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Representativeness of the Hong Kong English lexicon

Studying word formation from an end-user perspective

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Introduction

In 2016, the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) formally recognized the status of Hong Kong English (HKE) by adding 13 HKE words in its entries (Oxford English Dictionary [OED], n.d.-a). While this codification marks significant progress in the development of a language variety, there have been vigorous discussions within the local community about the legitimacy and representativeness of these selected words as HKE (Xu, 2019). As emphasized by Schneider (2007), acceptability and codification are both important criteria for language development. Therefore, this warrants a bottom-up approach to investigate the extent to which HKE words are accepted by the local community, so as to provide insights on how future HKE words can be better codified.

Linguistic landscape

Since 1997, Hong Kong has implemented the 'Biliterate and Trilingual' policy, with the aim of cultivating citizens to be biliterate in written Chinese and English and trilingual in Cantonese, Putonghua, and English. Cantonese is the local tongue for over 88% of the population, while only 2.3% and 2.8% of people use Putonghua and English as their first language respectively (Census and Statistics Department, 2022). There exists a functional distinction among these languages, with Chinese commonly used in daily life and English primarily employed in formal settings.

Status of HKE

Over the past two decades, HKE has been extensively researched and recognised as a distinct variety of English (Li, 2018). However, ongoing debates persist regarding its status, particularly in relation to Schneider's (2007) Dynamic Model of evaluation for New Englishes (Sung, 2015). Schneider (2007) places HKE is in phase 3, Nativisation, due to its unique vocabulary and phonetics influenced by Hong Kong's colonial history and English usage. However, doubts arise regarding HKE's transition to phase 4 (Endornomative Stabilization) due to the local acceptability of this new linguistic norm. Evans (2015) found that HKE is generally not accepted because of people's adherence to native-speaker norms. He still noted traces of phase 2 (Exonormative Stabilization) in HKE, as the local community still heavily relies on exonormative English standards, creating resistance in accepting and using HKE. This raises the question of whether OED's recognition of HKE in 2016 has received sufficient support from its users, which forms the focal point of our study.

Codification

Codification involves systematically analysing and describing 'educated indigenous forms of English in dictionaries and grammars' (Schneider, 2011: 219), with the objective of establishing new linguistic norms for standard usage (Evans, 2015). For HKE, works of codification help legitimize it as an autonomous language variety (Schneider, 2007). The codification of HKE was first achieved through the publication of a dictionary by Cummings and Wolf (2011), utilizing resources from Hong Kong English newspapers, cartoons and local literary works and government materials. The dictionary provides a frequency rating for each item using the International Corpus of English and Google.hk surveys. However, the authors acknowledge that the corpus data may not exclusively represent Hong Kong usage, and the salience of

the items may change over time in the media (Ooi, 2015). Furthermore, the frequency of these words among the local Chinese-dominant users in society remains unknown, as these words are often English translations (Li, 2018).

To examine the prevalence of words from Cumming and Wolf's (2011) dictionary in HK, Evans (2015) conducted empirical research using five representative corpora. This research identified three main word-formation principles in HKE: loan translations, loanwords from Chinese and new English compounds. However, these corpora only offer a glimpse into the prevalence of HKE words but not their acceptability. For example, one corpus consists of letters to South China Morning Post, where the English words are predominantly used by educated English-using Hongkongers who adhere to professional and institutional norms (Evans, 2015). The words used in these letters are conventional and do not include much of the local lexicon. Another corpus features the proceedings of Hong Kong Legislative Council (LegCo) (Evans, 2015), which are English translations rather than statement made by LegCo members during sessions. The acceptability and attitude towards HKE in these studies have not been thoroughly examined.

Attitudes towards HKE

Numerous studies have investigated attitudes towards language variation, but research specifically focusing on HKE has only recently gained attention (Zhang, 2013). Existing research primarily explores attitudes towards HKE accents and phonetic and phonological features (e.g., Chan, 2016; Chan & Chan, 2021; Zhang, 2013), and the legitimacy of HKE as a distinct variety of English (e.g., Chan, 2016; Hansen Edwards, 2015). Hansen Edwards (2015) found that tertiary students generally held a positive attitude towards the legitimacy of HKE. However, these students were hesitant to use HKE due to traditional exonormative norms and some respondents were unclear about what HKE entailed, perceiving it as non-standard English. This ambivalent attitude has been supported by other studies (e.g., Chan, 2016; Zhang, 2013). Despite the attention given to HKE accents in these studies, there is a notable lack of research specifically on attitudes towards HKE words.

Research gaps

The literature reveals several research gaps. Firstly, there is a lack of research on the acceptability of HKE words, as existing studies primarily focus on HKE accents rather than other aspects, such as HKE words. Secondly, despite Cumming and Wolf's (2011) work and OED's updates on HKE, questions still arise regarding the acceptability of the documented HKE words. Therefore, the present study aims to address these gaps by examining the following two research questions:

1) To what extent are HKE words accepted by the Hong Kong public?
2) Which word-formation methods are likely to yield acceptable HKE words?

Methodology

Participants

A total of 191 students (71 males, 120 females) from two English-medium higher education institutions in Hong Kong participated in this study. All of the students had lived in Hong Kong for over ten years. Among them, 23 of them had five to ten years of experience of learning English in Hong Kong while 168 of them had ten years or more. These students can be considered educated English users, and their perspectives carry significant implications for the acceptability of HKE (see Benson, 2002).

Instrument

This study used an online questionnaire that consisted of two sections. In section 1, there were 31 items, each containing a sample sentence with one HKE word. Following each item, participants were asked to rate the acceptability of the word as a HKE word on a five-point Likert scale. Additionally, two open-ended questions were included to gather participants' general opinions on the word and their suggestions for an alternative if the word was deemed not acceptable as HKE (see Appendix A).

The 31 HKE words were classified into eight word-formation categories (i.e., blending, semantic shift, affixation, coinage, compounds, loan translations, loanwords from Chinese, loanwords from foreign sources) and each category comprised three to four items (see Appendix B). Only the core categories of HKE were chosen for our study, and they were compiled based on the existing literature on HKE (Bolton, 2003; Bolton et al., 2020; Cummings & Wolf, 2011; Evans, 2015; OED, n.d.-c; Sung, 2015; Setter, Wong & Chang, 2010). All the sample sentences for the HKE words were also either extracted or adapted from these works.

Section 2 of the questionnaire asked for the background information of the respondents e.g., English education experience.

Data collection and analysis

Convenience sampling was used for data collection, which took place from March 2021 to April 2021 through a self-administered web-based questionnaire. Informed consent was obtained from all the respondents. There were 191 valid responses after data cleaning. Data were analysed by using IBM SPSS statistics, version 26. Independent sample t-test and ANOVA were used to examine the statistical significance of respondents' acceptance of the words as HKE between two categories and over two categories respectively. There is a statistical significance between or over two categories if the p-value is below 0.05.

Results

Overall Trend

There were significant differences in the tendency on whether the words should be accepted as Hong Kong English in various categories, as shown in Table 1:

Table 1. Acceptance of the words as HKE

	Semantic shift	Coinage	Affixation	Loanwords from foreign sources	Loan translations	Compounds	Blending	Loanwords from Chinese
Mean	3.2448	3.4948	3.5183	3.5183	3.6204	3.6257	3.8547	4.1178
S.D.	0.8291	0.6991	0.8283	0.6928	0.7367	0.8840	0.5731	0.6016
ANOVA	F-Statistics = 24.0461; p-value = 0.0000							

Among all the categories, loanwords from Chinese scored the highest mean value in being accepted as Hong Kong English, followed by the words in the blending category. Words formed by compounds and loan translations ranked third and fourth on the list. Words from affixation and loanwords from foreign sources shared the same mean value, taking the fifth place in the trend. The second lowest mean value was obtained in the coinage category whereas the lowest mean was found in the semantic shift category.

This trend generally corresponds to the results of the individual comparisons between different categories concerning the acceptance level of the words as HKE, where the statistical significance placed loanwords from Chinese and blending as the more preferred categories while semantic shift as the least (see Appendix C). The detailed results of these comparisons will be elaborated below with respondents' comments.

Loanwords from Chinese

Respondents showed the highest propensity in accepting the loanwords from Chinese as HKE, in comparison to words from the other seven categories.

Respondents suggested that loanwords from Chinese convey specific cultural meaning in Hong Kong that may not be captured by other forms. One respondent, when commenting on Dai Pai Dong [a traditional licensed street stall selling cheap food with outdoor seating], reckoned that:

> [Dai Pai Dong is] one of the traditions in Hong Kong and can hardly be explained in other words so it should be add[ed] in dictionary. 'Outdoor restaurant' simply isn't quite the same I suppose. (#S142)

Another respondent also supported this notion, explaining how an alternative term for 'Yum Cha' [a meal with dim sum and hot tea in the morning] through loan translation fails to accurately convey its meaning:

> It is a cultural [thing] for Hong Kong people to Yum cha with family. It is not just about eating. Drinking or morning tea cannot tell the correct meaning of Yum cha. (#S191)

While loanwords from Chinese can preserve the original meaning of the words, they may not be comprehensible to non-Cantonese speakers. One respondent stressed this by using Kaifong [neighbour] as an example:

> Kaifong is essentially [C]antonese talking about the neighbours living in my community but it is hard for non-[C]antonese speakers to understand. (#58)

However, not all loanwords from Chinese were well received by the respondents. The term guanxi [relationship for professional gains] was considered controversial and less representative of HKE because it is borrowed from Putonghua instead of Cantonese:

> This is spelt with a Mandarin pinyin [the official romanization system for Putonghua] instead of Cantonese and hence I seldom hear people around me use this word. (#S60)

Blending

Blending was rated as the second most favored word formation method for HKE, as indicated by the statistical significance in its comparison with semantic shift, affixation, coinage, loan translations and loanwords from foreign sources.

Respondents seemed to appreciate how blending can produce words that are immediately clear to readers by combining two or more separate words. Cantopop, for example, could easily be understood as being formed by the phrase Cantonese pop music or culture:

> It is quite normal to use this word because it has [been] widely used for a long time and it is clearly about Cantonese pop music or culture by the word itself. (#S42)

Comprehensibility aside, blending can also bring convenience to writing by giving an 'abbreviation' for the original term. One respondent observed that:

> 'LegCo' is just an abbreviation for Legislative Council. It is so much faster to write and we often see that in newspapers. (#S174)

Reading the term may however necessitate a certain understanding of the local context, as one respondent observed how the term LegCo could be culture-specific in Hong Kong:

> Legco is quite a unique term only to [be] see[n] in HK. Other countries use congress or [something]. They won't understand this term. (#S152)

Semantic shift

Words with semantic shift were voted to be least likely accepted as HKE in comparison with those from all the other seven categories.

Respondents' comments revealed a general lack of awareness of the distinctive meaning of the given words with

semantic shift in Hong Kong. Uncle, for example, is often used to refer to a male friend of one's parent in HKE as opposed to one's parent's sibling in standard English (Bolton, 2003). Yet, this distinctive meaning in HKE did not seem to be noticed by our respondents and one respondent even remarked that it is no different from 'plain English':

> I will use uncle to call a friend of my father. It is concise and precise. It's just plain English. (#S137)

Another example is the term podium. In British English, podium is supposedly used to refer to a platform where conductors perform or public speakers give their speech but in Hong Kong, it means a large area where facilities like banks, cafes and bookshops can be found (Setter et al., 2010). Respondents similarly demonstrated only the latter understanding in their comments:

> I can find lots of restaurants in the podium of my building. Nice! (#S34)

Affixation

Affixation was not favored compared with loanwords from Chinese and blending but was rated better than semantic shift. It is however unknown how affixation was ranked among the other categories as no significant differences were found in the comparisons.

Nevertheless, the comments may provide some reasons why affixation was less preferred. One may have to do with the lack of standardized or agreed affixes for certain terms. For the term Hongkonger, respondents noted how Hong Kong people should be or have been termed:

> I've heard Canadians calling us 'Hong Kongese' during my exchange in Canada, in a situation which they were doubting whether using which word to describe us. (#S25)

Another reason seems to be related to the lexicogrammar of standard English. 'Staffs' is commonly used in Hong Kong to refer to members of staff where the suffix -s is added to stress the plurality of the subject (Cummings & Wolf, 2011). However, this localised form of lexicogrammar was rejected by the respondents simply because it did not seem grammatical or correct to them:

> This sounds quite ungrammatical to me. (#S61)

Similar comments were also found in the discussion of the HKE word 'equipments' where -s is used to emphasize pieces of equipment. Despite showing an awareness of this distinctive feature of HKE, respondents did not seem to be willing to accept it. This sentiment was nicely captured by the following respondent:

> This is just bad grammar but I know HK people write that a lot but I wouldn't. (#S99)

Loanwords from foreign sources

Loanwords from foreign sources were ranked lower than loanwords from Chinese and blending but higher than semantic shift. Similar to affixation, due to the lack of statistical significance, it is unclear how loanwords from foreign sources were positioned among the other categories.

One recurring comment on the words from loanwords from foreign sources is the lack of familiarity and thus understanding of the words. For instance, the HKE word 'chit' is borrowed from Indian English and it means a bill or an official paper (Cummings & Wolf, 2011) but respondents reiterated that they did not recognize this word:

> I have not heard of this word. (#S60)

Similarly, the HKE term 'amah' also comes from Indian English which means domestic helpers or maids (Cummings & Wolf, 2011) but one respondent even doubted whether it is English at all:

> I don't think this is English? At least I haven't seen it before. (#S24)

Discussion

Previous research on word formation in HKE has primarily examined corpus data and identified three main categories: loanwords from Chinese, loan translations and new English compounds (Evans, 2015). However, the currency of HKE does not guarantee user acceptance. Therefore, our research focused on assessing users' acceptance of different categories of HKE words. Our findings revealed users' preferences for word formation patterns in HKE, ranked as follows: loanwords from Chinese, blending, compounds, loan translations, loanwords from foreign sources/ affixation, coinage and semantic shift. This ranking was affirmed by statistical significance in individual comparisons, with loanwords from Chinese, blending, and semantic shift being rated as the most preferred, second most preferred, and least preferred word formation methods for HKE, respectively.

The top two categories, loanwords from Chinese and blending, highlight the cultural aspect of HKE words, suggesting that they are more readily accepted when connected to the local culture. This aligns with previous research emphasizing the distinctiveness of HKE words within the Hong Kong context, requiring users to draw upon their knowledge of the local culture for comprehension (Benson, 2002). The distinctiveness of HKE is further reflected in their formal differences from other varieties of English worldwide (Benson, 2002). This is particularly evident in the loanwords from Chinese in our study, where words are borrowed either from Cantonese (e.g., char siu [roasted pork]) or Mandarin (e.g., guanxi [relationship for professional gains]) and may be less comprehensible to non-Chinese speakers. However, our participants stressed that HKE's loanwords should be derived from Cantonese rather than Mandarin. This idea was also implied by newspaper discussions in 2016 when 'guanxi' was included in the OED as HKE, raising doubts about its representativeness (Xu, 2019). The preference for Cantonese may be related to the linguistic landscape in Hong Kong, where Cantonese is the local tongue for most residents. Therefore, for words

to be widely recognized as HKE, they should not only be tied to the local culture but also to the local tongue.

It is noteworthy that semantic shift consistently received the lowest ratings as a word formation pattern for HKE, despite its words being also culture- or context-dependent. One potential reason for this is the participants' limited awareness of how these HKE words differ semantically from their counterparts in standard English. For example, it is culturally acceptable to address a male friend of one's parent as 'uncle', even though the word typically refers to one's parent's male sibling in standard English (see Bolton, 2003). The participants' preference for the former meaning, considering it precise and aligned with plain English, highlights the potential neglect of words with semantic shift as a category deserving further attention. If the 'normalization' of these words as standard English is not addressed, it may continue to hinder their acceptance and impede their development within the HKE lexicon.

Furthermore, our findings about affixation shed light on how participants' reliance on the exonormative norm might limit the development of the lexicogrammar in HKE. Affixation was ranked as the antepenultimate category based on mean scores. Participants appeared to show less favor towards this category because the words were not used in the same manner as the norm they were familiar with. For example, the word 'staffs' (members of staff) received criticisms from several participants as being ungrammatical according to the lexical grammar rules governing count and mass nouns in standard English, a distinction that is often absent in HKE (Setter et al., 2010). This line of criticism aligns with Jenkins' (2015) observation that many L2 Hong Kong English speakers 'remain attached to British English norms of correctness' (p. 167). Such orientation not only limits the growth and recognition of HKE lexicon, but also carries implications for the status of HKE. In Schneider's (2007) typology, HKE is generally categorized within phase 3. However, the aforementioned exonormative orientation can be seen as a remnant of phase 2 and suggests that HKE has yet to transition from phase 3 to phase 4, where acceptability of the language variety is the key (Schneider, 2007).

Conclusion

At the practical level, our study has presented implications on codification by showing that (1) priority should be given to loanwords from Chinese and blending while semantic shift be deprioritized, and (2) cultural (i.e., local context) and linguistic (i.e., Cantonese) factors ought to be considered when compiling words. The current approach taken by the OED (n.d.-b) focuses on the frequency of word usage in various media outlets. However, this emphasis on currency may not always result in words that are widely recognized by people, as demonstrated by the public reactions to the case of 'guanxi' (Xu, 2019). Therefore, our study proposes the use of an empirical approach to determine the acceptability of words. Dictionaries may benefit from adopting this approach for codification, if it is not already in place, to ensure that the language variety is

more readily accepted and recognized within the local community.

At the theoretical level, two more implications for the development of HKE may be drawn from this study. Firstly, the acceptance of words with semantic shift as part of the HKE lexicon requires further improvement, as their distinctive meanings are not well understood making it an outcast category. This current status makes it challenging to include them in codification. Secondly, the lexicogrammar of HKE (in the case of affixation) may continue to be influenced by the exonormative norm in standard English, which may hinder the growth of the HKE lexicon and impact HKE's progression to phase 4 in Schneider's (2007) Dynamic Model.

This study has two limitations: (1) data were not triangulated using interviews, and (2) the participants were drawn from a homogenous population (i.e. university students), which may limit their representativeness for the broader population. Future research could address these limitations to examine the representativeness of HKE in a more comprehensive manner.

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