Factors affecting the acceptability of grammatical features of Hong Kong English

SHAWNEA SUM POK TING AND JANICE WING SZE WONG

Undergraduate students' ambivalence towards the grammatical features of Hong Kong English

Background

Although a large number of varieties of English in Asia have gained recognition as independent varieties, this has not been the case for Hong Kong English (HKE) (Jenkins, 2015: 162). The city has a low level of affiliation towards HKE (Jenkins, 2015: 167) and often laments its ever-falling standard of English (Leung, 2015). There exists a phenomenon of 'linguistic schizophrenia' – the community may recognise that a local variety of English exists and conform to its features in practice, but it still looks to native varieties as the norm and views local features as evidence of deteriorating language standards (Kachru, 1983: 118).

Although the status of local features is decisive in determining the status of a variety, the acceptability of the features is significant in affecting this status (Li, 2010). Acceptability, which involves the attitudes of users and non-users towards a feature (Li, 2010), is crucial for the status of a feature: only when a feature is accepted can it disassociate itself from the label of being an error and continue to exist in the community (Bamgbose, 1998). Moreover, Wolfram and Schilling–Estes (2006: 182) state that socially prestigious language features are often associated with high-status speakers, causing them to be even more favoured, whereas socially stigmatised language features are often associated with low-status speakers, making them more disfavoured. For a language feature to be accepted in a community, in addition to being codified, the feature has to lose its social

SHAWNEA SUM POK TING is currently a lecturer at the Department of Communication Studies at Hong Kong Baptist University. She obtained her MPhil in Applied English Linguistics from the Chinese University of Hong Kong, and will commence her PhD at the Department of English and Comparative Literature at Goldsmiths, University of London, in 2018. Her research interests include sociolinguistics, English as a Lingua Franca, and patient-centred communication in intercultural contexts. Email: shawneatsp@link.cuhk.edu.hk

JANICE WING SZE WONG is a lecturer in the Department of Communication Studies at Hong Kong Baptist University, Hong Kong. She received her PhD in Applied English Linguistics from the Chinese University of Hong Kong, specializing in the acquisition of second language speech. Her research focuses on cross-linguistic speech perception and production, speech training and intervention, and varieties of English. At present, she is working on a project on the perception of lexical tones in a third language. Email: janicewong@hkbu.edu.hk

29

stigma (Bao, 2003: 40). Of the studies investigating English usage in Hong Kong, few have focused on the grammatical features of HKE from the view of World Englishes (e.g. Gisborne, 2011; Hung, 2012; Poon, 2010; Setter, Wong & Chan, 2010; Wong, 2014), and little is known about what affects the perception of local English speakers in Hong Kong towards the grammar of HKE. Whether they stigmatise or show affiliation to the grammatical features of HKE will shed light on the status of these features. Therefore, the present paper aims to explore the factors affecting the acceptability of grammatical features previously identified as belonging to HKE. However, due to limited space, only the factors related to social and contextual aspects are discussed.

Method

This paper was part of a project involving two phases of data collection; both phases involved an in-depth exploration of the acceptability of the grammatical features of HKE and the status of HKE. In the first part of the project, an acceptability survey, inspired by the Grammaticality Judgement Task by Chan (2004), was voluntarily completed by 52 local Hong Kong Chinese undergraduates (aged 19–23, 27 females and 25 males, all middle-class). These students were born and raised in Hong Kong; Cantonese was their L1, and they represented the mesolectal level of local English users in the community (Hung, 2012: 127). In the second part, semi-structured interviews were then conducted with ten survey respondents (four females and six males) who agreed to be interviewed. The survey responses of each participant acted as 'retrospective prompts' in the interviews (Dörnyei, 2007: 171), helping the participants to generate reflections on both their acceptability and attitudes towards the non-native grammatical features of HKE. The current paper focuses only on the findings of the qualitative analysis of the project.

Grammatical features included in the acceptability survey

This paper does not aim to codify HKE but to use the grammatical features (hereafter features) to elicit responses. To avoid fatiguing the participants, only nine features that were identified as grammatical features of HKE were included in the acceptability survey (see Table 1). Unlike the phonological and lexical aspects of HKE (e.g. Deterding, Wong & Kirkpatrick, 2008; Evans, 2015), there is no straightforward consensus

concerning what constitutes the grammatical 'features' of HKE and what constitutes common 'errors' made by local English users (Hung, 2012: 126). Thus, the survey included only features that had been investigated by more than two previous studies examining HKE (e.g. Gisborne, 2000, 2011; Hung, 2012; Platt, 1982; Poon, 2010; Setter et al., 2010; Tongue & Walters, 1978, as cited in Bolton, 2003; Wong, 2014), ensuring that those that were more widely recognised would be studied. These features may be perceived in other fields, such as Second Language Acquisition, as 'errors' made by non-native English speakers. However, some of the features are already recognised in other varieties of English, such as Singaporean English and Malaysian English (e.g. Low & Hashim, 2012; Percillier, 2016: 20–21). In addition, whether a non-standard usage is an error or a feature depends on how its users view and accept it (Gut, 2011: 120); studying users' perceptions and level of acceptance of such features is the objective of this paper.

Two sentences for each of the above features were included in the acceptability survey. For each sentence, participants of the survey had to answer questions about whether they understood the meaning of the sentence, and to rate the acceptability of the sentence – totally unacceptable, slightly unacceptable, slightly acceptable, totally acceptable, or don't know. For each sentence the participants found unacceptable, they had to provide a version they regarded as acceptable, and also a context where the sentence might become acceptable, if there was any.

To ensure the sentences were of natural production, they were taken from private conversations under the spoken dialogue section in the Hong Kong component of the International Corpus of English (ICE–HK) (Nelson, 2006). Since passages containing all the features on which this paper focused could not be found in ICE–HK, isolated sentences were used.

Three sentences of each feature, and more features, were used in the pilot study, where fatigue was reported. To avoid overloading the participants, fewer sentences and features were included in the main study. Additionally, simpler wording was adopted to facilitate the understanding of the participants during the interview.

Data collection and analysis

Semi-structured interviews were used because they provided participants with the freedom to share as many insights as they wished (Polit & Beck, 2017: 510); at the same time, they enabled the

Table 1: Grammatical features of HKE included in this paper

Features	Example
1. Using a transitive verb as an intransitive verb	Please do return back in June rather than in July (ICE–HK:W1B–003#74:3, as cited in Wong, 2014: 608)
2. Using an intransitive verb as a transitive verb	We must care the old people (Setter et al., 2010: 64)
3. Extended plurality	We have excellent furnitures of all kinds for sale (Tongue & Walters, 1978, as cited in Bolton, 2003: 106)
4. Unmarked plurality	I think I will have instant noodle (Poon, 2010: 101)
5. Verbs not marked for subject–verb agreement in present tense	She like to go there (Gisborne, 2000: 368)
6. Verbs not marked for past tense	I went to the park and see her playing football (Hung, 2012: 128)
7. Non-occurrence of copula–be	I guess his hands his hands too full (Gisborne, 2011: 43)
8. Variable occurrence of articles	The Mercury is the closest planet to the sun (Poon, 2010: 62)
9. Non-occurrence of subject, particularly in relative clauses	Here is not allowed to stop the car (Platt, 1982: 410) One of the plant[s] contains carotenes is called . . . (Hung, 2012: 127)

authors to spontaneously pursue further responses to any unexpected and/or insightful comments (Garret, Coupland, & Williams, 2003: 35). The interview questions were developed by the authors and modified from previous studies (e.g. Crismore, Ngeow & Soo, 1996; He & Li, 2009). They were set to explore three areas: 1) the participants' attitudes when encountering the features, 2) the reasons behind the responses they gave in the acceptability survey, and 3) whether and/or how they would regard these features as features of HKE or as errors produced by local English users. The interview protocol was finalised after gathering data from a pilot study and the results from the acceptability survey. All interviews were conducted face to face by the first author, lasted from 62 to 84 minutes, and were audio-recorded with the participants' consent. Their L1, Cantonese, was used as the medium of communication to allow them to speak openly and with confidence, thereby minimising the risk of a language barrier (Sung, 2014). Informed consent was obtained from all participants.

The interviews were transcribed and translated into English by the authors, with Cantonese as the L1 and English as the L2. Applying content analysis, the authors coded the transcripts separately for words and phrases that reflect the participants' perceptions towards the acceptability of the features. To enhance reliability, the codes were then compared and discussed between the authors, who further grouped the codes together under different categories.

Findings and discussion

Table 2 reports the means of the acceptability of the features obtained from the acceptability survey. The findings informed the subsequent qualitative analysis used to investigate the acceptability of the features through semi-structured interviews, which is the focus of the current paper.

Data from the interviews revealed that the participants' level of acceptance towards the features was affected by three factors relating to social and contextual aspects, i.e. (i) Perceived social status and perceived competence of the users of the features; (ii) Mode of Communication; (iii) Perceived level of formality of the context. Only representative views from the majority of the participants are extracted and presented in the discussion. Compared to other factors which are much more prominent, gender is not a significant factor in affecting the acceptability of the features in both the survey and the interview.

Perceived social status and perceived competence of the users of the features

Although one may believe that the social distance between the users of the features and the participants might affect the acceptability of the features, this did not emerge in the interview data. Instead, the perceived social status of the users played a larger role in affecting acceptability. For instance, features became more acceptable when they were produced by people perceived to have a lower

Table 2: Means of the acceptability of the features

Features	Means*
1. Using a transitive verb as an intransitive verb	2.17
2. Using an intransitive verb as a transitive verb	1.98
3. Extended plurality	2.19
4. Unmarked plurality	2.43
5. Verbs not marked for subject–verb agreement in present tense	2.13
6. Verbs not marked for past tense	2.09
7. Non-occurrence of copula–be	1.72
8. Variable occurrence of articles	1.98
9. Non-occurrence of subject, particularly in relative clauses	1.43

* 1: totally unacceptable; 2: slightly unacceptable; 3: slightly acceptable; 4: totally acceptable.
The mean is rounded off to two digits after the decimal point.

social status, such as waiters and taxi drivers. However, when the users were perceived to have a higher social status, such as civil servants and university graduates, even a slip of the tongue involving any of the features was not accepted. The reason is that people with a higher social status were generally expected to be proficient in English, particularly Standard English (StE), as exemplified below:

> People are like this, double standard. But it's, like, university students versus bus driver. Different roles bear different responsibilities. There're different things to be fulfilled.
>
> (P3, male, aged 19)

Therefore, the features became more acceptable when produced by people of lower social status only because the participants had lower expectations of these people's communication needs and their ability to conform to StE. This reflects the fact that although the features seemed to have a higher level of acceptability, they were actually still being stigmatised.

In fact, not only the features but also their users were socially stigmatised. When the participants perceived the existence of the features as only a slip of the tongue, their users were 'forgiven', and the presence of the features were accepted.

One example that most participants noted was the lack of a third-person-singular present-tense marking for verbs. However, when the features were produced consistently by the same person, both the features and that person were not to be accepted. The production of the features became indicative of that person's incapability rather than a careless mistake:

> So, when you really have processed it … and you're still wrong after you've thought about it, you really have a problem.
>
> (P1, female, aged 19)

> If you've already processed it and you're still incorrect, then there's a problem.
>
> (P2, female, aged 22)

The two similar quotations show that the reason underlying the rejection of the features was a rejection of the users. This conforms to Milroy and Milroy's (1999: 33) observation that usages that do not follow StE are often viewed as 'a sign of stupidity' and 'ignorance' and that those who produce such usages are considered ignorant or cognitively deficient in using 'correct' English (1999: 69). The participants' disapproval of the users' incompetence in using English transferred to disapproval of the features; both the features and their users bore the stereotype of being deficient.

Mode of communication

Face-to-face communication

The participants reported that they found it easier to accept the features in face-to-face conversations because they perceived the features to be less noticeable to the ears. For example, for the regular plural marking for nouns (e.g. table–s) and past tense marking for verbs (e.g. discuss–ed), the markings were not individual lexical items but were part of the morphological structure of a word. In addition, the participants revealed that they empathised with their interlocutors, who had limited time to produce an utterance in English. Therefore, even when their interlocutors used English in non-standard ways, such as those involving transitivity or copula–be, it was still accepted:

> I think in verbal communication, the time allowed for you to think of what to say and how to say is very short. So, maybe, the chance for you to be wrong is higher. But because you can get a response immediately, so, for example, you can clarify immediately, so, it's OK.
>
> (P4, female, aged 23)

Echoing Chan (2013), the spontaneous nature of face-to-face communication was reported by the participants as the reason for them to place higher priority on making oneself understood than the other aspects of language, such as conformity with StE. However, this seemingly increased level of acceptability does not reflect true acceptance. As exemplified by participant 4, the participants accepted the features only out of 'forgiveness', thinking that the non-standard usage could be 'corrected' immediately, or even because they were unable to recognise the features in the spoken context. Although various features in this paper, such as those relating to subject–verb agreement and articles, are common in successful communication among non-native speakers of English (Seidlhofer, 2004), the participants still regarded them as 'wrong'. An exonormative attitude was still maintained.

Computer-mediated communication (CMC)

In general, the participants also showed a more open attitude towards non-standard features used in online platforms such as instant messaging and social media because they placed a higher priority on comprehensibility and speed. In line with Lee (2007), the participants viewed CMC as informal and being for social use; therefore, building rapport with their friends became more important than conforming to StE in this context. The participants regarded it as a norm for people to express themselves in fragmented sentences rather than in StE, which concurs with Poon (2005: 10), who notes that sentences in synchronous chatgroups tend to be loosely structured.

The priority given to speed was another factor that raised the acceptability of the features. The participants mentioned that they were used to focusing more on keeping the conversation in progress than conforming to StE in synchronous communication, which further affected their acceptance of non-standard features in asynchronous communication:

You're so used to typing quickly on a keyboard, so, you simply type closing your eyes. It doesn't matter if you're really in a hurry or not [. . .] You don't really pay attention, you don't really check, you don't really care.

(P6, male, aged 20)

The remark from participant 6 about updating one's status on the social media platform Facebook reflects the fact that when an exchange online is perceived to be informal, regardless of the synchronicity of communication, people are more open to accepting non-standard features. Therefore, a higher level of acceptance towards the features arose because the participants were more concerned about other features of online communication; affiliation towards the features has yet to be developed.

In addition, it is generally observed that with technological advancement, it has become much easier and more popular to type in Chinese. Therefore, even with CMC, the use of English is decreasing, which further reduces the possibility for local English users in Hong Kong to perceive that English is something of their own. Thus, how the community will develop a habit of using English and develop positive attitudes towards various non-standard features becomes even more uncertain.

Perceived level of formality of the context

Although the participants conveyed that the features would still be accepted in somewhat formal contexts, such as in presentations and lectures at university, it was once again merely an expression of empathy rather than real acceptance towards the users of the features whose L1 was not English. This is shown by participant 5 below, with variable occurrence of articles as an example:

Maybe at the moment I hear it, I'd find it odd, because it's wrong. But I won't not accept it because of this or think that person is not good. Because we are all students, and the main purpose is to let people understand you.

(P5, male, aged 21)

Non-standard usage of English tends to be less accepted in formal contexts, for instance, in the educational context (Tan & Tan, 2008). However, when the participants were asked if and when they would use English outside school and work, the participants agreed that they rarely speak English in their everyday lives. This is in line with Görlach's (2002: 109–10) prediction that unlike in Singapore, English will remain foreign to Hong Kong and be predominantly used in formal contexts instead of becoming an independent variety embraced by the local English users. Van Rooy (2010) notes that for non-native features to be accepted and stabilised in a community, it is essential for language users to have the intention to communicate with others using these features and to consider these features to be associated with them. However, the interview data reveal that, English, not to mention the non-standard

features, is perceived by residents of Hong Kong as neither their possession nor part of their private, everyday lives. Therefore, the situation is not optimistic regarding the emergence of higher levels of acceptability towards the grammatical features identified as being HKE.

Conclusion

The data from this paper reflect a somewhat negative attitude and, therefore, a low level of acceptance towards the grammatical features of HKE. Practical concerns for maintaining a high 'standard' of English for social recognition and a lack of open-mindedness towards World Englishes remain the major reasons for the participants' reluctance to accept local features of HKE (Chan, 2013; Lai, 2009). This exonormative orientation is negatively responsible for the overall acceptability of HKE as an independent variety of English.

It is noted that the number of participants in this study is limited. However, this paper does not aim to capture all views in the community. Meanwhile, the findings in this paper conform to those of previous reports (e.g. Georgieva, 2010; Schneider, 2003: 252), in that grammar is generally the most stable aspect of a language and the most resistant to change. It is also acknowledged that all the participants in this study were undergraduate students. Thus, the data collected were limited to a particular age range and background, which affected the perceptions being collected, such as what constituted people of higher social status and what constituted a formal context; in addition, the acceptability of the features might have been constrained by academic needs. Because English users who are not university students may have other perceptions concerning the use of English, other population groups, such as the business sector, should also be included in future research for a more comprehensive view of the attitudes towards HKE of speakers and non-speakers of HKE (Chan, 2013; Evans, 2013).

Finally, with the general observation that English is used less frequently in private communication, further research is necessary to observe whether HKE will progress, or regress, as an independent variety of English.

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