Previous publications by this author:


In memory of my beloved grandparents and godparents

Tanus ibn Yusuf Abu Butrus Hubayqat / Anthony Joseph
4 Nov. 1883–20 Sept. 1963

Suraya Qamar / Sarah Amar Joseph
1 Nov. 1898–25 Apr. 1987
6

Case Study 1: the New Quasi-Nation of Hong Kong

This chapter is devoted to an in-depth look at a linguistic situation in which distinctive identities are in the relatively early stages of emerging. There is a good chance that, in the long run, they will prove not to have emerged at all, given that potent social, cultural and (supra-)national forces are ranged against any such emergence. Yet comparable forces have been in play in the history of every national linguistic identity, successful or unsuccessful. For that reason, Hong Kong provides a valuable insight into how the process of linguistic identity construction is played out.

Historical background

Hong Kong was a British colony from 1841 until 1997, at which time it became a semi-autonomous Special Administrative Region (SAR) of the People’s Republic of China (PRC). By terms of the treaty negotiated between the UK and the PRC in 1984, Hong Kong is to retain SAR status until 2047, when it will be fully incorporated into the PRC. Both Chinese and English continue to be co-official languages in Hong Kong, with official documents published in both languages. Prior to 1 July 1997 the English document was the ‘controlling’ version, the one which prevailed in the case of any discrepancy between it and the Chinese version. Since 1 July 1997, the Chinese document is the controlling version.

What makes the case of Hong Kong linguistically intricate has partly to do with the use of English, but at least as much with what is covered by the word ‘Chinese’. Although there is a relatively unified written Chinese that literate people throughout the Chinese-speaking world share, the spoken ‘dialects’ differ so much from one another that linguists classify them as separate languages. There is little mutual comprehensibility between Putonghua, the ‘official’ spoken language based upon the northern dialect called Mandarin, and southern dialects such as Hakka, Hokkien, or the dialect that is mother tongue to over 90 per cent of Hong Kong residents, Cantonese. The linguistic distance between Putonghua and Cantonese has been compared to that between English and Swedish.

When it became a British colony, Hong Kong Island (which was the whole of the original colony) had only a small population of fisher people. The colony developed trading relations with wealthy south Chinese merchant families, and this led to the growth of a local population brought in from neighbouring Canton province to work in trade-related industries. The population spilled over to the mainland area of Kowloon, just across the strait from the island, and this area was ceded by treaty to Britain in 1860 following another conflict with China. Then, in 1898, the ‘New Territories’, a large rural expanse extending up to the mountains, was leased by the colony for 99 years. It was the forthcoming expiry of this lease in 1997 that led Britain in 1984 to decide that the colony would not be viable without the New Territories, and that it should be returned to Chinese sovereignty.

The population growth was reasonably steady until 1949, when the Kuomintang government of General Chiang Kai-Shek was overthrown by the Communists led by Mao Zedong, and forced to retreat to Taiwan. From that point on, great masses of people from China began seeking refuge in Hong Kong, until the British government imposed limits on immigration. The Chinese government supported such limits, and has strengthened them since the return of Hong Kong to Chinese sovereignty.

The last British governor of Hong Kong, Christopher Patten, attempted to introduce democratic institutions into the colony from 1992 onward, but these attempts met with a mixture of hostility and indifference from Beijing, which considers its own style of oligarchic rule to be ‘democratic’ and has tried, with partial success, to impose it upon the Hong Kong SAR. However, the SAR administration was forced as early as 1998 to bend its policies in the face of popular protests, one of the first and most powerful of which was over language policy. The government’s proposal to shift from English to Cantonese as the language of instruction in government-run schools met with vehement opposition from parents, who contended that their children would be
put at a disadvantage in their future careers by not being taught in English from the elementary level onwards. They took to the streets in protest, until the government retreated to a compromise position. As a result, it is likely that English will play a significant role in Hong Kong culture and society for many decades at least.

The political situation in Hong Kong has remained extremely tense. In the summer of 2003 popular demonstrations forced the SAR administration to withdraw 'security' measures Beijing was trying to impose, which would have significantly restricted civil liberties. Beijing seems not to have anticipated that the ethnically Chinese population of Hong Kong, once free of British influence, would be prepared to stand up against the same sort of iron-handed rule it exerts on the mainland. The fact that they are provides ample evidence that Hong Kong culture is distinctive from mainland Chinese culture in more than superficial ways.

Hong Kong people do not see themselves as 'a people', but as part of the Chinese people, and, in certain contexts (discussed in a later section) as part of the southern Chinese people. This corresponds with the linguistic situation: Hong Kong people consider their 'language' to be Chinese, of which their spoken Cantonese is a 'dialect'. The social hierarchy of Hong Kong is however defined in significant part by bilingualism with English. For the senior managerial generation, brought up in the 1950s and 1960s, fluent, quasi-RP-accented English is the hallmark of their being products of the 'glory days' of colonial education, helping to define them as the upper echelon of Hong Kong society. For the younger generations, native-like proficiency belongs almost exclusively to those sent overseas for their education. Many of these have come back to Hong Kong, while others have remained overseas, but in any case the returnees are greatly outnumbered by those who stayed in Hong Kong for their university education. For this much larger group, the hallmark of their identity is their ability to code-switch, relentlessly and seamlessly, between Chinese and English (see Gibbons, 1979).

The 'myth' of declining English

The public discourse about English in Hong Kong has been studied by Joseph (1996) and Lin (1997). Starting around the late 1970s it progressively became centred upon the notion of a deterioration in English standards, with the predominant metaphor that of 'decline' or 'falling'. Here is just one of many examples cited by Lin, this one from the front page of the leading Hong Kong economic publication:

The falling standard of English in Hong Kong is starting to pinch corporate pocketbooks.

As the territory’s burgeoning service businesses boost demand for English speakers, there are signs that the English proficiency of university and secondary-school graduates entering the work force is dropping, forcing local companies to fork out large sums on remedial language training. [...] (Lotte Chow, ‘Drop in English Standard Hurts Hong Kong Business’, Asian Wall Street Journal Weekly, 12 June 1995, p. 1, cited by Lin, 1997, p. 428)

Commissions were set up to study this problem, generously funded bodies established to address it, and dozens of linguists hired from outside to counteract it. Some of the linguists have echoed the perception of a decline in English standards, particularly when participating in a public forum, where to do otherwise would be perceived (rightly or wrongly) as being out of touch with reality and abrogating professional responsibility. However, in professional discourse, it is rare for linguists to speak in terms of declining English standards. Instead, the view has tended to be that the supposed linguistic deterioration is the product of a false, or at least skewed, perception.

The notion of linguistic decline depends upon a concept of 'good' and 'bad' in language which linguistics has rejected as 'prescriptive' since the nineteenth century. Following the views of Bourdieu and Billig discussed in the preceding chapter, we can see this rejection as merely superficial, with the activity and discourse of 'descriptive' linguistics being ultimately inseparable from that of 'prescriptivism'. Nevertheless, the distinction is crucial to the ideology under which most linguists operate. To say that a language situation is deteriorating carries implications about language quality that linguists are trained early on not to entertain. Further complicating the case of Hong Kong, the 'good' situation of the past is one in which university students were (or are imagined to have been) solidly bilingual and biliterate in Chinese and English, the colonial language. Western linguists sometimes appear to be suggesting that a change from colonial-plus-native-language bilingualism to native-language monolingualism is desirable, or on the contrary that it is undesirable. Either way, the argument presents serious problems, quite apart from the fact that the data (some of which are given below) do not support the belief that Hong Kong is moving toward monolingualism. The positive value judgement implies that monolingualism and monoliteracy are preferable to multilingualism and multiliteracy, a view that linguists are constitutionally disposed to
reject, and that Hong Kong people too are generally disinclined to accept. The negative judgement could be taken to mean that English is better than Chinese, a proposition any linguist would reject immediately as nonsense if applied to the structure or ‘inner logic’ of the language (since we have no independent criteria by which to measure the quality of languages, even relative to one another), and would likely steer clear of even if ‘better’ simply has the sense of ‘more useful’ (since ‘usefulness’ has many more aspects than are immediately apparent).

For these same reasons it has seemed to many linguists that the idea of a decline in standards of English in Hong Kong is logically untenable. But more than that, it is directly contradicted by empirical research. Table 6.1, cited from a Hong Kong language survey project by Bacon-Shone & Bolton (1998), shows the number of English speakers in Hong Kong increasing by 50 per cent between 1983 and 1993. Bacon-Shone & Bolton have found a steadily accelerating rise from the 1950s to the present in both the proportion and the sheer numbers of Hong Kong people proficient in English, certainly giving the lie to any statement to the effect that ‘Hong Kong is a monolingual (Cantonese-speaking) and ethnically homogeneous (ninety-eight per cent Chinese) society’ (So, 1987, p. 249), or even this slightly tempered version: ‘Hong Kong is essentially a monolingual Cantonese-speaking society where English is used in only a restricted number of domains’ (So, 1992, p. 79).4

Table 6.1 1993 survey of languages spoken and understood by whole population of Hong Kong (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Understand</th>
<th>Speak</th>
<th>(Speak: 1983 survey)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cantonese</td>
<td>91.5</td>
<td>91.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>68.6</td>
<td>65.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Putonghua (Mandarin)</td>
<td>61.9</td>
<td>55.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>7.3</td>
<td>6.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hakka</td>
<td>7.4</td>
<td>6.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chiu Chau</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>5.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fukien</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>4.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sze Yap</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shanghaiese</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>2.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cantonese dialects</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Chinese dialects</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other European languages</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Adapted from Bacon-Shone & Bolton (1998, pp. 68, 74).

Bacon-Shone & Bolton’s study also shows a marked increase between 1983 and 1993 in the proportion of people claiming to know English with considerable proficiency (Table 6.2). Among the public at large, then, one finds a substantial shift of perception of how well English is spoken in Hong Kong, in the opposite direction to that maintained by the discourse of decline. In order to understand what is going on, it is useful to consider how the perceptual shift came about historically.

Until 1995 the territory had two universities, the University of Hong Kong, founded in 1911, and the Chinese University of Hong Kong, founded in 1963. Between 1994 and 1997, five colleges/polytechnics/institutes were upgraded to university status and one wholly new university created. The number of university student places tripled in less than three years. At the same time, the number of school-leavers going abroad for university education, mainly to the UK and North America, had been on a sharp upward curve in tandem with the territory’s growing affluence since the late 1980s. Families who can afford to do so send their children overseas, which means that the higher-ranking local universities (the older ones, particularly the University of Hong Kong) get the cream of the poorer families. Twenty or 30 years ago this was not so. In those days the well-off went to the then very British University of Hong Kong, while middle-class students might get a place in the Chinese University if they were lucky. But as recently as the early 1970s, only 2 per cent of secondary-school graduates in Hong Kong went on to university. By 1997 the figure was 20 per cent.

In 1972, the secondary-school graduates in the top 3–18 per cent ranking of their class mainly took up jobs as clerks and secretaries, in which they dealt extensively with the public. Management jobs were not immediately open to them; the executive sector, like the economy, was much smaller and dominated by expatriates. When one visited a government or business office downtown, the receptionist or the clerk behind the window may well have been from the top 5 per cent of their graduating class, highly educated and with excellent English. By today,
with more than 20 per cent of graduates going to university and from there to management jobs on an executive ladder, the receptionist or clerk at the window downtown will not even have come from the top quarter of their graduating class. In that sense, there has been a decline in standards, but it has come about as part of a great increase in educational opportunity – a very good thing even in the eyes of those who complain about poor English.

These changes have made Hong Kong in many ways like the Victorian Britain described by Hobsbawm, with a large ‘exam-passing’ class moving via education from being hourly wage earners or small shopkeepers into the lower ranks of the middle class. Their use of language (particularly English) is closely bound up with the urban institutional structures (schools, universities, testing agencies, employment offices) responsible for hierarchising them. In every act of speaking or writing, through the particular forms of Chinese and English they speak – often intermittently within a single sentence – they enact their identities as Hong Kong Chinese who have reached the top of the educational ladder. To speak Standard British or American English would not be desirable, as it would mark them as outsiders; to speak no English would be even less desirable, marking them as uncosmopolitan, uneducated, undesirable as marriage partners.

When people talk about a decline in English standards in Hong Kong, they are reacting to the most readily perceptible aspect of a major social change. This point was already made by Lord (1987):

In Hong Kong, over the past two decades, English has changed from being a purely colonial language whose use was largely restricted to government circles, the law, high-level business, and a few other sectors, to becoming an indispensable language of wider communication, for a growingly large range of people, all the way down from top brass to clerks, from taipans to secretaries... Not unnaturally, it has seemed to many that standards of English are falling. (Lord, 1987, p. 11; italics in the original)

By italicising the word ‘seemed’, Lord suggests, as many other linguists have done, that the decline is mythical. This is not entirely wrong. It is not as though some entity called the English language exists in Hong Kong and used to be better but now is worse. Whatever we mean when we talk about ‘English’ – whether we have in mind a set of words and rules existing independently from speakers, a form of knowledge in the minds or brains of speakers, or a way of behaving in communicative discourse – it is clear that what has happened in Hong Kong is that more people have obtained access to English, not fewer. As is typical when a privilege of the few becomes open to the hoi polloi, it is no longer perceived as having the same quality as before.

From this point of view the ‘myth’ of declining English in Hong Kong is a type of linguistic snobbery. That helps explain one aspect of my own experience as Professor of English at the University of Hong Kong in the mid-1990s – the fact that, without exception, the people who complained to me in vociferous and emotional terms about the decline of English in Hong Kong were ethnic Chinese. Westerners sometimes mentioned it, but with a resigned shrug. Ethnic Chinese Hong Kong people who themselves are highly proficient in English continue to get very worked up, insisting that this is an urgent issue, a crisis situation that must be got under control. Then they inevitably add that not only is the university students’ English terrible, but their Chinese is just as bad – a complex comment given the Chinese language situation as described earlier, but mainly reflecting anxiety over ‘code-mixing’, the use of English words within ostensibly Cantonese conversation (see p. 134 above on the identity value of such code-mixing). Actually I do not think that they say these things entirely out of snobbery, and shall elaborate further on what else I believe is behind it. But through such discourse, they establish the value of the kind of English which they and other university graduates of their generation possess, and which is increasingly rare among today’s students.

The first thing they would deny is that they speak something that ought to be identified as ‘Hong Kong English’. With few exceptions, it is linguists who talk about this language. Its speakers scoff at the notion that there is anything other than ‘good English’ (represented by the overseas standard) and the ‘bad English’ of their compatriots. In this respect, Hong Kong English is in exactly the same position as every modern Romance language was in the early stages of its emergence vis-à-vis either Latin or some other Romance language (with further, Slavic complications in the case of Romanian).

It is almost certainly the case that the perception of a decline in English standards is tied in part to the emergence of a syntactically distinctive Hong Kong English with clear interlanguage features. Recognition of a new ‘language’ depends on three sets of factors: linguistic form, function and status (see Joseph, 1987). The following sections present samples of Hong Kong English, then consider it in the light of these three criteria, beginning with form.
Samples of Hong Kong English

In order to give readers at least an initial sense of what Hong Kong English is like, I offer three texts, each in a different genre. The first is drawn from Hong Kong Voice of Democracy (3 September 2003). It is a purely written text, only semi-formal in nature, inviting readers to a group hike the following weekend. I have highlighted features which do not follow the British or American standard, differentiating among them as follows. Those features which are, in my view, idiosyncratic to the text at hand are in boldface italic. Those features which are more generally shared by speakers and writers of Hong Kong English, and are likely to be part of the distinctive form of that language if and when it emerges, are in boldface roman:

Dear Members/Friends of 7.1 People Pile

The below plse have a look of the details of the hiking event held this Sunday.

Democracy heading to Lion Hill

Time: 7th September 2003 (Sunday)
Gathering time: 1:30pm
Gathering place: Hang Seng Bank of Wong Tai Sin MTR station
(group of bright orange polo shirt as identification)
Transport: NO.18 Mini-bus
Route: Shatin Pass Estate → Shatin Pass → Unicon Ridge → Lion Rock → pavilion → Amah Rock → Hung Mui Kuk

Characteristics: To observe the development of Kowloon and Shatin
and have a close look to Amah Rock

Distance: around 7.5 km
Time: around 2.5–3 hours
Difficulty: level 2
Facility: None
Time of departure: 5:30pm
Departed place: barbecue
Transport: There are buses available in Hung Mui Kuk going to Kowloon or Shatin.
For alternative, we can walk 20 minutes to Tai Wei KCR station

*Remarks:
1) Bring enough food & water (700–1000 ml). Prepare enough transportation fees

2) Under the sun, should prepare umbrella, sun-block products, sweat-shirts and towels

Among the ‘regular’ features of Hong Kong English in this text we can note the following:
• flattening of count noun vs mass noun distinction, reflected in use of singular for Standard English plural and in different distribution of definite and indefinite articles (e.g. group of [...], shirt, for alternative).
• highly distinctive distribution of prepositions
• semantic differences in individual lexical items (e.g. prepare meaning have available, bring)

The second text, also drawn from the Hong Kong Voice of Democracy (1 June 1998), consists of excerpts from the transcript of an interview with Szeto Wah, a prominent pro-democracy politician and Chairperson of the Hong Kong Alliance in Support of Patriotic Democratic Movement of China:

Q The Alliance has raised a lot of money from the citizens through its activities all these years. What is the financial picture now? What if all the money are spent? Will the Alliance accept foreign sponsorship?

A As of April, we still have three million Hong Kong dollars in the bank. We have been trying our best to cut all unnecessary expenses. I think this year we’ll have no problem. And every year, especially during the commemoration activities, we receive a lot of donations from the citizens. However, as Hong Kong is going through an economic down turn recently, we shall have to see. If we can raise a million and a half this year at the commemoration activities, it will be okay. Last year we have raised more than two million Hong Kong dollars. Money is a problem, but not the major one. We will adjust to work with what we have. We will never seek foreign sponsorship. All our past resources are based on the money donated to us directly from the citizens.

[...]

Q Last May, a debate has been successfully motioned in the Legco to call for Beijing for rectification of the June 4th massacre. Of
course the act itself was symbolic rather than substantial. That Legislature has been disbanded. But now, many of you have been re-elected back to the council; do you think another similar motion can trigger the attention of both the public and the authority, thus exercising media pressure?

A The LegCo system of motioning is quite different now. Some are newly elected legislators. The voting set-up of the council will not permit that kind of motion to take place. Without the written permission of the Chief Executive, such a motion will never arrive at the discussion agenda. The possibility of such an action is quite bleak. We can of course repeat the application to motion in order to attract media coverage, but it will never lead to the kind of debate and influence as before. Even for the last debate, it was just a record for the expression of opinions from the LegCo members. It is never anything with judicial authority.

In addition to the features noted in the first text, we find here several instances of another characteristic of Hong Kong English, namely its different distribution of verb tenses from Standard English (e.g. is going through [...] recently, last year we have raised). Although many ‘world Englishes’ exhibit such differences from the Standard, there does appear to be some distinctiveness among them that may be traceable to the mother tongue ‘substratum’. For instance, native speakers of Germanic languages have a strong tendency to overuse the progressive forms from the point of view of Standard English (e.g. Where are you coming from? vs Standard Where do you come from?), but this is not a tendency one finds in Hong Kong English.

The final text samples come from papers written by two students of mine for the course Language in Society at the University of Hong Kong in autumn 1996. I include them here not only as samples of emerging Hong Kong English as produced by top-level university students in the second half of the 1990s, but also in order to allow the voices of Hong Kong English speakers themselves to say what they think about the language situation.

Multilingualism becomes more common and popular among the countries [...]}. According to Ramirez, multilingualism appears to be a characteristic of most human. There are already many countries recognize two or more languages are their official languages. As the technology is largely improved in recent decades [...] multilingualism is need for a country to develop trade/communication with other countries [...]. Besides, people with multi-linguistic people are able to communicate with other countries, that serve global needs and shorten the gap between nations.

In Hong Kong, people are exposed to written Chinese in the most of the time as it is the mother language for over 95% of the population. Problems of written Mandarin/Cantonese are concerned. Students in Hong Kong are taught of written Mandarin and it is commonly used. However, written Cantonese can represent spoken Cantonese syllable by syllable, and all people in Hong Kong can fully understand [...]}. Hong Kong has a smaller percentage who cannot read Chinese while comparing with Singapore. For English, Hong Kong has a lower standard comparing with Singapore as it can be expected as language mainly used in Singapore is English (to communicate with other races) while Chinese is used in Hong Kong.

The quality of teacher directly affect the performance of the students. In Hong Kong, most teachers [...] have the problem of the using of English themselves. Then some teachers [...] will teach in half English and half Chinese that make students neither good at English nor Chinese [...]}. When the children are in the primary, they use their Chinese language logic to study English. This is the reason that primary students make Chinese style English like ‘Do you think you can pass the salt?’ instead of ‘Can you pass me the salt?’ [...]}

Many parents in Hong Kong have strong desire to have their children learning in English. It is because having higher English can have better job opportunities [...]}.

Although most of the features have already been discussed following their appearance in one of the earlier samples, the fifth sentence of the first extract above (‘Besides, people with multi-linguistic people are able to communicate with other countries, that serve global needs and shorten the gap between nations’) contains three noteworthy features:

- The use of Besides as a sentence opener, corresponding to Standard English Furthermore (similarly with Then in the second extract).
- The first occurrence of people would in Standard English be a people (‘people with multi-linguistic people’=a people with a multilingual population), and would be followed by a singular rather than a plural verb, so both features of the count–mass flattening are present here.
The use of *that* as a pronoun of broad reference – the Standard English equivalent here would be something like *an ability which* or *a situation which*.

Of all these features, the most characteristic – to the point of having long been a locus for caricature of Chinese speakers of English – are undoubtedly those related to the flattening out of the count–mass distinction in the noun phrase. They will be the focus of attention in the next section.\(^5\)

**The formal distinctiveness of Hong Kong English**

As Kloss (1978) noted, the first requirement for a new language to be recognised is simply that it differ in form from the already recognised variety. Kloss used the term *Abstand* to designate the required linguistic distance. Of course, difference always exists – no form of language, no matter how narrowly defined, is free of variation, and at the level of *a language* there is bound to be variation that will cause a certain amount of disruption in communication among speakers. As we have seen, there is no preset threshold of difference that a distinct *language* must reach. If the desire for a distinct language to be recognised is strong enough, the most minor differences will be invested with the ideological value needed to fill the bill.

One marker of Hong Kong English that regularly occurs in discourse samples is the lack of the Standard English distinction between count noun phrase and mass noun phrase. In this respect the simple noun phrase (NP) in Hong Kong English has the structure of its equivalent in Chinese, as shown in Figure 6.1, where CNP stands for ‘common noun phrase’, CL for ‘classifier’, CL-P for ‘classifier phrase’, and X for ‘to be determined’. Hong Kong English speakers, including master’s students I have taught who are English teachers and some of the best local university English graduates of the last two decades, have invariably been astonished to learn that *noodle* is a count noun rather than a mass noun in Standard English, and that one does not say *bowl of noodle* in parallel with *bowl of rice*. A current student of mine from Hong Kong reports having been strongly rebuked by a teacher for saying *bowl of noodles* in lieu of the ‘correct’ *bowl of noodle*. The nouns *faahn* ‘rice’ and *miihn* ‘noodles’ take the same nominal classifier in Cantonese, *wun* ‘bowl’.\(^6\)

**SE:** a. a bowl of rice (one bowl rice)  
   b. a bowl of noodles (one bowl noodle)

**HKE:** a. *a bowl of rice*  
   b. *a bowl of noodle*

**Cant.:** a. *yät wän faahn*  
   b. *yät wän miihn*

In Chinese, every common noun selects a particular classifier, so that in Cantonese *a book* is yät *bün syù*, *a university* is yät *gään daaish-hohk*, and so on. Chinese learners of English implicitly expect that if two nouns select the same classifier in Chinese, their English equivalents will show identical syntactic behaviour. Although with many, perhaps most, structural contrasts between the two languages, proficient Chinese learners of English do not bring a similar expectation to bear, *bowl of noodles* sounds just as strange to my highly proficient master’s students as *bowl of rice* does to them or to me.

The syntactic structure of these noun phrases can be represented as in Figure 6.2, with Standard English and Cantonese on the left, and on the right, Hong Kong English represented as an interlanguage continuum.\(^7\)

The NP consists of an article, a, and a CNP, whose head is the common noun (CN) *bowl*. This CNP selects a phrase headed by the preposition of as its complement. The complement of that phrase is another CNP which will always be specified as count or mass. If it is a count CNP, then it will be further specified as singular or plural, whereas the mass CNP does not have this specification.

Looking now to (c), we find that the Cantonese equivalent of these two NPs is a single structure, consisting of a CL-P and a CNP. The CL-P consists of the number yät and the head, the classifier (CL) *wün*. The CNP is headed by a noun for which there is no evidence to suggest that it is syntactically marked as count or mass. Chinese has no direct singular or plural marking of nouns or verbs. Demonstratives show interesting number phenomena, but here too there is no real evidence of a count–mass distinction in Cantonese. The other main difference between the English and Cantonese phrases is that in English *rice* and
continuum have little or no sense of the count-mass noun distinction, even if they have a well-developed proficiency with singular and plural markers. Instead, as I have noted, there is a strong implicit sense for these speakers that nouns selecting the same classifier in Chinese should show the same syntactic behaviour in English. That is the main reason for my labelling bowl here as a pseudo-classifier. My suspicion is that the presence of what we might term a ‘pseudo-classifier effect’ even at the SE end of Hong Kong English is responsible for the non-standard subject-verb agreement one finds even in those highly proficient speakers.

It is more than 30 years since the notion of ‘interlanguage’ in applied linguistics established that second-language speakers do not simply make random errors. To be precise, they do make random errors, just as mother-tongue speakers do, but the great bulk of the features that set their interlanguage apart from the standard version of the target language are systematic in nature. Hong Kong English speakers make the same ‘errors’ from the point of view of Standard English in regularly recurring patterns, many of them traceable to the influence of Cantonese. Given this regularity of structure, it makes sense from a linguist’s point of view to speak of Hong Kong English as an emerging ‘language’. The second point is that the ‘emergence of Hong Kong English’ and the ‘decline of English standards in Hong Kong’ are one and the same thing, looked at from two different points of view. In some ways two opposite points of view, because ‘emergence’ implies that English is in the process of becoming a language of Hong Kong (using ‘of’ in the strong sense of ‘belonging to’), whereas ‘decline’ implies that Hong Kong is losing English. There is in fact a sense in which Hong Kong is losing English, and it can be expressed precisely thus: the British or American or other foreign standard of correct spoken English has ceased to be the majority norm for Hong Kong. Likely more people than ever before speak ‘correct’ British English in Hong Kong, yet as a proportion of the Hong Kong English-speaking population, they have never been smaller.

This development was inevitable once universal education, all or largely in English, was instituted in the territory in the late 1970s. Given the massive numbers of students involved, there would have been no way to prevent the development from ensuing that is simultaneously the emergence of Hong Kong English and the decline in English standards. If it seems paradoxical that the spread of education should be connected with a decline in standards, that association is made routinely in the contexts of North American, British and Western European education. People there have come slowly and painfully to realise that,
given inequalities in the home environments from which students come and the limitations on human and economic resources which societies can deploy toward education, choices have to be made between being bound to traditional academic standards and educating the masses. No one has yet shown how to achieve both, and rare indeed are the voices ready to call for abandoning the masses for the sake of the standards.

The status of Hong Kong English

In the context of English in Hong Kong, if history teaches us anything it is that the 'decline' in externally imposed standards must occur if English is to survive in post-colonial Hong Kong (see Harris, 1989). New 'internal' standards must replace them - and that is precisely what has been happening with the emergence of a distinctive form of English. If Hong Kong English shows regularly occurring patterns traceable to the influence of its speakers' mother tongue, it was by just such a process that the Romance languages came into being - an emergence that was at the same time a crumbling of the standards of Latin measured against the external criterion of Virgil and Cicero, and not a random crumbling, but one connected to the other languages spoken in the former Roman Empire. In the Middle Ages, the Romance dialects were already taking on their distinctive forms, but it was only over the course of many centuries that they came to be recognised as distinct 'languages' (see Wright, 1982). Particularly where writing was concerned, but also in prestigious spoken registers, there was good Latin, conforming to classical standards, and bad Latin, where those standards were giving way to the influences of the vernacular language. With the Renaissance and the spread of the modern idea of nationhood, the status of this 'bad Latin' changed into something and people began to think of it as something else, their language. In the case of France, by the eighteenth century it became an idée fixe that French was the most rational of all human languages, an opinion which continues even now to be widely held in French culture.

The status of Hong Kong English today is somewhat comparable to that of 'bad Latin' in the later Middle Ages, though there is a twist. The typical pattern in the recognition of a new language or form of a language is that a group of partisans within the native population begin asserting linguistic autonomy, and there ensues a struggle for international recognition. In the case of Hong Kong English, international recognition has come in the almost total absence of local assertion.

Hong Kong English is, for example, one of the forms of English under study in the massive International Corpus of English (ICE) project. The lack of any positive recognition of Hong Kong English in the local public discourse is perhaps not surprising, given that the emergence of other Englishes, including American, Australian, Canadian, Indian, New Zealand and Singapore English, as well as Quebec French, Venezuelan Spanish, Brazilian Portuguese and the like have always been post-colonial phenomena in the most literal sense (for fine studies of the post-colonial emergence of new Englishes in Singapore and Malaysia, see Platt & Weber, 1980; in Sri Lanka, Parakrama, 1995; and for an overview, Platt et al., 1984 and Brutti-Griffier, 2002). In some cases the emergence took a few years, in others entire decades, after the withdrawal of the colonial power. We do not find cases of local varieties of a language attaining official or social recognition as distinct 'languages' during the time of colonial rule. So it may be that the best we can expect is that Hong Kong English will be a future development. That is, although in terms of linguistic form it is well along the path of emergence, in terms of status we could not, projecting from historical evidence, reasonably expect it to attain recognition until well after 1997, other than from linguists focusing on its formal distinctiveness.

This is not to say that initial steps toward the creation of that status are not discernible. University students in Hong Kong are by and large oblivious to any sense that their English is 'bad', and this fact in itself constitutes strong evidence that Hong Kong English is at an early stage in the development of language status. These students have, after all, been studying English since the age of four or five, and if they have been accepted into university, they have likely been in the upper ranks of English users in their peer group. They are quite befuddled, sometimes even amused, to arrive at university and encounter expatriate and foreign-educated teachers telling them that the English they have been consistently praised for is deficient. One does not see them heading in panic to the English Centre to 'improve' their English, unless specifically ordered to do so. Again, these are signs that a 'local' standard is in operation, even if that standard has as yet no recognition or status within the local discourse about English.

If the emergence of a formally distinctive English in Hong Kong, also known as the decline in English standards, was inevitable once universal education was instituted in 1978, the eventual recognition of this 'new English', the accordance to it of the status of 'Hong Kong English' within the public discourse as well as within the specialised discourse of linguists, if and when it comes to pass, will appear in hindsight to have
been inevitable once the end of British colonial rule in Hong Kong was decided upon in 1984. Again, history leads us to expect that Hong Kong English will not be publicly recognised until well after 1997, and that its attainment of public status will be closely connected with its use in particular linguistic functions, to be discussed in the next section. This is the real wild card, because the future distribution of languages in official and non-official functions in the Hong Kong SAR depends crucially on still developing policies of the Beijing and Hong Kong governments, and on the development of a Hong Kong identity, all of which are far from predictable.

The functions of Hong Kong English

While the attainment of language status depends upon the use of a language in certain functional spheres – what Kloss (1978), focusing on literary functions, calls its *Ausbau* – it is also the case that use in those spheres depends on a certain status having already been attained. Status and function are intertwined in a dialectical fashion. The account in Joseph (1987) says or at least implies that language status begins with a group of native-speaking partisans who, having learned standard-language functions in the colonial language, then begin using the new language in those functions, sometimes increasing the formal differences in the process. By this means the new status spreads to the population at large and ultimately gains national and international recognition.

Again, this is what has been observed regularly in post-colonial situations, as well as in the emergence of standard European languages in the Renaissance and after. But Hong Kong has not exactly moved into a post-colonial situation, at least not the typical one where a colony is granted independence. Rather it has been turned over to another power, the PRC, which did not exist until more than 100 years after Hong Kong became a British colony. The PRC has its own standard spoken language, Putonghua, and written language, for which it uses simplified characters rather than the traditional ones still in use in Hong Kong. The majority first language of Hong Kong, Cantonese, does serve in some spoken standard-language functions in the PRC – though at this point the discussion becomes extremely complex, because in those functions a special form of Cantonese is used which is itself in a diglossic relationship with ‘colloquial’ Cantonese dialects.

With colloquial Cantonese, standard spoken Cantonese, formal spoken Cantonese, spoken and formal Putonghua, written Chinese in traditional and simplified characters, and a distinctive written Cantonese already available, what functions could possibly be left for Hong Kong English to fill? It will remain a co-official language, and so long as the territory remains part of the common law tradition, English will not be far distant from legal usage and status even when proceedings are superficially in Chinese. In addition, there is a widespread feeling in Hong Kong that English is the language of international business and tourism, as well of science, and that there will therefore remain economic and educational imperatives for learning and using it. And from a different sort of ‘functional’ perspective, there is the fact that language mixture, or code-switching, is so widely attested in ostensibly Cantonese discourse in Hong Kong that the borders between the languages are becoming ever more nebulous, despite the great structural gap between them. But again, even that gap is narrowing, based on what we saw for Hong Kong English in Figure 6.2 above, and arguably in the other direction too, as discussed in Joseph (1996).

Chinese identities

Part of the problem for China is the global techno-culture of which English appears to be the chief language. Since at least 1919 Chinese intellectuals have struggled with what Tu (1991, p. 6) has called ‘the May Fourth intellectual dilemma: the intertwining of nationalism (patriotism) and iconoclasm (antitradiationalism)’. How was it possible to be both Chinese, with all the weight of cultural tradition that identity implied, and modern? The genius of Mao was to offer an answer that convinced so many for so long: real Chineseness lay with the peasantry, working the soil, and modernity lay in the first instance with the overthrow of the ruling classes, so that the peasantry would rule. In both cases the peasantry, as it turned out, was personified in him (see further Tu, 1991, pp. 24–5).

Mao’s Cultural Revolution was in some sense a semantic revolution, a redefinition of Chinese such that its old opposition with modernity was not merely undone, but reversed. Whatever was not modern would henceforth be unpatriotic, hence un-Chinese. As Wang (1993, p. 72) puts it, Mao launched this revolution ‘by putting on parts of a Chinese face, invoking features of authority and power’.

That all things un-modern would be unpatriotic did not imply that all things modern would be patriotic. Much of the liberalisation of the mid-1980s was based on an assumption that Deng Xiaoping’s economic modernisations, patently capitalistic even though labelled as ‘socialism with Chinese characteristics’, meant an opening of doors to all the
hallmarks of the modern – products with international brand names, rock and roll, and Western-style liberal democracy. Even patriotism was appropriated for the neo-modernist cause:

The millions of democracy demonstrators in the spring of 1989 dubbed their movement ‘patriotic’, in contrast to a regime which they found had wasted the people’s hard-earned wealth on imported luxury items such as Mercedes-Benzes for a parasitic ruling caste. (Friedman, 1993, p. 1)

(Apparently at least one international brand name, Mercedes-Benz, was beyond the pale.) On 4 June 1989 the central government made a definitive semantic clarification of the meaning of patriotism, when it broke up the democracy demonstrations using all necessary force, including murdering university student protestors.

It came as a shock to Chinese and non-Chinese everywhere, though a shock of a particular kind to Hong Kong people, whose fate had been delivered into this government’s hands five years earlier. For the whole of Hong Kong’s colonial history, and ever more intensely since the anti-colonial riots of the late 1960s, Britain had stood in semantic opposition not only to China but to self-rule and democracy. Unlike what was the case for many Chinese elsewhere, China seemed to represent not the past, but the future, because for Hong Kong, Britain meant the past. Locating their own identity with the Chinese ‘mother country’ was an easy choice for both ethnic and political reasons, a choice of a democratic future with themselves as subjects, in the Hegelian sense, over a colonial past in which they were objects. When it became clear that China was rejecting any such alignment as a threat to its internal stability, the choices for Hong Kong identity no longer seemed to make any coherent sense.

Friedman (1993) and Siu (1993) both stress the renewed importance of south Chinese identity in opposition to Chinese identity in the current politically and culturally ambiguous context. Mao successfully created a mythical history in which the rise of the Chinese nation is credited entirely to the northern ‘Han’ people and their superior civilisation, and all later heroic events too are the work of northern Chinese peasants (see Friedman, 1993, pp. 2–4). This was not the prevalent view before Mao. ‘At the outset of the twentieth century, Chinese patriots often identified the hated, conquering Manchus with an alien North and a backward Czarist Russia, while identifying patriotic Chinese (not Han) with the South’ (ibid., p. 6). Since Mao, the mythical Han history has crumbled in the south and something like the old identity has re-emerged. With the south’s economic boom, ‘Beijing is ridiculed as a backward town of mere talkers who live off the people’s wealth and contribute nothing to wealth expansion. Northerners are mocked as people who would not even recognise money lying in a street’ (ibid., p. 10). By the 1990s, ‘Even in Beijing, people understood that the future was coming into China from the commercialized South and the trading coasts. Cantonese language and culture spread. Even farther north, traders hired Cantonese tutors’ (ibid., p. 11).

It is not implausible that south China – as opposed to Hong Kong specifically or China generally, or in addition to them – could emerge as a locus of Hong Kong people’s identity in the years or decades ahead. This prospect has language in its favour, the Cantonese tongue which links Guangdong and Hong Kong culturally despite their vastly different modern histories. There is geography and economics as well. The dyad of north and south might replace the old one of Britain and China, with all the negative attributes transferred wholesale from Britain to Beijing, along something like the lines shown in Figure 6.3. Obviously

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pre-1989 oppositions</th>
<th>Post-1997 oppositions</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Britain</strong></td>
<td><strong>China</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The past</td>
<td>The future (and the glorious past)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colonial rule</td>
<td>Self-determination</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-serving oppression</td>
<td>Democracy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good business and management</td>
<td>Good business/management potential</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>North China</th>
<th>South China</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The past</td>
<td>The future (and the glorious past)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colonial rule</td>
<td>Self-determination</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-serving oppression</td>
<td>Democracy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bad business and management</td>
<td>Good business and management</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 6.3 Pre- and post-1997 identity oppositions in Hong Kong*
Beijing would prefer not to see a pan-south Chinese identity emerge as a locus of loyalty for people throughout this thriving region. They would prefer to win Hong Kong hearts and minds, and Beijing’s definition of Chineseness, thus encircling Guangdong and forcing it back into line. But how to win those hearts and minds?

**Constructing colonial identity**

In approaching the question just posed, it is instructive to look back at how the British colonial administration tried to do it, at a point when sovereignty was, potentially at least, in crisis. The pair of texts which follow are from a volume entitled *Proclamation by H. E. the Governor, Sir Alexander Grantham, G. C. M. G., Queen Elizabeth II Coronation Celebration* [New] [Territories] [Hong Kong] [Kong] (Hong Kong: The Times News Agencies, no date), held in the Hong Kong Collection of the University of Hong Kong Library. Actually this pair is part of a set of three texts, the first being the Hong Kong New Territories District Commissioner’s Speech at the Coronation Dinner, 5 June 1953, the second a Chinese text that corresponds closely enough to it to be considered a ‘version’ of it, though not a translation in the usual sense, and the third an English translation of the Chinese version. That the last text should have been produced and published at all is rather extraordinary, and it and the first text are the ones I here reproduce and discuss.

*Version for British audience:*

**District Commissioner’s Speech at Coronation Dinner, 5.6.53**

The Coronation of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II is an occasion for celebration and rejoicing in Britain and throughout British Territories all over the world.

This rejoicing is not only an expression of loyalty and affection for the new Sovereign; the Coronation also provides a special opportunity for people everywhere in British Territories to reaffirm their deep conviction and belief in the ideals of freedom and democracy. The unity of this belief, throughout the British Commonwealth and Empire is symbolised by loyalty to the Queen who is voluntarily recognised as the head of the commonwealth.

During the past few days we have all been much impressed by the spontaneous rejoicing and happiness which has marked Coronation celebrations in the New Territories. The Government has given you some encouragement and help, but the organization and preparation have been yours, and I am pleased at the efficient and orderly way in which everything has been conducted. I offer you my congratulations, and also my thanks to those whose generosity has enabled the poorer people to share in the general rejoicing.

The opening of a new reign is a good time to remember our duty to help and serve others. No one works harder for the good of her people than the Queen, and we should all follow her example. Most of you here are members of Rural Committees or are village representatives. You have been appointed at the wish of the people in your districts, and you should continue to work unselfishly and energetically for the good of the majority. Many of you have already served for several years as the representatives of your villages or towns, and have earned the respect and gratitude of the public.

We have already drunk the health of the new Queen. Let me now take the opportunity of this great occasion to wish you, one and all, happiness and prosperity in the days which lie ahead.

**Respectful Congratulations on the Great Occasion of the Coronation of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II.**

2nd June 1953 is the Coronation Day of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II.

All under heaven celebrate together and all beyond the seas rejoice.

All Her Majesty’s servants and subjects leap and dance with joy.

Long have we been numbered as her subjects and have been deeply grateful for Her Majesty’s protection and benevolence. Like palm trees inclining to the sun, we bow in splendid ceremony toward her.

In pure, heartfelt devotion, we, for two hundred thousand New Territories’ inhabitants, send rejoicing to the Maple Palace.

Heaven bestows its wisdom on Her Majesty; in ability and virtue she excels all contemporaries.

She has won the admiration of both heaven and earth for her wisdom and good fortune.

Her star shines with brilliance and inspires the poets to song. Her virtue towers to the sky, and in happiness today we see the Dragon flying.

Following in the footsteps of her ancestors, she brings peace to the nations. Governed in virtue and wisdom, her dominions extend far and wide.
As we travel through the imperial realms we recognize the true qualities of a sage. She is clad in virtue and benevolence; the people are given new strength.

Those who come to pay homage to the Crown climb over mountains and sail across seas; eight hundred nations gather within the glittering walls. Those who enjoy the Queen's bounty pledge their wisdom in utmost devotion: millions of people swear everlasting loyalty.

Gazing at the palace door thousands of miles away, we all yearn to go there. We are treated without distinction, and our love is deepened.

We burn incense in the midnight and pray for Her Majesty's health; as we go along the road we sing good wishes for the Commonwealth's prosperity.

What is happening in the transition from the British-audience to the Chinese-audience version of the text is the construction of a hybrid Hong Kong New Territories Chinese British-colonial identity, centred upon the traditional Chinese national identity focus, devotion to the monarch. On one level, the original text has been 'translated' into the 'target culture' of the New Territories inhabitants, who were and to some extent still are the 'most Chinese' of the people of Hong Kong, their lives in their remote mountain villages having received far less impact from the British colonial administration and Western settlements than did Hong Kong Island or Kowloon.

But what has been lost in the translation is quite extraordinary. Where the first version (for a British audience) confines the celebration to 'Britain and British Territories all over the world', in the second version (for a Chinese audience) it is a universal celebration of 'all under heaven and all beyond the seas'. There is no mention of Britain or British Territories, only of 'the Commonwealth'; it is as though the text is speaking of the monarch of the world, or indeed of a goddess. And whereas in the second version it is the wisdom and virtue of the Queen that are praised, in the first it is simply her hard work on behalf of her people. That is perhaps British empiricism coming into play: virtue and wisdom are not directly observable, but everyone in the British audience will have seen pictures of Princess Elizabeth steadfastly at work on her official African tour, then having to abandon it and return to Britain as Queen upon her father's death. Meanwhile, in the last paragraph of the two versions, the British are characteristically drinking, while the Chinese are out burning joss sticks in the midnight.

The 'ideals of freedom and democracy' invoked in the first text have no counterpart in the second; and where the Queen 'is voluntarily recognized as the head of the commonwealth' – which is rather an unusual use of the word 'voluntarily' (does anyone remember who the other candidates were?) – in the second everyone is bowing toward her 'like palm trees inclining to the sun'. The closest thing to democracy in the second text comes in the penultimate paragraph, where 'we all yearn to go' to the 'Maple Palace' (Buckingham Palace?), and in this dream of desire we arrive to find that 'We are treated without distinction'. The ambiguity of that last phrase is all too apt; it is hard to imagine any New Territories inhabitant, or any other British subject for that matter, turning up at the Palace and being treated as anything other than a very undistinguished visitor indeed.

One of the most intriguing features of the Chinese-audience text is that it never mentions 'the new Queen', as the other version does. Apart from the word 'coronation' – which a New Territories inhabitant might or might not understand as occurring toward the beginning of the reign of a new sovereign – the rhetoric is entirely of continuity, above all in the sentence 'Long have we been numbered as her subjects and have been deeply grateful for Her Majesty's protection and benevolence,' Her Majesty and the her in 'her subjects' refer of course to the Crown rather than to the present monarch; the New Territories had at that point been subject to the British Crown for some 55 years (actually not all that long in Chinese dynastic terms), but to Elizabeth II for only a matter of months. Yet a few paragraphs down, Her Majesty, her and she are being used in a way that makes sense only with personal reference to Elizabeth II; for example, 'in ability and virtue she excels all contemporaries'. Thus the person of Elizabeth II is wedged rhetorically to the permanence of the Crown in a way that effaces the newness of her reign. Further confusing the issue was the fact that there had already been a Queen Elizabeth (subsequently the Queen Mother) on the throne since 1936. Might it have been she who was being crowned upon the death of her husband the King? Certainly the second text would make more sense if she, rather than her untested 27-year-old daughter, had been the Queen in question.

The effacing of the change of monarch in the hybrid text highlights the fact that the continuation of a reign means stability, and the end of a reign is inherently a moment of crisis. In opinion polls conducted in the UK, many of those who say they support ending the British monarchy add that they do not believe that this should happen during the reign of the present Queen. Rather, they opine, after her death or abdication...
of an independent Hong Kong, throwing off the colonial language entirely and functioning exclusively in their mother tongue, Cantonese. Many of them are having difficulty coming to terms with the fact that Hong Kong is not independent. It will be interesting to see what happens when, ten years from now, they take over as the senior leaders – unless Beijing’s policy of virtually lifelong tenure will be extended to the present Hong Kong leaders, which is not beyond imagining.

The future of English in Hong Kong depends on the future direction of Hong Kong identity. If Beijing continues to see the major threat to national stability as residing in movements for regional autonomy, it would not be surprising if active efforts were made to promote the use of Putonghua over Cantonese in Hong Kong. Today, when Cantonese is the first language to more than 90 per cent of the population, it may seem unthinkable that the language could ever be weakened. But in fact the figures cited back in Tables 6.1 and 6.2 suggest otherwise. Most Hong Kong people are bilingual or trilingual, and that is the first stage in the demise of a language. There are plenty of historical cases of large populations largely or entirely losing their language in favour of another one within a relatively short span of time – one has only to think for example of a place like Wales, where this occurred when education, communications and opportunity for travel were only a fraction of what they are now. If the Beijing government wanted to, and went about it in the right way, they could significantly increase the spread of Putonghua in Hong Kong at the expense of Cantonese (despite the protestations of Yau, 1992). The people of Hong Kong might equally well find their primary identity within the common language of China.

But if Hong Kong people were to strengthen and intensify their non-mainland identity – that is, regardless of any question of their loyalty to the Beijing government, if they were to want to manifest their historical and cultural differences vis-à-vis the rest of China rather than what they share, and particularly if Cantonese were to undergo suppression of the sort discussed above, then they might in a sense ‘remember’ that the majority of them also know English. That memory of English, even if it does not take the form of everyone in Hong Kong being fluent in the language – i.e. if it is only a memory of having known it, as is sometimes the case with ethnic identities in the USA – could form a part of Hong Kong linguistic identity, for those people who wanted to assert it. In so far as the history of other peoples is a guide, it is when this identity function emerged, and only then, that one could expect a recognition of ‘Hong Kong English’ to become a part of the public (non-academic) discourse. This possibility is further bolstered by the

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The present and future roles of English

Beijing’s position on language in Hong Kong universities has been clear and consistent for a decade or more: it does not support any movement toward teaching in the ‘mother tongue’, Cantonese, nor does it support making Putonghua (Mandarin) the main teaching language. China is full of Mandarin-language universities, in the PRC’s view, and it needs Hong Kong as its English-speaking bridge to the rest of the world.

This policy has not been disagreeable to the senior Hong Kong leadership, most of them graduates of the University of Hong Kong and all of them bilingual with a very high level of English. But it was unsatisfactory indeed to a large segment of the Hong Kong leadership class, particularly those agemates of the most prominent leaders who never quite made it to the top of the colonial hierarchy just because their English was not good enough. And among people in the 45–50 age range who were themselves students at the time of the 1960s riots and led what Choi (1990) has called the ‘search for cultural identity’ in the students’ movement of the early 1970s, there are many who have dreamed ever since

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no successor should be crowned. Other proposed changes to constitution or long-standing protocol should, respondents again say, be considered only after the reign of Elizabeth II is completed (for many years the Queen Mother’s lifetime was frequently given as the period in which no major changes should be undertaken, but her death in 2002 has not so far been followed by any wave of political reaction). The change of sovereign is, in principle at least, a moment when the relationship between the people and the Crown, which remains central to national identity, can be negotiated without fear of seeming disrespectful or ungrateful to the present monarch. Our Chinese-audience text is an attempt to assert a hybrid identity at just such a moment of crisis. In the absence of any record of the details of its production, one assumes that it was created by one or more high-level Hong Kong Chinese interpreters in the civil service, possibly working in collaboration with a British ‘old China hand’, and no doubt sincerely convinced that the need for political stability in Hong Kong, in the wake of Mao’s revolution in China and the Korean War, overrode any concern for the virtues of freedom and democracy espoused in the British text, or for making it clearly understood that they were celebrating the coronation of a relatively inexperienced young woman who was obviously a dedicated, hard worker, but whose wisdom, ability and virtue had yet to prove themselves.

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Case Study 1: the New Quasi-Nation of Hong Kong
ongoing emergence of a global postmodern identity in which English plays the predominant linguistic role, and by the widespread (though not necessarily accurate) perception of English as the international language of the global economy (see Lau, 1997, pp. 123–5).

The changing patterns in the use of English in Hong Kong can best be understood within a historical perspective which takes account of similar developments in other times and places while remaining aware that the particular circumstances of Hong Kong are unique. The perception of a decline in English standards, which dominates the public discourse, and that of the emergence of Hong Kong English, which dominates the specialised discourse of linguists, are actually two sides of the same coin, two ways of looking at the same phenomenon.

Linguists risk having only a very partial understanding of the linguistic situation if we dismiss the popular perception outright because it is contradicted by our ‘scientific’ data. We would do better to think in terms of ‘stories’: linguists have a different story concerning language in Hong Kong than the one that has emerged in public discourse. Both matter in respects so different from one another that it makes little sense to compare them; but in any case surely the last thing we want to say is that the story in public discourse does not matter. It matters very much indeed. It is through such stories that a society constitutes and maintains itself, determines the direction in which it will develop, and creates an identity and, when necessary, a resistance.

What people are reacting to as a decline in English standards in Hong Kong is, at one level, a tremendous rise in social opportunity, that has produced a democratisation of the language, allowing a distinctive Hong Kong English to emerge, as such Englishes have already emerged in Singapore, India and various other places around the globe. The idea of such a language is not one which Hong Kong people take seriously – not yet, anyway. But the cultural identity crisis constantly threatens to deepen if Beijing plays the cultural unity and stability card too strongly and suppresses the vibrant written Cantonese literature, mainly in the form of comic books and popular newspapers which the mainland government undoubtedly considers vulgar and subversive. Then the possibility that Hong Kong English might find its functional niche and become a locus of cultural identity and expression no longer seems far-fetched at all.

As noted above, at present, if one mentions ‘Hong Kong English’ to Hong Kong people, they assume one is using the term in derogatory fashion, to identify their ‘mistakes’ vis-à-vis Standard English. This is less overwhelmingly the case in Singapore, where books like Singapore