Abstract

Hong Kong English (HKE) has been the subject of a growing body of research over the last few decades. This article presents an overview of research into HKE from both linguistic and sociolinguistic perspectives. The first section reviews the linguistic features of HKE at phonological, grammatical and lexical levels as documented in the literature. In the second section of the article, the development of HKE as a ‘new’ variety of English is discussed from a sociolinguistic viewpoint, with a view to addressing the question of in which phase HKE is currently situated according to Schneider’s (2007) Dynamic Model of evolution for New Englishes. A review of the literature suggests that HKE displays a number of phonological, grammatical and lexical features which makes HKE distinguishable from other varieties of English, with the majority of these features attributable to the influence of Cantonese, the first language of the majority of HKE speakers. With reference to Schneider’s model, the article suggests that HKE can be situated in phase 3 and is considered an ‘emergent’ variety with its norms still in the process of developing. While there are signs of increasing awareness of HKE as a distinct variety in the local community, ambivalent attitudes towards the acceptability of HKE as the linguistic norm still exist. It remains to be seen whether HKE will eventually reach phase 4 and become an autonomous variety of English in the near future. This review ends by suggesting several further research directions with respect to the study of HKE.

1. Introduction

Hong Kong is a city situated in Southeast Asia with a population of over seven million. Branded as ‘Asia’s World City’, Hong Kong is a cosmopolitan city where the East meets the West. It was a British colony from 1898 until 1997 when the sovereignty was returned to the People’s Republic of China. Under the ‘one country, two systems’ principle, Hong Kong remains a largely autonomous Special Administrative Region (SAR) for a period of fifty years until 2047 (Bolton 2000; Hung 2012). Apart from Cantonese, the first language spoken by approximately 95% of the Chinese population in Hong Kong, English and Putonghua (also known as Mandarin) are also widely used in Hong Kong. English used to be the only official language of the colony, and it was not until 1974 that Chinese was made a co-official language alongside English under the Official Languages Ordinance (Li 1999). It now plays a vital role in different sectors in Hong Kong society, including the government, business, higher education and professional workplace (Evans and Green 2003; Evans 2010). English is also used as the major lingua franca by Hong Kong people for intercultural communication with non-Chinese-speaking people from around the world (Sung 2014a, 2014b). While 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 (Setter, Wong and Chan 2010). Putonghua, the standard variety of Chinese and the official language used by the central government in China, is also widely spoken in Hong Kong in different settings. It is the current Hong Kong government’s language policy of ‘trilingualism...
and biliteracy’ to create an educated citizenry that is trilingual in Cantonese, Putonghua and English, and biliterate in Chinese and English.

For more than two decades, Hong Kong English (HKE) has been the subject of a growing body of research (see e.g., Bolton 2000, 2002, 2003; Deterding, Wong and Kirkpatrick 2008; Evans 2011a, 2011b; Hickey 2004; Hung 2000, 2012; Li 1999, 2009; Luke and Richards 1982; Kirkpatrick, Deterding and Wong 2008; Setter 2006, 2008; Setter et al. 2010; Trudgill and Hannah 2008). While it is generally agreed among researchers that there are identifiable linguistic features associated with HKE, there have been debates surrounding the status of HKE as a ‘new’ variety of English. Indeed, the question of whether HKE exists as a variety of English dates back to the early eighties when Luke and Richards (1982: 51) argued that Hong Kong was a place where two largely monolingual communities co-existed, alongside a small number of bilinguals serving as intermediaries. They suggested that these Hong Kong L2 speakers of English derived their linguistic norms primarily from standard British and/or American English, thereby concluding that ‘there is no such thing as Hong Kong English’ (1982: 55). Luke and Richards (1982) also went on to suggest that HKE lacked an independent identity and should be referred to as ‘English in Hong Kong’ instead. Even towards the end of the colonial era, Hyland (1997: 206) also pointed to ‘the parallel existence of two largely monolingual communities with little cross-cultural interaction’.

More recently, however, the earlier views about the linguistic situation of the Hong Kong community and the status of HKE have been seriously challenged. Most notably, Bolton (2003: 90) casts doubt on the claim that the Hong Kong speech community comprises only a Cantonese-speaking local community and an English-speaking expatriate community. According to a recent study conducted by Bacon-Shone and Bolton (2008), 45% of local respondents reported that they had a knowledge of English, around 70% claimed to understand and speak English, and that 74% felt that there was a distinctive ‘Hong Kong English’. More importantly, Bolton (2002) argues for the existence of HKE as a variety of English with reference to the five criteria set out by Butler (1997) for identifying a ‘new’ variety of English, i.e., (1) a standard and recognizable accent; (2) a distinctive vocabulary to express key features of the physical and social environment; (3) a distinctive history; (4) creative writing ‘written without apology’; and (5) reference works, such as dictionaries. Bolton (2002) suggests that HKE meets the first four criteria, but acknowledges that HKE has yet to fulfill the fifth criterion because of a shortage of reference works such as dictionaries and style guides which regard HKE as a legitimate variety of English in its own right. Kirkpatrick (2007) also expresses reservations about the fulfillment of the fourth criterion concerning literary creativity in the case of HKE (but see e.g., Xu 2000). However, Kirkpatrick suggests the likelihood for HKE to develop as a local lingua franca, given the great linguistic diversity among the Chinese-speaking communities (see also Jenkins 2009).

In sum, while the status of HKE as a ‘new’ variety of English has been the subject of debates in the last two decades, HKE is now increasingly recognized as a variety of English in its own right by researchers (Bolton 2002; Kirkpatrick 2007; Setter et al. 2010). However, unlike many other post-colonial varieties of English, HKE is not yet widely recognized as a ‘nativized’ variety of English on an equal footing with other more established Asian Englishes, such as Indian English, Malaysian English, Philippine English and Singapore English. HKE can be considered an ‘emergent’ variety of English, given that it is not as far advanced in its development as other ‘new’ post-colonial varieties of English (Setter et al. 2010).

The purpose of this article is to review the existing body of research into HKE from both linguistic and sociolinguistic perspectives. The first section describes the linguistic features of HKE at phonological, grammatical and lexical levels as documented in the literature. In the second section, the article considers HKE from a sociolinguistic viewpoint and discusses the status
of HKE as a variety of English, with particular reference to Schneider’s (2003, 2007) Dynamic Model of evolution for New Englishes (henceforth, ‘Dynamic Model’).

2. Linguistic Features of HKE

In this section, a review of the linguistic features of HKE as documented in the literature is presented, including phonological, grammatical and lexical features. It should be noted that the features discussed below are by no means exhaustive, and the section only intends to provide an overview of some of the most prominent and commonly cited linguistic features of HKE.

2.1. PHONOLOGY

One of the most studied aspects of HKE is perhaps related to its phonology. One of the key findings is that there seems to be a recognizable pattern of pronunciation spoken by educated L2 speakers of HKE, and the typical Hong Kong accent is heavily influenced by the phonological features of Cantonese (Bolton and Kwok 1990; Deterding et al. 2008; Hung 2000, 2012; Setter 2008; Setter et al. 2010; Sewell 2012; Sewell and Chan 2010; Stibbard 2004).

Compared with the standard variety of British English, or Received Pronunciation (RP), HKE phonology is found to be considerably different in both of its vowel and consonant systems (Hung 2000: 354). In Hung’s (2000) research into the phonology of HKE, it was found that the vowel system contains only seven vowel contrasts, compared with twelve in RP (see also Kirkpatrick 2007). Specifically, the four vowel sounds that are distinguished in RP but not in HKE are as follows:

- the vowel sounds in RP heat and hit are both realized as /i/ in HKE;
- the vowel sounds in RP head and had are both realized as /ɛ/ in HKE;
- the vowel sounds in RP hoot and hood are both realized as /u/ in HKE; and
- the vowel sounds in RP caught and cot are both realized as /ɔ/ in HKE.

While there are only seven simple vowel contrasts in HKE, there are eight diphthong contrasts, namely hate /ɛə/, height /aɪə/, house /aʊə/, coat /oʊə/ , toyed /sə/, here /ɛə/, hair /ɛə/, and poor /ʊə/, as in the case of RP (Hung 2000: 347).

Like the vowel system, the consonantal system of HKE is also found to consist of fewer phonemes (Hung 2000). In the case of the fricative consonants, there is little evidence of a voiced and voiceless contrast among most speakers of HKE (Hung 2000: 347), with only four fricative consonants in the HKE phonological inventory (and the voiced equivalents (/f, s, θ, ʃ/) were not found in Hung’s data). Another phonological feature of HKE is the fronting of the voiceless fricative consonant /θ/ (i.e., the pronunciation of /θ/ as [f]), and such a phenomenon is reported to be rather common in word-final position (e.g., in the word youth). Furthermore, Hung (2000: 351) found that [l] and [n] in onset position are often used interchangeably by HKE speakers (especially when the syllable contains a nasal sound), arguing that [l] and [n] can be in free variation in the onset of a syllable. For example, line is produced with initial [n], and number is produced with initial [l] (Deterding et al. 2008). Interestingly, however, while the conflation of [n] and [l] occurred in around 37% of word tokens in Hung’s (2000) study, such phenomenon was found to be rare in another study (Deterding et al. 2008). A further phonological feature is that there is evidence of the substitution or deletion of postvocalic /l/ in HKE phonology, sometimes with the presence of both vocalization and deletion (Hung 2000).

As for consonant clusters, the [kw] cluster shows deletion of the [w] component before rounded vowels, with the pronunciation of quarter as [kɔtə] by speakers of HKE. It is also found that deletion of final plosives from word-final consonant clusters occurs before a pause or a
vowel (Hung 2000). In the study carried out by Deterding et al. (2008: 157), 47.2% of final [t] sounds were deleted, and 62.5% of final [d] sounds were omitted. Instances of the omission of [l] and [r], especially in consonant clusters, were also noted in Deterding et al. (2008). For example, the consonant cluster [pr] in primary is simplified.

At the suprasegmental level, the prosodic rhythm of HKE is found to be different from that of RP, because of its tendency towards syllable-timing (i.e., each syllable taking up more or less equal space), as opposed to stress-timing in British and American English (i.e., the tendency for stressed syllables to occur at regular intervals) (Setter 2006). As Cantonese is a syllable-timed language, syllable weakening is not a common feature in Cantonese. As a result, syllables in HKE tend not to be subject to weakening, and more syllables are found to be pronounced with a full vowel than a schwa or syllabic consonant (Setter 2006). For example, function words are not reduced as in the case of RP. Interestingly, HKE appears to be patterning with other varieties of English from around the world that exhibit phonological influence from syllable-timed languages, as in the case of Latino English (Carter 2005), African American English (Thomas and Carter 2006), Vietnamese English (Nguyen 2003), and Singapore English (Deterding 2001).

Furthermore, the pronunciation of words in HKE is sometimes characterized by a markedly ‘tonal’ quality (Hung 2012), largely due to the influence of Cantonese which is a tone language. According to Hung (2012), stressed syllables are typically assigned a ‘high’ tone, whereas unstressed syllables are often given a ‘low’ tone, which results in more pronounced tonal contrasts than in other varieties of English. A further suprasegmental feature is the general lack of liaison between words (i.e., the linking of the last consonant of one word to the first vowel in the next word) (Hung 2012).

It is also worth noting the use of stress in HKE. For example, no distinction is made in the stress pattern between verb-noun pairs, such as transport and increase (Hung 2012). It is also found that sentence stress, or tonic stress, tends to occur at the end of an utterance (Bolton and Kwok 1990: 154), and that both repeated and predictable information may be given equal emphasis.

In brief, there seems to be a set of phonological features in HKE which makes educated speakers of HKE easily recognizable as such based on the way that they speak. Hung (2000: 337) goes so far as to argue that there is little dispute about the existence of ‘an identifiable HKE accent, which is just as easily recognizable as Indian, Singaporean or Australian English’. It should be noted, however, that there is also a great deal of variation in the pronunciation exhibited by Hong Kong people, which could have resulted from a range of factors such as age, educational level and socioeconomic class (Bolton 2002; Wee 2008). Given that there is evidence of both systematic and idiosyncratic features in HKE phonology (Stibbard 2004; Groves 2009), we can at least consider HKE as an ‘emergent variety’ with a developing system of phonology (Setter 2008: 503).

### 2.2 Grammar

As is the case with phonology, HKE shows a number of grammatical features as reported in the literature, as the grammar of HKE differs markedly from the standard varieties of British English and American English. However, compared with the phonological features of HKE, there is less agreement among researchers as to whether these aspects of ‘HKE grammar’ can be treated as grammatical ‘features’ of HKE or simply as grammatical ‘errors’ which may have resulted from the L2 acquisition process (Hung 2012).

While some of the grammatical features might have arisen from language acquisition factors, others are due to the influence of Cantonese, a language with few inflectional and derivational markings (Matthews and Yip 1994). Since Cantonese is not a morphologically rich language, the differences between Cantonese and English in terms of their syntactic and morphological
structures may have led to certain grammatical features in HKE. In the description of the grammatical features of HKE below, the examples are drawn from various sources in the literature (e.g., Gisborne 2000; Hickey 2004; Hung 2012; Li 2000; Setter et al. 2010). It must be noted that many grammatical features occur not only in HKE, but also in other ‘new’ varieties of English (such as Philippine English, Indian English and Singapore English), as well as in the so-called ‘learner varieties’ of English (see Mukherjee and Hundt 2011). In other words, the features listed below are by no means considered to be unique to HKE only.

2.2.1. Noun Phrases


• Zero morphological markings. Examples of the omission of the -s suffix in plural nouns include ‘all these experience’, ‘all sort of dangerous things’ and ‘too many thing’. (Setter et al. 2010).

2.2.2. Verb Phrases

• Double morphological markings. Examples include ‘would took’ and ‘didn’t telled’ (Setter et al. 2010).

• Non-tense marking. Examples of the leveling of morpho-syntactic features in finite verb forms (to refer to a past time situation) include: ‘He is born in Hong Kong and then just go to Hong Kong’ and ‘In my first year Cats come to Hong Kong’ (Li 2000).

• Use of pseudo passives. An example is ‘In the ‘Reading Section’, it divided into three parts…’ (Li 2000).

• Use of intransitive passives. An example is ‘That accident was happened at 6pm.’ (Li 2000).

• Non-distinction between the active/passive verbs. An example is ‘A survey conducting among 30 chief executives reveal that…’ (Li 2000).

• Non-distinction between transitive and intransitive verbs. Examples include ‘The figure raises’, ‘The financial crisis deteriorated the economy of Hong Kong’ (Hung 2012), ‘They always laugh me’, and ‘He didn’t reply me’ (Li 2000).

2.2.3. Clause and Sentence Structures

• Non-use of the ‘Adj for NP to V’ structure. An example is ‘You are impossible to stay here overnight’ (Li 2000).

• Periphrastic topic construction. An example is ‘In the above examples, it shows that learners’ (Li 2000).

• Independent clause as subject. An example is ‘He was willing to stay surprised us all’ (Li 2000).

• Post-modifying clause structure after ‘There be NP’. An example is ‘There are a lot of people died’ (Li 2000).

In addition to the grammatical features listed above, there are also specific features in the relative clause system which are considered unique to HKE by several researchers (Gisborne 2000, 2009; Newbrook 1988; Wang 2011), particularly with respect to the use of restrictive and non-restrictive relative clauses. Based on a corpus-based study on the use of the relative clause system in HKE, Gisborne (2000: 366) goes so far as to argue that HKE has established its norms in the use of relative clauses. Examples include the following:
• ‘Zero’ subject relatives. Examples include ‘This is the student did it’, ‘Hong Kong is a small island has a large population’ and ‘There was a fire broke out’ (see Newbrook 1988; Gisborne 2000).

• Use of restrictive relative clauses led by which. An example is ‘The Renaissance which began at the end of Middle Ages and blossomed from the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries was of this kind’ (Wang 2011: 23).

• Use of non-restricted relative clauses led by that. An example is ‘The term is associated with certain connotative meaning, that is a cultural barrier’ (Wang 2011: 23).

• Non-reduced relative construction, with a redundant subject relative pronoun added. An example is ‘This is the student who admitted last year’ (Newbrook 1988: 48).

• Lack of prepositions before the relative marker which. An example is ‘This is the newspaper which I read the news’, whereby the preposition in is absent (see Gisborne 2000).

In sum, the review above shows a number of grammatical features that are found in HKE, and many of these features may be attributed to the influence of Cantonese, or the L2 acquisition process, or perhaps a combination of both. Still, one unresolved question is whether the grammatical features listed above may be considered characteristic of HKE or simply regarded as evidence of an ‘interlanguage’ (Selinker 1972) or grammatical ‘errors’ found in learner varieties of English. In other words, the status of these grammatical features as characteristic of HKE is still in debate. It is also worth mentioning that while these grammatical features cannot be claimed to be unique to HKE only (since they are also shared by other ‘new’ varieties of English), there is a possibility that these features may co-occur in certain patterns which could be characteristic of HKE but not of other varieties of English (see Mahboob and Liang 2014). More research studies would be necessary to determine whether there is such a possibility in the description of the grammar of HKE.

2.3. LEXIS

Apart from phonological and grammatical features, HKE is also characterized by vocabulary items not shared by many other varieties of English. While the exact size of the distinctive vocabulary of HKE is not yet known, its size is relatively smaller than vocabularies in other post-colonial Englishes, such as Singapore and Indian English, given the small number of HKE speakers who use it as the usual language of communication (Hung 2012). While there are distinctly local words in HKE, many of these HKE words can also be found in China English (see Bolton 2003; Xu 2010). In what follows, the examples of HKE vocabulary presented are drawn from the existing literature, including the recently published dictionary of HKE vocabulary entitled A Dictionary of Hong Kong English: Words from the Fragrant Harbour (Cummings and Wolf 2011), which offers a comprehensive and updated documentation of HKE vocabulary. Other sources of HKE vocabulary from which the examples below are taken include Bolton (2003), Butler (2002), Hung (2012), and Setter et al. (2010).

One source of HKE vocabulary is the coinage or innovation of new terms (Bolton 2003; Setter et al. 2010; Cummings & Wolf 2011). Examples include Canto-pop (Cantonese pop music), Chinglish (Chinese English), tan tan noodles (a noodle dish originating from Sichuan cuisine), mafoo (the stableboy or the prostitute’s manager), jetso (a bargain), caput school (a school receiving a government grant per student), BBC (British born Chinese), ABC (American born Chinese), and NET (native English teacher).

Borrowing is another rich source of HKE words, and around 50% of them are loanwords (Bolton 2003: 214). While HKE vocabulary items originate from varied sources, many of the vocabulary items are borrowed from Cantonese or Mandarin. They reflect the cultural practices
or objects in the Chinese culture which are difficult to translate into English. For example, there are words and expressions in HKE that derive directly from Cantonese. Examples of phonetic loans from Cantonese include *cha siu* (a type of barbecued pork), *cheongsam* (a long lady’s dress with slit sides), *gwailo* (foreign devil or foreigner, especially a Caucasian), *mahjong* (a game played with tiles), *dim sum* (Chinese tidbits), *laibai* (a red envelope containing money, as a gift, for good luck), *tong lau* (older residential buildings with stairs rather than lifts), and *taipan* (the boss of a large company) (see e.g., Cummings and Wolf 2011; Hung 2012; Setter et al. 2010).

In addition, loan translations from Cantonese or Mandarin also exist in HKE vocabulary, whereby the Cantonese morphemes are translated directly into English. Examples include *iron rice bowl* (a secure job), *golden rice bowl* (a lucrative and secure job), *black hand* (a behind the scenes mastermind who plans political or criminal activities), *black society* (a Chinese secret society or triad), *China doll* (a pretty young Chinese woman of submissive demeanor), *snakehead* (a smuggler of illegal immigrants) and *green hat* (having an unfaithful spouse) (Cummings and Wolf 2011). It is also noteworthy that words of specific cultural importance also appear in compound words in HKE. In HKE (and China English), two such key words are *dragon* and *temple*. Both words, *dragon* and *temple*, occur in a range of compounds that describe culturally specific phenomena and objects, including: *dragon boat*, *dragon dance*, *dragon pot*, *dragon bond*, *dragon market*, *dragon head*, *dragon gate*, *temple bell*, *temple altar*, *temple compound*, *temple festival*, and *temple priest* (see Butler 2002; Cummings and Wolf 2011).

Apart from words derived from the Chinese sources, there are also vocabulary items in HKE which originated from other foreign sources, including Hindi, Portuguese and Malay. For example, words like *coolie* (manual laborer), *chit* (bill or receipt), *shroff* (a kiosk or a payment counter), and *nullah* (a monsoon drain) originated from Hindi and probably came into HKE via India as a result of the presence of a large number of Indians in the police force during the colonial rule (Hung 2012). Words borrowed from Portuguese include *amah* (a maid) and *praya* (promenade), whereas words borrowed from Malay into HKE include *godown* (a kind of warehouse), and *catty* (a unit of weight equal to 604 grams). The influence from these foreign sources is likely to be the result of not only the trade language used between the Chinese merchants and the foreign traders on the southern coast of China in the 18th and 19th century but also Hong Kong’s colonial legacy and mixed cultural heritage (O’Connor 2012).

In addition to the existence of a distinctive HKE vocabulary, many of the words in HKE can only be satisfactorily understood in terms of their semantic and pragmatic relations that are internal to the local context (Benson 2000; Hung 2012). Benson (2000), for example, suggests that ‘regional context’ may be more appropriate than ‘regional variety’ in identifying these HKE words. For example, the word *mainland* in HKE refers to the part of China excluding Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan, while *cross-border* refers to what takes place across the Hong Kong-mainland China border. In addition, *local* in HKE is used to mean ‘concerning or belonging to Hong Kong’ and its derivative *localize* refers to ‘replacing expatriates by local Hong Kong people’ (Benson 2000). Similarly, the phrase *through train* is used in HKE as a metaphor for simplified dealings with the Chinese government (Cummings and Wolf 2011). Another example is the word *astronaut*, which has acquired a special meaning in HKE, referring to a person who left Hong Kong and immigrated overseas with his/her family at the time of the handover to China in 1997, but returns to work in Hong Kong and frequently flies between the two places (Benson 2000; Groves and Chan 2010).

It is also worth noting that semantic shift can also be observed in HKE vocabulary. For example, *to sleep late* refers to ‘going to bed late the previous night’ as opposed to ‘waking up late in the morning’ (Groves and Chan 2010); *body check* in HKE means a complete medical check-up, rather than a move in the sport of ice hockey; *to eat outside* in HKE means ‘eating
at a restaurant’ and is the equivalent of ‘eat out’; to accompany means ‘staying with somebody’, rather than going with somebody somewhere (Groves and Chan 2010); to play computer in HKE means ‘entertaining oneself through the use of computers either to play games or surf the internet’ (see Wee 2008); and to wish is used by HKE speakers to express future plans and hopes, rather than something that cannot happen. In HKE, the word back in ‘He’s not back in the office yet’ implies that s/he is not in the office, rather than that the person had already been in the office earlier that day (Vittachi 2002). With reference to the use of selected vocabulary items in HKE, Groves and Chan (2010) argue that the norms of English vocabulary usage are both systematic and pervasive, suggesting that Hong Kong speakers of English appear to develop a different kind of ‘intuition’ from that of native speakers of English in their use of English words within the local context.

3. Sociolinguistic Aspects of HKE

Following the description of HKE in terms of its linguistic features, this section looks at HKE from a sociolinguistic perspective by considering the stage of the development of HKE as a variety of English within Schneider’s (2007) Dynamic Model.

Schneider’s (2003, 2007) model is widely accepted as one of the most promising and influential theoretical frameworks for explaining the evolution of English varieties in post-colonial settings. He argues that any post-colonial English varieties typically undergo a similar evolutionary process which involves a diachronic sequence of five developmental phases, namely, (1) foundation; (2) exonormative stabilization; (3) nativization; (4) endonormative stabilization; and (5) differentiation. Each of these phases can be characterized by four sets of parameters, i.e., extralinguistic background, identity constructions, sociolinguistic conditions, and linguistic consequences (Schneider 2007: 56). Based on the characteristics of these five phases, Schneider observes that many ‘outer circle’ territories have typically reached either phase 3 or phase 4.

Of particular interest to the case of HKE are the three middle phases in Schneider’s model, that is, exonormative stabilization (phase 2), nativization (phase 3), and endonormative stabilization (phase 4). In phase 2, English is formally established and is accorded the official status in at least some sectors of society, including administration, education, and the legal system. The linguistic norms of the settlers are adopted, and English spreads among the elite of the indigenous group who see themselves as members of a community which is different from that of the settlers, but who also understand the advantage of the ability to speak English for socio-economic gain (Schneider 2007: 39). Accordingly, a group of bilingual ‘indigenous elite’ emerges and looks to the exonormative norms of Standard English. At the same time, some ‘structural nativization’ begins to take place rather unnoticeably, as a result of linguistic transfer.

In the phase of nativization (phase 3), both linguistic and cultural transformations take place, as the local community begins to undergo large-scale acquisition of English as an L2. Their usage of English begins to exhibit perceptible local linguistic idiosyncrasies, which could in turn serve as a marker of identity (Schneider 2007). A ‘complaint tradition’ about falling standards of English can also be observed. In addition, there is a move towards independence from the distant country of origin, politically, linguistically and culturally, and economic independence is also achieved in phase 3. In the next stage, endonormative stabilization (phase 4), political independence is typically achieved, with a sense of cultural self-confidence felt among the indigenous group. The linguistic idiosyncrasies or innovations in the use of English begin to lose their stigma, and the local norms are increasingly accepted and used by the indigenous group, in both formal and informal settings. The new linguistic norms in turn are used for the expression of a new identity which may be evidenced in the emergence of literary works written in the new English variety. Typically, it is also the stage where codification begins and formal recognition is given to the new variety of English (Schneider 2007).
With reference to Schneider’s model, HKE can be situated in phase 3 (nativization), which began in the 1960s following the rise of Hong Kong into a commercial center. It was once in phase 2 (exonormative stabilization) throughout much of the 20th century (Schneider 2007). While it is generally agreed that HKE is now in phase 3, it must be noted that some traces of phase 2 are still evident in the development of HKE, particularly given the entrenched exonormative orientations among the local community (Bolton 2003; Tsui and Bunton 2000). Accordingly, Schneider (2007) classifies HKE as an ‘emergent variety’, noting the reluctance of many people to use the more definitive term ‘Hong Kong English’.

It is particularly worth considering the issues of identity construction and language attitudes which are of relevance in phase 3. In the case of HKE, the handover of sovereignty to China in 1997 had a major impact on the identity of Hong Kong people, and the years before the handover saw the emergence and development of a distinctive Hong Kong identity which was accompanied by increasingly positive attitudes towards English (Schneider 2007). Specifically, Hong Kong people no longer show a colonial ‘them vs. us’ mindset but display a ‘distinctive and healthy Hong Kong identity’ (Hyland 1997: 207; Schneider 2007: 136), and there are signs that Hong Kong people are developing a stronger Hong Kong identity embedded within a broader ‘Chinese’ identity (Groves 2009, 2011). Furthermore, attitudes towards the use of English also changed positively (Lai 2005, 2011), with the Hong Kong identity indexed by a mixed-code of English and Chinese.

Another sign of the development of HKE in its third phase is the continuing tradition of complaints about the falling standards of English in Hong Kong, which implies the persistence of ubiquitous colloquial features in the English spoken by Hong Kong people (Bolton 2000). Despite language teachers’ denial of the falling English standards in Hong Kong (Bolton 2000), the dissatisfaction with the declining standards of English among the local community has grown in the past few decades. Interestingly, the emergence of a local complaint tradition indicates Hong Kong’s advancement to phase 3, given that it is one of the key features of nativization in Schneider’s (2007) model. According to Mesthrie and Bhatt (2008: 34), a ‘complaint tradition’ may suggest that tensions exist between local forms of English and more prestigious norms, both of which co-exist in the Hong Kong community. Indeed, as Joseph (1997, 2004) argues, the complaints about the falling standards of English in Hong Kong can be seen as an indication that a local standard is in operation and that Hong Kong people are becoming more aware of the distinctive features in the English spoken in Hong Kong, which is somewhat different from the traditional or mainstream varieties of English. Arguably, such a complaint tradition is considered a necessary phase for Hong Kong to undergo in order for HKE to adapt to its post-colonial setting (Joseph 2004).

Unlike other post-colonial varieties of English such as Singapore English, HKE has not yet reached phase 4. As regards the transition from phase 3 to phase 4, Schneider (2007) argues that one of the major criteria is acceptability. Typically, in the fourth stage, linguistic standards are largely independent of external sources of reference. In the case of HKE, however, most of its speakers still rely on exonormative norms in order to determine what is right or wrong when they speak and write in English (Evans 2011b). It is also evident that HKE is not (yet) the variety of English to which many Hong Kong speakers aspire, and most of them remain attached to native-speaker norms in their judgements of correctness (Jenkins 2009). As Pang (2003: 17) points out, HKE should be seen as a ‘stillborn variety’ largely because most Hong Kong people are unlikely to easily accept that ‘a distinctive Hong Kong English exists’. Further, the lack of reference works such as dictionaries, style guides and pedagogic grammar books that acknowledge HKE as a legitimate variety of English may be another reason which may have hindered the further development of HKE.

It appears that the acceptance of HKE as the alternative norm of English usage among Hong Kong people may be rather difficult at least in the short run, given their entrenched
exonormative orientations among the local community (see Groves 2011). Like other post-colonial Englishes, local recognition of a new variety of English may take years or even decades. It is likely that HKE may also have to undergo a rather long period of ‘linguistic schizophrenia’, whereby competing exonormative and endonormative orientations co-exist (Groves 2011). As HKE is only in the process of developing its own identity, it will certainly take some more time for a local form of English to develop and evolve into a nativized variety as in the case of Singapore English (Li 2000). While there are some signs that the local accent is ‘beginning to be regarded as a positively evaluated source of identification’ (Bolton 2000: 277), there is still some reluctance to consider HKE as the local norm of usage. One reason is that there exists the widely held view among Hong Kong speakers of English that speaking a standard variety of English based on exonormative norms can bring considerable value in career advancement and upward social mobility (Chan 2013; Li 1999, 2000; Sung 2011). Ambivalent attitudes towards HKE are therefore still evident, as a result of the tension between English as an economic capital and as an identity carrier in the minds of some local people (Chan 2013; Sung 2013).

On a positive note, however, having reached phase 3, HKE can be considered at a more advanced stage than other post-colonial varieties of English in settings where only very few native English speakers and people of the British descent reside. Schneider (2007: 133) suggests that one reason is perhaps related to the ‘tighter colonial grip by the British for a long time’ in Hong Kong. Schneider also predicts that the major conditions which are necessary for the emergence of HKE as a legitimate variety are already in existence in the local community, especially given that the drive to use English among Hong Kong people seems to be ‘stronger than might have been anticipated’ (Schneider 2007: 139).

It remains to be seen whether and, if so, when HKE will continue to nativize and eventually move onto the phase 4 in Schneider’s model. According to Schneider (2007: 50), the major difference between phase 3 (nativization) and phase 4 (endonormative stabilization) lies in the question of whether there exists just an ‘English in Hong Kong’ or whether by now a ‘Hong Kong English’. In other words, more research is needed to look into not just its acceptability, but also its recognition within the local community.

4. Conclusion and Further Research Directions

This article has examined the linguistic and sociolinguistic aspects of HKE. Based on the review of the existing literature, HKE appears to display systematic patterns of use at the phonological, grammatical and lexical levels across a broad spectrum of Hong Kong L2 speakers of English. For example, the co-existence of a set of phonological features makes HKE an identifiable variety distinguishable from other varieties of English (Hung 2012). While there is evidence of variability in HKE phonology (Stibbard 2004), there is a general agreement among researchers about the existence of a Hong Kong English accent (Hung 2000, 2012; Peng and Setter 2000; Setter 2006, 2008). Apart from phonological features, a number of grammatical features in HKE have also been identified in the literature, many of which can be attributed to the result of the interaction between English and Chinese, two languages with very different morphological and grammatical structures. A distinctly local vocabulary in HKE is also in existence to accommodate the socio-cultural, socio-political and communicative needs of Hong Kong people, and there are signs that the size of HKE vocabulary is still growing (Hung 2012). While HKE is not yet a fully-fledged variety of English as in the case of Singapore English, we can at least conclude that HKE is an emerging variety of English which is now in the process of developing its own rules and linguistic features of its own (Peng and Setter 2000). Clearly, there is still scope for HKE to develop into an established variety of English in the years to come.
In addition to the linguistic features of HKE, this article has also looked at the debates surrounding the status of HKE as a ‘new’ variety of English. It is suggested that HKE can now be placed in the third phase within Schneider’s (2007) Dynamic Model. While there are some signs of increasing awareness of the existence of HKE and its linguistic features in the local community, ambivalent attitudes towards the acceptability of HKE as the linguistic norm still exist. With the rapid socio-cultural changes in the era of globalization, however, it remains to be seen whether HKE may move onto Schneider’s fourth stage whereby HKE eventually becomes an endonormative variety of English (see Groves 2011).

With regard to the future developments of HKE, one possibility is that HKE may serve as a more important symbol of cultural identity of Hong Kong people, especially if the Chinese government decides to suppress the development of the Cantonese or southern Chinese identity and impose a more mainstream northern Chinese or Putonghua orientation upon Hong Kong people (Joseph 2004; Schneider 2007: 139). Kirkpatrick (2007) also makes the point that the hand-over of Hong Kong to China may help to cultivate a unique sense of Hong Kong identity among the local people, which may involve increasing attachment towards English, with Hong Kong people looking back at the colonial time as a time of ‘a benevolent, non-intrusive government and a politically stable shelter offering security and promising prosperity’ (Li 2002: 40). It is therefore possible that the increasing recognition and acceptance of English as part of their linguistic repertoire might facilitate a distinct Hong Kong variety of English to evolve which could serve to distinguish Hong Kong people from their mainland Chinese counterparts (see Chan 2002; Setter et al. 2010).

Another possible development of HKE may be related to the influence of Mandarin. With the rising status of Mandarin on a global scale and the current Hong Kong government’s language policy of ‘trilingualism and biliteracy’, there is more pressure on students in Hong Kong schools to learn Mandarin in order to gain competitiveness in the job market (Kirkpatrick 2007). It remains to be seen whether the rise of Mandarin may have any effect upon the development of HKE. Deterding (2006: 172), for example, predicts that ‘it may indeed happen that Hong Kong English will be further influenced by both Cantonese and Mandarin’.

Apart from the need for continued research into the future developments of HKE, more research in other areas is clearly necessary for us to achieve a more nuanced understanding of HKE, especially the sociolinguistic realities surrounding it. I shall therefore end this article by suggesting several future research directions:

• Firstly, it has been acknowledged that there is evidence of variation in HKE as used by Hong Kong people (Setter et al. 2010). However, there seems to be a paucity of research into both inter-speaker and inter-speaker variations in HKE (Sewell and Chan 2010). A promising research direction would be to investigate different ‘sub-varieties’ of HKE and examine whether certain linguistic features are more commonly found than other features in HKE. For example, a recent study on a sample of speakers of HKE by Sewell and Chan (2010) found that the use of a particular phonological feature may imply the occurrence of another phonological feature. Clearly, inter-speaker and intra-speaker variation in HKE is an important area that deserves much more attention in future research.

• Secondly, there are signs that there is now increasing acceptance of HKE as a distinct variety among Hong Kong speakers of English than a decade ago (see Lee and Collins 2006; Groves 2011). For example, in a recent study by Groves (2011), it was found that around three-quarters of the Hong Kong respondents agree that HKE exists, and around 40% of them consider HKE as a valid and acceptable variety of English. It appears that there are signs of increasing awareness of a distinctive variety of HKE. It would be interesting to conduct longitudinal studies into attitudes towards HKE and the level of acceptability of HKE as a legitimate variety of English in order to track any possible attitudinal changes over time.
• Thirdly, more research is necessary to find out whether context may play a role in the use and acceptability of HKE by its speakers. For example, a recent study by Chan (2013) found that there exists contextual variation in Hong Kong speakers’ choice of English pronunciation. It was found that the less formal and more interactive the communication context, the less reservations the participants have about the use of an HKE accent. He argues that the desire to preserve their own identity through a distinct HKE accent may depend on the degree of formality, the nature of the interaction, and the role of interlocutors in particular contexts. His study clearly points to the need for more research into the specific contexts in which HKE is likely to be accepted by Hong Kong speakers of English.

• Finally, a further strand of research which would be worthy of investigation concerns the influence of the English spoken by many ‘returnees’ on the development of HKE. As of now, little is known about the linguistic practices of these returnees, that is, Hong Kong people who left Hong Kong before the handover in 1997 and chose to return to Hong Kong afterwards (see Chen 2008). It would be interesting to see how the linguistic practices of these returnees may have an influence on the development of HKE and on the general perceptions of HKE in terms of its acceptability.

Short Biography

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Notes

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1 Cantonese is a regional variety of Chinese and is a dialect of Yue Chinese mostly spoken in southern China, such as Guangzhou, Hong Kong and Macau. Putonghua (also known as Mandarin) is the national language and the sole official language in China. It is also considered the ‘standard’ variety of Chinese.

2 In addition to the English-language population primarily made up of native English speakers from the UK, the USA and other ‘inner circle’ countries, English is also used as a lingua franca by Hong Kong people with settlers and sojourners from Europe and other parts of Asia, including the Philippines and Thailand (Evans 2011a).

3 Hong Kong presents a rather unusual context for researchers to categorize HKE according to the established models which account for the statuses of different varieties of English, most notably Kachru’s (1985, 1986) ‘three circles’ model. While varieties of English which have developed in postcolonial settings and which play an institutional role are classified as ‘outer circle’ varieties, places where English is only learnt as a foreign language are classified as ‘expanding circle’ countries. Based on Kachru’s model, HKE should be classified as an ‘outer circle’ variety because Hong Kong was once a British colony and English is used in institutional settings such as the law courts and government even after the handover in 1997. However, unlike other post-colonial countries such as Malaysia, the Philippines and Singapore, Hong Kong did not achieve independence after the end of the colonial rule, but has become a Special Administrative Region (SAR) of China instead (Sung 2010).

4 The concept ‘New Englishes’ refers to the product of situations where English is learnt as a second language and is used for a range of functions within a multilingual (and typically ‘outer circle’) context, including, for example, Nigerian English, Singapore English, Indian English and Philippine English (Platt, Weber and Ho 1984).
Cantonese is a tone language whereby every syllable is characterized by one of the six tones (Matthews and Yip 1994). Tone refers to the pitch assigned to each syllable of a word and is a distinctive feature in Cantonese that makes the distinction between different words (Matthews and Yip 1994).

Given the colonial history and the teaching of English according to the British English standard at school, the pronunciation of most English L2 speakers of Hong Kong is based upon British English. However, a substantial minority of Hong Kong people adopt a predominantly American pronunciation. In a study by Bolton and Kwok (1990), about 10% of their respondents stated a preference for an American accent.

Note that some of the features listed in the section are considered by some scholars as errors and features of an 'interlanguage', rather than grammatical features of HKE.

The plural suffix -s is used with some of the mass nouns in HKE, as if they were count nouns. Uncountable nouns in 'standard' varieties of English become count nouns in HKE. One reason is that speakers tend to differentiate between count and mass nouns with reference to the meanings of the nouns, resulting in the belief that concrete objects are considered to be 'count' and intangible entities tend to be considered to be 'mass' (Setter et al. 2010). Many mass nouns such as furniture, mail, bread, chalk, trouble and equipment in English can be counted with the use of a classifier system in Cantonese.

Hong Kong speakers of English tend to use the present tenses for past and future tenses, and the time reference is indicated by a time phrase, rather than the morphological marking (McArthur 2002: 360). Hong Kong speakers of English do not usually make use of the full range of verb tenses in English, and use predominantly the present and past tenses.

In this example, although proper nouns are not amenable to restrictive modification, the sentence has a relative marker that is typically only used in restrictive relatives.

‘Elite bilingualism’ was replaced by ‘mass bilingualism’ as the educational policy objective, and the English-medium secondary education was introduced in the 1990s (Bolton 2000; Schneider 2003: 259). As a result, Hong Kong witnessed an increase in the number of English L2 speakers with varying levels of proficiency.

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