Lexical traps in Hong Kong English

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A study of semantic shift that provides new insights into the lexicon of Hong Kong English

Introduction

Despite a large and growing literature on Hong Kong English (HKE), few studies have been conducted on its emerging language features, particularly its grammar or vocabulary. According to Gisborne (2009), studies on HKE to date have focused on language attitudes, code-switching, learner errors, and the local accent. A quick review of the research on vocabulary reveals that even those studies with a specific lexical focus have tended to be fairly limited in scope, focusing on borrowing, politicized expressions and localized vocabulary. Additionally, by their nature, these studies have tended to only cover vocabulary items that are unique and obviously have a different meaning in the local setting. In particular, there is a noticeable dearth of in-depth studies on semantic shift, in particular extensions or adaptations of meaning for simple words or phrases which are taken for granted as being at the common core of English varieties throughout the world. This kind of usage is more likely to cause comprehension difficulties than the more-often studied borrowings or coinages, simply because it might not be apparent to either a native speaker or a Hong Kong speaker that there is a difference in meaning when it comes to the Hong Kong terms used, and therefore there is a greater potential for misunderstanding.

Benson (1993) mentions three common Hong Kong examples of semantic shift. An *astronaut* may not always be a space traveller, but could be a person commuting between Hong Kong and another country for work, leaving his family behind. Simlarly, a *cage* is not always for birds, but can be a partitioned bedspace for a person, as in the phrase *cage-man.* The third example is the adjective *harsh,* which is often used by students to describe a strict or demanding teacher. Vittachi (2002) lists two even more subtle examples of semantic shift. The word *back,* as in, 'He's not back in the office yet' would imply to a standard English speaker that the person had already been in the office earlier that day, but in HKE, it simply means he's not in the office. Likewise, the word *first* in standard English implies that a *second* will follow, but in Hong Kong usage it sometimes simply means, 'now.' Vittachi labels these kinds of usages 'linguistic traps,' and from our experience with teaching English to tertiary students in Hong Kong, it seems there is no paucity of these kind of traps in local English vocabulary usage! However, little study or codification has been undertaken of these items. Although there have been some unique Hong Kong vocabulary items included in the *Macquarie Dictionary*, these kinds of 'lexical traps' do not seem to have been included, probably because they have not been the focus of study to date.

This study aims to help fill this gap in the research, by focusing on several examples of semantic shift on basic English vocabulary items. The specific items chosen for analysis were selected from samples collected by the researchers over the previous two years from both local tertiary students and Chinese teachers of English in Hong Kong. One method to explore the subtle differences between the meanings of these items in standard English (for our purposes, British or American English or their exported Inner Circle[1] varieties) and Hong Kong English would be by way of corpus, for instance using the newly-developed ICE

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(International Corpus of English) Hong Kong corpus, and comparing the usages of these vocabulary items with a corpus of British and/or American English. However this didn't prove to be a practical option with the case of most of our items. Additionally, there were methodological considerations – corpora do not provide negative data and don't lend themselves to experimentation. Therefore instead, we designed a questionnaire which was completed by 50 first-year students in class time, and also distributed to 14 native English speaking friends and colleagues, none of whom were familiar with Hong Kong English.[2] Where appropriate our findings are supplemented with information from a corpus or dictionary.



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Examples of semantic shift in HKE

The first item we chose to study was the apparently simple word *sleep*, particularly in the phrase *sleep late*. As can be seen in Table 1, in response to the question what this phrase means, the native speakers (the 'NS' column) and the Hong Kong English speakers (the 'HKE' column) had completely different interpretations. All the native speakers interpreted to *sleep late* to mean to wake up late in the morning, i.e. to *sleep in*, whereas the vast majority of Hong Kong subjects used it to mean to *go to bed late* the previous night.

Table 1: 'Sleep late' means …

NS	HKE	
	78%	I went to bed late.
100%	20%	I woke up late in the morning.

What could be the reason for such a wide difference? In both Collins Cobuild & Longmans dictionaries, the definition for the first entry for *sleep* includes the phrase *the state of rest*. Counted altogether, there are 7 entries for the single word *sleep*, but none of them reflect a point of time – they are all used in a stative sense, to infer a state over a period of time. In order to refer to the point of time at which a person falls asleep or wakes up, a phrase is needed, to *go/get to sleep*, or to *wake up*. On the other hand, the Chinese interpretation of *sleep late* is probably derived from a direct Chinese translation, 我好夜瞓 (ngo5 hou2 je6 fan3),[3] literally *I very late slept,* where the word *sleep* refers to a single point in time, behaving more like an 'action' verb.

Some standard (British or American) English concordance checks confirm this. A Collins Cobuild Wordbanks search found 142 examples of the phrase *sleep late* (in any tense), all of which referred to sleeping in late in the morning. Another concordancing program, 'WordPilot,' devised by John Milton (of Hong Kong University of Science and Technology), gave 139 instances of the past tense *slept*. All of them referred to a period of time, usually the whole time a person was sleeping or asleep, not the action or point of time of falling asleep. Common collocations were *slept in* (18 times), *slept soundly* (i.e. slept well, 7 times), *slept for* (… a period of time, e.g. *half-an-hour / hours*, 7 times), *slept on* (… *a bed / peacefully*, 6

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times), *slept a* (... *long time* / ... *great deal*, 5 times). Consequently, it's not natural for a British or American English speaker to associate the verb *sleep* with one point of time. For Chinese speakers, however, it's natural to refer to *sleep* as a kind of action verb in this context. This same usage of *sleep* has already been noted in Philippine English. Therefore, a dictionary of Hong Kong English would have to have an extra entry with the item *sleep late/early,* meaning the point of time at which a person fell asleep.

The word *help* is a similar case to *sleep*, with a distinctly different meaning between the varieties. Firstly, a production test for the word *help* was given (Table 2). As expected, the majority of the students, but none of the native speakers, used the wording *to help somebody to do something* to ask somebody to do something by themselves. However, when asked directly what the phrase meant, the native speakers clearly understood to *help someone to do something* to mean to assist a person to do it, i.e. to do it together with them (see Table 3). It generally would not mean that you do it on behalf of them, yet this is what it can mean in Hong Kong English. This probably reflects the usage of the Chinese term 幫手 (bong1 sau2). It may also be a polite way of asking somebody more indirectly to do something for you.

Table 2: Ask your friend to return your book to the library on your behalf

NS	HKE	
	82%	Please help me to return the book ...
100%	18%	Other answers.

Table 3: 'to help someone to do something' means ...

NS	HKE[4]	
93%	30%	You do it together.
17%	67%	You do it either together or by yourself.

This difference in usage could lead to different expectations which could have important consequences in real life. For instance, an expatriate who had been living in Hong Kong for over ten years recounted that a local friend had asked her to *help her to look for a job*. She'd started 'helping' her friend, but later began to think, 'Wait a minute! There's something wrong here. She's asked me to help her, but I'm the one doing all the work!' Another example shows how the confusion could happen the other way round. A local woman got offended at an English acquaintance, who had asked her to *help her do something* – because she assumed the English speaker was asking her to do all the work, whereas in fact the intention was for the two of them to share the workload. Again, a dictionary of Hong Kong English would ideally have an extra entry with the item to *help somebody to do something* meaning to do something on behalf of someone else, in their place.

The word *already* is another example of a meaning mismatch. According to the Collins Cobuild Dictionary, it focuses on the fact that something had happened before the particular moment being referred to. In other words, it has a specific time reference, which can be seen by the native speakers' unanimous answers as to its meaning (see Table 4). However in Hong Kong English the word *already* appears to be used in the perfective sense, simply to mean that something has been completed, regardless of timing. This probably reflects the different semantic range of the Chinese 已經 (ji5 ging1) which is overused in comparison with English *already* and can often be omitted without change of meaning.

Table 4: If somebody tells you they have already done something, it means:

NS	HKE	
100%	26%	He/she did it before you asked.
	86%	He/she did it after you asked

A native English speaker would probably misunderstand the timing, and be very surprised to find out that a local Hong Konger was able to anticipate what they were going to be asked, and do it before they were asked to! In contrast, when a native speaker emphasizes they've 'already' done something it could be an expression of impatience or annoyance, which a Chinese speaker would probably not pick up on. This perfective meaning of *already* has already been noted in Singaporean and Malaysian English (Hickey, 2004; Mesthrie & Bhatt, 2008), and should also be included in a dictionary of Hong Kong English.

As can be seen by the data in Table 5, the

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term *body check* in Hong Kong English corresponds to the phrase *check-up* in English, which is not usually modified by *body* but by *medical/health/physical*. The Chinese term would seem to be a direct translation from the phrases 身體檢查(san1 tai2 gim2 caa4) or 體檢 (tai2 gim2), literally *body* + *check*.

Table 5: to go to the doctor to get your health checked is called a …

NS	HKE	
	78%	… body check
100%	20%	… (physical/medical/health) check-up

In fact, the phrase *body check* in English in the right context would be understandable, but in some situations it could lead to confusion, as it has a completely different meaning in North American English: according to Webster's Dictionary, it refers to a particular move in the sport of (ice) hockey. Checking the Collins Cobuild Wordbank, we found 36 examples of the term 'body check'. A total of 24 times this referred to an incident in a sports match, whereas the other 12 times it referred to checking your own body for some practical purpose, but it never meant to go to the doctor to have your health checked.

Table 6: the phrase 'body check' is related to …

(Native Speakers only)[3]	
security/crime	42.9%
a car body	21.4%
sports	14.3%
a person's appearance	14.3%
specific diseases (e.g. seeing a skin specialist)	21.4%
general health	28.6%

When we tested our group of native English-speaking subjects on what the term *body check* might mean out of context, we found a diverse range of interpretations. Most respondents related the term *body check* to concepts unrelated to general health, such as an airport security check or noting one's appearance before going out, or even to non-human subjects such as checking the body of a car for rust. The varied nature of these responses reflect that the term *body check* is a unique feature of vocabulary usage in Chinese Hong Kong, and one that is not immediately transparent to non-Chinese speakers.

To *eat outside,* meaning to eat at a restaurant, could be another Chinese expression misunderstood by native English speakers. The equivalent in standard English is to *eat out,* which was chosen by 100% of our native-speaking respondents when given the choice of the two phrases (Table 7). But to our Hong Kong subjects, the two phrases *eat out* and *eat outside* seemed to be considered synonymous, both being chosen to mean to eat at a restaurant. The phrase to *eat outside* probably results from a direct translation of the Chinese 出街食 (ceot1 gaai1 sik6), literally 'out' + 'street/side' + 'eat', which has the connotation of eating outside the home – another cause for a new HKE dictionary entry. In standard English, to get the same meaning the words *outside the home* need to be explicitly added, and so on a direct question about the meaning of *eat outside,* our native speakers related it to literally eating outdoors. To *eat outside* contrasts with *eating inside* so an English speaker may think the Hong Konger is suggesting a picnic in the park! This usage is confirmed by the Collins Cobuild Wordbank which only has 16 entries for *eat outside* (in contrast to 702 examples of *eat out*), 12 of which refer to eating outdoors. Of the other 4 entries, 2 refer to eating *outside of hours,* where *outside* is a time reference, not a place reference, while in the other 2 entries, *outside of the home* is specified.

Table 7: to eat at a restaurant is to …

NS	HKE	
	52%	Eat outside.
100%	48%	Eat out.

Table 8 includes a brief summary of some of the other differences uncovered in our study, all of which could possibly cause miscommunications.

Error or feature?

This small-scale study indicates that idiosyncratic features have been developing in English in Hong Kong not just in the more obvious areas of borrowings and coinages, but also in

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Table 8: other differences revealed

	NS	HKE
traveller	Purpose = multiple	Main purpose = sightseeing
accompany	Mainly means going with sb somewhere	Can mean either staying with sb or going somewhere with sb
wish	Means sthg that cannot happen	Is used to express future plans/hopes
train	Includes above-ground, underground & electric trains	Sometimes excludes underground or electric trains
bus	Includes mini-buses	Excludes mini-buses

more subtle lexicogrammatical ways. The only previous research carried out in the area of semantic shift on core English items has described these deviations as errors (see examples of *sleep late* and *accompany* in Boyle & Boyle, 1991, and *wish* and *accompany* in Bunton, 1989 and 1992), and thus this raises the issue of when an error becomes a feature in a new language variety.

In fact, it was this question which provided the original stimulus for our study. One of the authors is an expatriate, a native English speaker, while the other is a local Hong Konger. The native English speaker was at first unaware of how pervasive these local norms were, and was conscientiously trying to correct her university students' errors. However over a period of time, she noticed that her local English-teaching colleagues were making the same 'errors,' and didn't seem to be aware of some of the subtle differences between the 'standard' English and HKE usages. Upon discussing this, the two authors began to wonder if they instead should adjust their own paradigms and teaching strategies. An online conversation with Professor Tony Hung (Hung 2009) led to the following conclusion. In Hung's words, 'if a particular pattern of usage persists right throughout the whole spectrum of HKE speakers, including both high and low proficiency speakers, then it would make more sense to call it a "feature" than an error.' As Hung explains, 'These are a reflection of local culture and identity, and (in a broader sense) of the creativity of language.' Based on our research, it would seem that the examples above are clear cases of semantic shift operating within HKE, and should be recognized as features rather than simply labeled as errors.

Recommendations for teaching and research

As these simple examples show, it is inevitable that people picking up English as a second language draw from their own language resources and create new or different meanings in English, some of which could unwittingly cause confusion. This is a normal development process for languages, one which is already occurring in Hong Kong English, and which over time generally results in new norms and new varieties of English being recognized. This leads on to the question: Is Hong Kong English a new variety? We have been using the term 'Hong Kong English' throughout this article, partly for ease and partly because it is increasingly becoming a precedent in the literature. However, it is not our purpose to delve into this question here in depth, except to note that this has been the subject of ongoing debate for some time, and that on Schneider's (2007) model of the development of Post-Colonial Englishes, HKE would be classified as an 'emergent' variety. Regardless of the issue of the status of English in Hong Kong, previous studies have shown that its norms are both systematic and pervasive, and this also is confirmed by the present study. Simply stated, multilingual second-language English speakers have a different kind of 'intuition' than monolingual native speakers, and this 'intuition' varies in different parts of the world according to the learner's linguistic background and cultural setting. This fact definitely has implications for applied research, particularly teaching, and so this study makes a number of recommendations.

On the one hand, it's meaningless to expect local Hong Kongers to conform to native speaker norms in all respects, especially considering their input is largely from other

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locals, whose English exhibits the same features. However on the other hand, it's unrealistic not to take standard English as the norm for two main reasons: Firstly, there is general agreement in the literature that Hong Kong speakers themselves as a whole don't as yet recognize their own variety as having its own norms. In addition, we need to ensure international intelligibility is maintained, so we need to continue to teach standard English as much as possible.

To resolve this tension, and to aid in intercultural communication, we suggest a broad guideline for teachers. For those variants that have become features throughout the whole spectrum of Hong Kong speakers, we recommend that both variants should be pointed out in the classroom – the standard English versus the Hong Kong English – in the same way that we today make learners aware of the differences between American English and British English. In this way, learners will at least be aware of the differences and the potential misunderstandings that may arise. This means that monolingual teachers need to be aware of the preference for and usage of certain variants in their particular context, how they vary from 'standard English' (currently defined usually as RP or GA), and their possible future acceptance as a new feature of the variety. Conversely, local teachers need to know when their usage varies from the British or American standards. These differences also need to be taken into account when tests are designed. Additionally, teachers need to raise students' awareness of the features and functions of English globally. Ideally learners should be exposed to a variety of Englishes, both from inside and outside the Inner Circle, in order to enhance their ability to process different varieties of English. This also holds true for Inner Circle speakers themselves, especially those travelling abroad; all English speakers, native or non-native, need to develop sensitivity to other varieties of English.

The next recommendation regards the choice of English teacher for a multilingual context. In most parts of the world, Hong Kong being no exception, the monolingual teacher has reigned supreme, supposedly representing the idealized native speaker norm to students. However it is obvious that the learners are developing their own variety of English regardless of the good intentions of educators – and then being judged to be inferior by comparison. This article echoes Andy Kirkpatrick's (2007) conclusion, that it would be even more advantageous to employ as teachers multilinguals who can understand the language from both perspectives, who have already experienced and understand the process of language acquisition in the context of complex multilingual settings, and who can provide a more attainable model for their students.

Finally, much more research awaits to be undertaken in order to ascertain the emerging features of the new varieties of World English. The issue of codification is also important, because this is what gives variant forms credence in the eyes of the public. For instance, the recognition of Australian English was closely connected with the production of the *Macquarie Dictionary* which listed unique Australian items. Therefore, with regard to the Hong Kong variants discussed above, these differences should eventually be incorporated into a dictionary of Hong Kong English. This would be of use not just to teachers and students, but also to expats or other English speakers visiting or living in Hong Kong.

Conclusion

This has been a kind of pilot study, a 'snapshot in time' aiming to start the process of addressing a gap in the literature on Hong Kong English with regard to 'lexical traps' in the form of semantic shift on common, everyday English items. This has further implications for both teaching and research of new or emerging English varieties. In short, if any variant form or item is both systematic and pervasive, it should be considered a feature rather than an error. However, in the Hong Kong context especially, much more insightful research needs to be applied in order to ascertain the emerging norms. The findings would ideally be codified in a future dictionary of HKE, whenever the time is ripe. In the meantime, the new realities of emerging English varieties will continue to challenge both the researcher and the teacher of English in Outer and Expanding Circle contexts. ■

Notes

1 Kachru's (1985) 'three concentric circles' model of the worldwide spread and usage of English is well-known and probably does not need extra explanation here. Basically, the Inner Circle refers to native speaking areas such as Britain, North

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America, Australia and New Zealand, who have been traditionally looked to for English norms by the other Outer Circle (where English has been spread through colonization and is a second language) and Expanding Circle (using English as a foreign language) countries.

2 They were adults of various ages. Most were speakers of Australian or New Zealand English. The students were studying a variety of Arts and Science subjects; none were majoring in English or linguistics.

3 Chinese translations and Romanization are in Cantonese, the dialect of Chinese used by the vast majority of people in Hong Kong. These are transcribed in this article using the system developed by the Linguistic Society of Hong Kong (2002).

4 Some respondents ticked more than one option, hence the figures sometimes add up to more than 100%.

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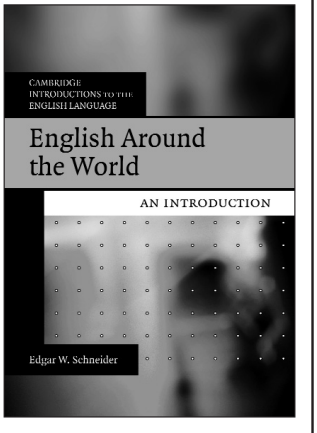
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