking domestic helpers, English-medium international schools, overseas schooling, etc., are all extremely costly and therefore beyond the reach of low-income parents.

The Hong Kong government has an official policy of teaching all students to be trilingual (Cantonese, English, and Putonghua) and bi-literate (Chinese and English). However, there is still a large discrepancy in students' outcomes that largely correlates with socioeconomic status for the reasons stated above. This indicates that the government's language policies are not effectively achieving their stated goals, and those citizens who have the economic means are making up for it outside of the public education system. Unless Hong Kong's Education Bureau sufficiently improves English education throughout the public school system, there will continue to be a disparity of English levels between the haves and the have-nots.

The variations seen among the individual participants of the studies described in section 2 indicate that, even among a comparatively homogenous group (i.e., university students), there are differences. Adding the rest of society into the mix increases these differences. This extreme heterogeneity makes it impossible to describe HKE using a single label that applies to the large majority of Hongkongers. Based on the research cited in this paper, it seems reasonable to say that most Chinese Hongkongers speak EFL, and that among them, most white collar and professional workers read and write ESL. This latter subgroup primarily consists of people of higher socioeconomic status, and among them, there is a small but growing minority of ENL speakers. Probably also belonging mostly to the higher socioeconomic populace are those Hongkongers who belong primarily to English-speaking social networks and watch and listen to significant amounts of English-medium entertainment. This latter group comprises ENL speakers and Hongkongers who essentially live ESL lives. All this implies that large subgroups of Hongkongers belong in different positions within Kachru's (1985) Three Circles of English, and also makes it impossible to clearly place Hong Kong within a particular phase of Schneider's (2007) Dynamic Model.

This diversity of English in Hong Kong has implications for English language education. Any approach that treats all Hongkongers as a homogenous community of L2-English speakers will not be effective. For those adult learners in the work force who read and write English all day, this skill should be exploited for vocabulary building and used as a bridge to improve listening and speaking. Those who regularly watch and listen to English for entertainment likely have good listening comprehension, but teachers may be unaware of this unless such students are tested, and again, these abilities that learners bring with them to the classroom should be exploited. Teachers could also ask these learners what types of English entertainment they enjoy, and then perhaps recommend these to other students. To boost motivation, teachers can also try to think of creative ways to exploit the high status and prestige that English still enjoys.

Questions about the status of HKE remain. While linguists widely agree it has the properties of an emerging variety, there is debate as to how likely it is to fully emerge as a native language spoken by a significant portion of the Hong Kong speech community. Linguists have said there are no native speakers of HKE. Code-mixing is extremely common, but I am not aware of any reports of Hongkongers regularly speaking English among themselves in social settings where all the conversational participants are Cantonese speakers. Hongkongers speaking English among themselves is an essential prerequisite to the full development of a new variety of English called HKE. One possible scenario that could lead to this is a significant increase in speakers of other languages, requiring the use of English as a lingua franca, such as the situations in Singapore and India. This could happen if the influx of Mandarin speakers continues, or even grows (see note 4), which is likely, and especially if it is coupled with an increase in the number of immigrants from outside of China.⁵ Interestingly, this suggests that the emergence of HKE requires an increased diversity in Hong Kong's linguistic landscape, which in turn would influence the linguistic properties of HKE. Only time will tell how HKE will change and develop in the future.

Notes

1. The term "mainland China" is used in Hong Kong to refer to all of mainland China excluding Hong Kong and Macau.
2. Lim (2007, p. 463) has proposed that lexical tone exists in Singapore English, but this is limited to discourse particles borrowed from Chinese. For example, she said that the particle *meh* was borrowed from Cantonese "as a package," including its form, tone and meaning. This is different from Wee (2016), who proposed a system of lexical tones for the entire HKE lexicon.
3. This is an extremely complex issue. Mental lexicons are difficult to examine, especially on a large scale. In Wakefield (2018), I explain that loanwords change their meanings after borrowing. In yet-to-be-published research of mine, the questionnaire data indicates that in some cases, HKE speakers apply the meanings of English loanwords in Cantonese to their SE counterparts. For example, many Cantonese-speaking participants thought the English word "tomboy" referred to a lesbian because that is what the English loanword *tomboi1* means in Cantonese. And many thought that the word "cheap" indicated that a person has bad morals, lies, and does bad things to other people, because this is what the loanword *chip1* (or *cip1*) means in Cantonese. These results imply that English loanwords in Cantonese whose meanings differ from the English words from which they were borrowed, should arguably be added to a dictionary of HKE. It also indicates that many of the Cantonese-origin words listed in Cummings and Wolf's (2011) dictionary are probably represented differently in the minds of Cantonese vs. non-Cantonese speakers.
4. The Hong Kong government officially allows a daily quota of 150 people from mainland China to reside permanently in Hong Kong. That adds up to about 1.2 million new immigrants from mainland China since 1997, but many of them speak non-Hong Kong varieties of Cantonese, so the degree of potential linguistic effects on HKE from the Mandarin-speaking sector of the population is difficult to predict.
5. The effect that a large influx of Mandarin speakers would have on HKE is hard to predict. It would vary depending on whether the primary lingua franca used is Cantonese, Mandarin or English.

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