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Chapter One

ENGLISH AND ITS ROLE IN HONG KONG CULTURAL IDENTITY

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ABSTRACT

Hong Kong is a city with a unique blend of Eastern and Western influences. This chapter illustrates the role English language plays within the mixed back drop of a metropolitan-capitalism and Confucius-derived setting of Hong Kong. The cultural diversity found in Hong Kong is rather unique with its status as the gateway of international trade and traffic. One hundred years of British ruling has cemented the importance of English in Hong Kong as a functional lingua franca – judging that English is paramount for international trade and business, and central to Hong Kong's economical and social well being. However, recent educational reforms in relation to language of instruction have raised the curtain on the undercurrents of cultural identity and its place in Hong Kong people's effort in being seen as an integral part of the Chinese mainland. The importance of this chapter lies in our attempt to draw the connection between Hong Kong English and its role in Hong Kong cultural identity.

Key words:
Hong Kong English, Hong Konger, mainland Chinese, China, Cantonese, pragmatic.

INTRODUCTION

Hong Kong, one of the world's most important financial centers, is a city with a unique blend of Eastern and Western influences. A former British colony, its population is comprised of local Hong Kong Cantonese people, mainland Chinese and expatriates from diverse cultural backgrounds (Hong Kong Census and Statistics Department, 2010). Out of this diverse population, 91% of people in Hong Kong are native Cantonese speakers. The remainder consists of speakers of other forms of Chinese dialects (4.4%) and Mandarin-speaking migrants (0.9%) from the Chinese mainland. A minority speak either English (2.8%) or another language (1.1%). Chinese and English are the official languages; however, English is learnt as a second language and used mostly for international communication. Since the handover of the city to China in 1997, Hong Kong became the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HK SAR) which resulted in China having a "One Country, Two Systems" policy (Koo, Kam, & Choi, 2003). This policy meant that the Hong Kong government has the discretion to implement its own policies except in international and military matters. In accordance with these changes, significant reforms have been made especially in the education sector, which are targeting Hong Kong children to become trilingual (Cantonese, Mandarin and English), and biliterate (Chinese and English).

This chapter illustrates the role English language plays within the mixed back drop of a metropolitan-capitalism and Confucius-derived setting of Hong Kong. The cultural diversity found in Hong Kong is rather unique with its status as the gateway of international trade and traffic. One hundred years of British ruling has cemented the importance of English in Hong Kong as a functional lingua franca – judging that English is paramount for international trade and business central to Hong Kong's economical and social well being. However, recent educational reforms in relation to language of instruction have raised the curtain on the undercurrents of cultural identity and its place in Hong Kong people's effort in being seen as an integral part of the Chinese mainland. We first define Hong Kong English (HKE) and its place as an emerging variety of English. We discuss the importance of HKE in relation to the current education system. We then explore the specifics of Hong Kong people's cultural identity in association with its historical roots with Britain and its motherland, China. The importance of this chapter lies in our attempt to draw the connection between Hong Kong English and its role in Hong Kong cultural identity.

HONG KONG ENGLISH

In understanding English as a language, it is often difficult to arrive at a succinct definition. In the book *An Encyclopedic Dictionary of Language and Languages*, Crystal (1992) defines English as:

> A Germanic language which has come to be spoken world-wide by a large and ever-increasing number of people – 800,000,000 by a conservative estimate, 1,500,000,000 by a liberal estimate. Some 350,000,000 use the language tongue, chiefly in the USA, the UK, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Ireland, and South Africa. A further 400 million use it as a second language, in such countries as Ghana, Nigeria, Tanzania, Pakistan, and the Philippines (p. 121).

From a historical perspective, Matthews (1997) offers the following definition of English:

> West Germanic. Old English ('Anglo Saxon') is attested from the 7th century AD, with an extensive literature before the Norman Conquest in the 11th century. After the conquest, Middle English was heavily influenced by

> French, most noticeably in large and central areas of vocabulary. A standard form, based mainly on eastern dialects spoken in London, developed increasingly from the end of the Middles ages (pp. 114 -115).

The definitions above reflect the rich historical background, complex development of the language, and its susceptibility to cultural changes, in which language contact was already evident in Middle English period, earlier than 1066 (Algeo, 2010). The development of English varieties is complex as well; studies in World Englishes offer different descriptions and models of global English (e.g., Kachru, 1986; Kirkpatrick, 2007; Modiano, 2004).

The development of HKE is historically embedded; a simple description perhaps is to begin from the British rule of Hong Kong. During the colonization period, English settlers saw their distant mother country as a source of political power and cultural guidance. They, however, used their own variety of English in order to blend in with the local needs. Since local Chinese avoided teaching Cantonese to the English, they in turn learnt this adapted English to communicate with the settlers. Thus, during this language acquisition process, Hong Kong locals further developed an English variety with peculiar linguistic properties and incorporated lexical borrowings from Cantonese.

Therefore, using Schneider's Dynamic English model (2007), for example, HKE could be categorized as a nativizing variety, where local language and cultural elements had found its way into the way English was used in Hong Kong. A pidgin English spoken in the "Canton" jargon was developed as a primary means of communication between the English settlers and the local Chinese (Bolton, 2002). Whilst the English merchants and aristocrats at the time of colonization, found it unbecoming to speak in this jargon, the locals had found it as an easy way of getting their message across to others who spoke English. Many of these jargons still remain today and occasionally arise in daily conversations between the locals who converse in English. One example is "chop-chop" which means to be fast.

Recently, Kirkpatrick (2007) argued that HKE is an emerging variety of English that is constantly undergoing transformations due to the social and educational changes within Hong Kong. Under the Biliterate and Trilingual Policy, students or even the wider society are expected to be proficient in Cantonese, English and Mandarin, which marks Hong Kong's transition from diglossia to triglossia (M.-l. Lai, 2001). One major point to note is that HKE is perhaps a variety that is still developing against a backdrop of trilingualism mixed with Hong Kongers' extrinsic and pragmatic aim for success (D. Li, 2002). Such development makes it worthwhile to examine the status of HKE in Hong Kong's education system in order to discern its relationship with Hong Kong cultural identity.

Hong Kong English Language Education

Sociocultural values, curriculum changes and the pressure of examinations have had significant influences on Hong Kong's English language education (J. Li, 2009; Rastall, 2006). Prior to the 2000 education reform, English classes were mostly teacher-centered, focused on grammar instruction, and lacked opportunities for English language use (Littlewood, 2001). Students were motivated to learn English mostly for pragmatic reasons – to pass examinations, get into a good tertiary education and eventually a good, high-paying job (Johnson & Yau, 1996).

Elaine Chan (2002) reported the objection of many parents and students against the mother-tongue medium of instruction (MOI) policy where it was perceived as contrary to their needs. She asserted, "In so far as the English language is a habitus of the people of Hong Kong, it has become part and parcel of the Hong Kong identity" (p. 281). Similarly, David Li

(2002) highlighted Hong Kong parents' pragmatic concern for success as closely associated with their demands for English-medium instruction within the schooling system.

To corroborate these findings, we recently conducted interviews with 12 Chinese students and their parents from four different public schools in Hong Kong. The interviews were semi structured and geared to solicit students' and parents' reactions to reasons for learning English. Overall, the students commonly echoed their parents' pragmatism in learning English. Both students and parents mostly perceived English as the means for upward and social mobility. For example, one student, Annie, did well in English because she thought it was important for her future. Others like Lili, Mia, Kean and Jian had high English grades because they knew that their parents considered it important for their future. One student, Lucy, stated that her choice of an English medium secondary school forced her to have better English proficiency.

> *...because [School A], which I want to apply is a English teaching school, for many subjects they use English as the teaching medium, so I have to learn English… and also… I find that English is more useful then other subjects in the future.*
> (Lucy's statement)

Parents in our study, however, showed more concern about obtaining high quality English instruction for their children. A number of them felt that the teaching of English was receiving less attention from the government. The parents worried about their children's access to high quality English teaching and learning because they believed high English proficiency allowed their children greater number of choices for their future. Parents were also concerned that with lower quality English teaching and learning, their children would lose the motivation to want to learn English despite the value it held for their future. These parents' concerns were valid as other research has shown that in recent years low achievement in English altered students' motivation to learn English and caused them to have negative attitudes towards the language (M.-l. Lai, 2000).

Besides achievement, parents want their children to learn English in order to elevate their status amongst their peers and society. One parent, for example, stressed how important it was for her daughter to acquire English in relation to her daughter's status amongst her peers:

> *She needs to be good in English...you see it's important for her...I want so much for her. I want her to do so well. I want her to be most popular child in the class, I really do. I want her to be everybody's favorite because she's mine… I want people to see how important she is.*
> (Parent C's statement)

Another parent associated the ability to speak in English as a gateway to an English medium school that was commonly aspired to by other children in the community. The school produced highly confident children:

> *You know, my nephew went there, and has just finished at eighteen. We have lots of friends with kids in that school, you know they come out incredibly confident, you know, really charming, socially confident children, you know, seems to be able talk to anyone and not afraid to have an opinion...*
> (Parent A's statement)

The mother-tongue MOI policy further aggravated the problem by reducing students' access to English and so parents were forced to compensate by sending their children to tutorial schools for extra assistance (P.-S. Lai & Byram, 2003). All 12 parents interviewed expressed regret about the MOI policy, and one parent, in particular, stated that:

> *I have a bad feeling about the changes against English in our education system…We can't ask the government to do something for us…we have to start doing it by ourselves. That is why we spend money for our daughter's English tutorial...*
> (Parent E's statement)

The effectiveness of these tutorial schools, of course, have been questioned since students coming into tertiary education have low English speaking and writing skills, which in turn affected their academic performance, remembering that all local Hong Kong universities use English as the medium of instruction (Littlewood, Liu, & Yu, 1996).

Despite curriculum initiatives to the contrary, secondary English language classrooms continue to be teacher-centered and focused on grammar instruction (Mok, Chow, & Wong, 2006). Students are mostly extrinsically motivated to learn English (M.-l. Lai, 2009). Although the new curriculum has adopted task-based learning, it has not been effective due to the preference for textbook teaching (Mok-Cheung, 2001). Despite language arts being viewed as promoting interest in English learning and in fostering creativity and imagination, teachers prefer not to use them because they lack the confidence to teach them and find that they are time consuming (Mok et al., 2006). Even English medium schools have similar problems in that the expectation of a total immersion experience for students are perceived mostly unrealistic, impractical and pedagogically undesirable despite its purported benefits (Evans, 2008). These interactions indicate a strong tension between cultural and situational factors over recommended theoretical orientations (Rao, 2006).

Such learning attitudes are carried over to the tertiary level although there are significant differences (Yang & Lau, 2003). Students who are enrolled in bachelor degrees reported that they have relatively high levels of English given that this is a requirement of Hong Kong tertiary institutions. Despite this success and a wider variety of English courses than secondary school (Yang & Lau), it seems that students are still highly extrinsically motivated and classrooms are still teacher dominated (V. Chan, Spratt, & Humphreys, 2002). However, there also appears to be stronger link between motivation, effort, and achievement in that high achievement triggers intrinsic motivations to learn English (Phillipson, 2005).

On the other hand, students also enter university with lower oral proficiency levels and so, need to experience more opportunities to develop active skills in oral English (Littlewood et al., 1996; M.-l. Lai, 2009). Where students have a lower English proficiency, their reasons for joining English medium classes are pragmatic and situational; pragmatic because students see English as a means to an end – their future career, and situational because the educational context demands some level of proficiency in English (Phillipson, 2005). Could these reasons be related to Hong Kong's background and identity? It is, thus, important to discuss the nature of Hong Kong identity to answer the former question.

HONG KONG IDENTITY

Hong Kong identity is complex in nature due to the city's historical origins. A local Hong Konger's identity is a historical blend of the West because of past the British rule, and the East through its motherland, China. This combination has produced a complex set of Hong

Kong Chinese values and beliefs. The Chineseness of the Hong Kongers comes from Neo-Confucian tradition in the Chinese society (Lee, 1996) where filial piety is central to the upbringing of children. Hong Kong children are taught from early in their lives to pay attention to proper and dutiful behaviors that adhere to moral standards and honor to family (Sun, 2008). It is crucial for children in a family to excel in education, not only for economic purposes but also for the good name of themselves, their parents and extended family (Lau, 1996). Effort is an important attribute for all Hong Kongers and this trait forms the underlying aim in individual and family goals (Shek & Chan, 1999).

With neo-Confucian tradition as the foundation of their identity, Hong Kongers tend to be accused of being neither Western nor Chinese, hence creating layers of identity. The Jackie Chan films, for example, reflect no specific cultural object of being Chinese, nor are they Western in a strict sense. Lo (2001) terms this characteristic as a 'double-negation' of Hong Kong identity. Similarly, Tsang and Wong (2004) contend that Hong Kong identity can also be revealed through stand-up jokes of a renowned local comedian, T. W. Wong. The comedian presents satirical notions of the realities of Hong Kong and China, such as the code-mixing practices of Hong Kongers and relationship of Hong Kong with the political figures in China.

Hong Kong's complex identity is also evident through the practice of anglicizing Chinese names. David Li (1997) reveals that Hong Kongers, in general, are found to use Western-style first names derived from their Chinese names, but not necessarily adopting a Western identity (e.g. Sze Sze becomes Cissy; Wing Sze becomes Winsy). Hong Kongers could also have Anglo names derived from Christian traditions such as John and Chris. They are also fond of adopting interesting names like Fanny and Kinky, which most always raise eyebrows among outsiders who are not familiar with the Hong Kong name acquisition. David Li (1997) argues that name changing occurs for convenience of communication with their friends. Anglicized names also do not make Hong Kongers feel deprived of their Chinese heritage but gives them a 'borrowed identity'. Nevertheless, Wong (2009) showed that when Hong Kongers are situated within a different culture abroad, they tend to reaffirm their identity as Chinese despite having a somewhat diluted identity prior to leaving Hong Kong.

Despite the predominant Western influence, Hong Kong endeavors to preserve its heritage and cultural establishments. The Ping Shan Heritage Trail is one historical icon of cultural-political relationship between the British and the Tangs (indigenous residents of Ping Shan village). Cheung (1999) reported that the trail represents Chinese identity in several ways. For the Hong Kong government, the trail represents a unique image of the territory to the public by declaring it a cultural heritage site. The Hong Kong Tourist Association markets it as an example of pre-modern Chinese life. This illustrates how Hong Kong does not fully accommodate the West but has a strong desire to preserve its Chinese cultural heritage as well.

Other factors, however, create tension between Chinese culture and its people. Fung's (2001) observation of Hong Kongers' response towards national discourse, such as national flag, national song, and public security in China, revealed that prior to the handover, the public seemed to show mixed emotions towards these national icons because of their fear of an unknown political agenda. Fung (2004) later surveyed public response to governmental figures (e.g. Chief Executive, Financial Secretary and the President, the Premier, etc.) and his study showed that Hong Kong people had developed a stronger local identity, which portrayed a united political vision of Hong Kong and the mainland. A more recent study by Fung (2008) revealed that Hong Kong people relate to the national symbols based on their practical values rather than nationalistic affinity. For example, business owners whose business relies heavily on the mainland embrace mainland national symbols as their own

because of the need to protect their investments. It seems that Hong Kong's identity assumes a complexity that has pragmatism at its core. With this assumption at hand, we discuss the position of HKE in relation to the Hong Kong identity.

Cultural identity through English

Political and social factors have given HKE a major role in forming Hong Kong cultural identity. From being just a symbol of political dominance, HKE has grown to become one of Hong Kong's most important cultural icons. Bacon-Shone and Bolton (1998) reviewed census and language survey data and reported a growing trend of multilingualism in Hong Kong with English recognized as the language for business, education, government, and law. Furthermore, a 1993 survey of secondary schools reported high levels of Cantonese-English code mixing at home, with their friends, and especially at school. This evidence was supported by David Li (2008), who found that educated Hong Kongers could not avoid using Cantonese when speaking in English and vice-versa. Apparently, Hong Kongers code mix because of pragmatic and social reasons and the choice to code switch is strongly linked to their status in society (i.e. Westernized in some way) (Luke, 1998). It seems that at the turn of the century, Hong Kongers who know and use English see themselves as having a higher status in Hong Kong society.

The use of HKE as a measure of social status was further aggravated with the advent of the language policy and change in medium of instruction from English to Cantonese. Evan, Jones, Rusmin, and Cheung (1998) conducted a survey of students, teachers, parents and business people and discovered that there was a growing concern of deteriorating English standard that could severely affect Hong Kong's international business standing. This concern is echoed by business people in current times. Lai (2005) reported the language attitudes of Hong Kong's first postcolonial generation secondary students and discovered that HKE ranks as the top language of instrumental value and social status (Cantonese mainly used in informal situations and Mandarin for business, if necessary). Clearly, HKE appears to be a marker of prestige in the Hong Kong context.

Code mixing continues to be prevalent in Hong Kong society. As an example of the code mixing phenomenon, we cite Brian Chan's (2009) study of English elements in Cantonese pop songs. The data revealed that code mixing is chiefly used as a poetic and satirical device where English words are used to imitate colloquial Cantonese with the aim to invoke feelings, humor or self expressions in relation to locally meaningful events or situations. English is also used to emphasize the unique characteristics of the songs. Although English elements are prevalent in the pop genre of Hong Kong music, Chan argued that the use of English in the pop songs, however, does not project a Western outlook. Code-mixing is thus an indication that a Hong Konger is to be neither Western nor Chinese, but a unique hybrid of both worlds.

The elevated position of HKE does have its drawbacks. Chen's (2008) comprehensive study of Hong Kong locals and Chinese returnees from overseas compared their linguistic practices and identity construction. Chen found that the returnees displayed different code-switching patterns from the locals, who mainly adhered to more Cantonese words in their sentences. The returnees, however, embraced English alongside Cantonese and this resulted them to be labeled as 'outsiders' in Hong Kong society. Using English in social situations is considered socially inappropriate because English should only be used for academic and career advancement. This study illustrates how Hong Kongers position and reposition themselves in society through the use of English.

CONCLUSION

Hong Kong has a blended Chinese-Western culture that stemmed from the British colonial era (Hong, Morris, Chiu, & Benet-Martinez, 2000) based on "pragmatism…rather than tradition as its key value" (Kennedy, Fok, & Chan, 2006, p. 112). HKE's place in the Hong Kong context shows that identity negotiation is not simply a one-off process. Various internal and external forces constantly influence the malleable identity of a Hong Kong person. From our discussion, we observed a linguistic representation of Hong Kong identity. Our own investigation and the studies of Li (1997) and Chan (2009) have brought to our attention that Hong Kongers have a tendency to exploit English language to achieve certain communicative purposes, and so project a dichotomized identity that pertains to neither entirely Chinese nor English. HKE then has a pragmatic status in relation to Hong Kongers' identity in the Hong Kong context.

What seems to be unanswered is whether HKE might disunite Hong Kongers and mainland China. Do Hong Kong people tend to form a national identity of an exclusive one, apart from China? Will HKE deprive Hong Kong from its national identity formation? Recent political debates in the wake of planned constitutional reforms in Hong Kong speak volumes for such possibilities to happen. A replica of the American/English statue of liberty called Lady of Democracy was used to represent opposition to "China-influenced" proposed reforms. During the protests that happened, English words were used to highlight democracy, thus placing HKE as a tool for political and social identity in Hong Kong. Perhaps, HKE is being used to position Hong Kong in a distinguishing status, apart from the motherland, China. This, we have to wait and see.

To conclude, we iterate that HKE has a pragmatic value for Hong Kong and its people. The pragmatism exists at all levels of interactions – whether it is for every day communication, to position oneself in the society or to voice a political stand.

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