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# Towards an acceptance of the ideology of English as a lingua franca in Hong Kong?

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An examination of the myriad ideologies underpinning the perceptions of English within the complex local language ideological landscape

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## Introduction

English as a lingua franca (ELF) is now the most extensive sociolinguistic use of English around the world (Jenkins, 2015). As a widespread language phenomenon, ELF serves as ‘a “contact language” between persons who share neither a common native tongue nor a common (national) culture and for whom English is the chosen foreign language of communication’ (Firth, 1996: 240). More specifically, ELF refers to communication in English between speakers from different first language (L1) backgrounds (Mauranen, 2012; Seidlhofer, 2011). Instead of being a single variety of English, ELF is also conceptualized as a set of practices involving translingual uses of English (Jenkins, 2015; Seidlhofer, 2017).

Hong Kong, which prides itself as ‘Asia’s World City’, is no exception in witnessing the widespread use of ELF among people from diverse L1 and cultural backgrounds (Sung, 2010, 2015, 2018b, 2020; Xu, 2014). ELF is an important aspect of language use in Hong Kong, given that English is often used by local Chinese people for communication with non-Chinese speakers. It must also be noted that English for intra-ethnic communication in Hong Kong is rare (Li, 2017). As Evans (2016: 91-92) notes, local Chinese have ‘little need or desire to speak English among themselves, except in the domains of education and employment, where its use is motivated by institutional expectations or the presence of non-Cantonese-speaking listeners or interlocutors’. With the widespread use

of English as a lingua franca among speakers of different L1s in Hong Kong, an interesting question arises: *Is there a growing acceptance of the ideology of English as a lingua franca among Hong Kong speakers of English?*

To address this question, the present article considers ELF not only as a description of a language phenomenon, but also as an ideological construct (Kroskrity, 2004; Pennycook, 2012). By examining the set of assumptions underlying the ideology of ELF and scrutinizing the recent sociolinguistic



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research on English(es) in Hong Kong from a language ideological perspective, I will argue that there appears to be a merely superficial orientation to the ideology of ELF among Hong Kong speakers of English. While there is some recognition of the lingua franca role of English and the plural nature of different Englishes in ELF communication, Hong Kong speakers of English do not seem to embrace the ideology of ELF in its entirety, especially with respect to the assumptions regarding the de-privileging of native English and the de-coupling of English from cultural identity. By drawing on the concept of heteroglossia (Bakhtin, 1981), I will also argue that the ideology of ELF is not the only language ideology that underpins Hong Kong speakers' understanding of ELF in Hong Kong, but it co-exists with other language ideologies which may or may not be compatible with the ELF ideology, supplementing and/or competing with each other simultaneously. Instead of being a single, dominant ideology in Hong Kong, the ideology of ELF will likely continue to be in constant tension with other co-present language ideologies, continually shaping and reshaping Hong Kong speakers' understandings of English in a complex, dynamic and sometimes contradictory manner. It is hoped that by considering the simultaneous co-presence and dynamic multiplicity of the interrelated language ideologies in the local language ideological landscape, we can come to a more nuanced picture of Hong Kong speakers' multifaceted understandings of what it means to speak English in Hong Kong.

## Language ideology

As Seargeant (2009) argues, divorcing the use of a language from the complex set of beliefs which constitute its existence within society is neither practicable nor possible. I will take a language ideological perspective in understanding the use of ELF in Hong Kong.

Language ideologies can be understood as 'any sets of beliefs about language articulated by users as a rationalization or justification of perceived language structure and use' (Silverstein, 1979: 193). Specifically, they are related to our beliefs about the status and values of a language, and the (in)appropriateness of the use of a language in particular contexts (Piller, 2015). Moreover, it should be noted that language ideologies are always situated in specific socio-cultural contexts, and can therefore be multiple, dynamic, variable, and sometimes conflicting in nature (Kroskrity, 2004). While individuals can hold one or more

language ideologies, not all language ideologies are necessarily seen as equal in their explanatory value (Silverstein, 1979).

## What is the ideology of ELF?

Pennycook (2012: 150) argues that 'ELF is not so much a linguistic system as an ideological construct'. I would conceptualize ELF as a language ideology which contains a set of assumptions about the use of English in lingua franca contexts. Specifically, I will refer to the set of assumptions as 'the ideology of ELF' or 'the ELF ideology'.

An important assumption underlying the ELF ideology is that ELF is constructed in opposition to native English (Seidlhofer, 2011), with an emphasis on mutual intelligibility, as opposed to conformity to native-speaker norms. In particular, the ELF ideology de-emphasizes the relevance of native-speaker norms in ELF communication, promotes the plurality of Englishes, and acknowledges language variability and change. Jenkins (2009), for example, argues that the norms of ELF communication should not be driven by native-speaker norms, whether lexical, grammatical, phonological or cultural. Furthermore, as no one can claim to be a native speaker of a lingua franca, the ELF ideology extends the ownership of English from native speakers of English to non-native speakers of English, thereby making the ELF ideology a potentially liberating one for non-native speakers of English (Jenkins, 2007; Marlina & Xu, 2018). Note though that from a world Englishes perspective, the notion of 'native speaker' has been problematized (see, e.g., Faez, 2011 for a discussion).

Another dimension of the ELF ideology is that ELF is constructed primarily as a tool of communication for transactional purposes, rather than as a language of emotional identification or identity construction (House, 2003). As ELF is primarily concerned with communication, as opposed to identity formation, it is imagined as a space where individuals can be culturally, politically, and socially neutral (House, 2003; Meierkord, 2002; Modiano, 2001). According to Kirkpatrick's (2007) 'identity-communication continuum' in understanding language use, the role of communication can sometimes be in conflict with the role of identity. He explains that when speakers use a language for identity expression, they tend to use terms, idioms and accents that are shared by the local speech community. However, when they speak a language for lingua franca purposes, they are likely to consciously edit local references from their language in order to be understood (Kirkpatrick, 2007, 2011).

Furthermore, the ideology of ELF is underpinned by the assumption that ELF would allow for egalitarian conceptions of communication that position both native speakers of English and non-native speakers of English as equally responsible for successful communication through ELF (Subtirelu, 2014). Accordingly, successful speakers of ELF should be defined in terms of their ability to interact successfully in linguistically and culturally diverse settings (Subtirelu, 2014). In addition, ELF, given its association with values such as ‘equality, human rights, fair play, democracy, free speech, freedom of the press, humanitarianism, and cultural and linguistic pluralism’ (Modiano, 2001: 169), is envisioned to be a democratic basis for communication, placing native and non-native speakers of English on an equal footing (Marlina & Xu, 2018).

### **A heteroglossic approach to language ideology**

In addition to a language ideological perspective towards ELF, I also draw on the notion of heteroglossia (Bakhtin, 1981) in understanding the multiplicity and pluralization of language ideologies underpinning laypeople’s perceptions of ELF.

Heteroglossia refers to ‘the co-existence and struggle between diverse social languages and between centripetal and centrifugal forces’ (Maybin & Swann, 2007: 504). Each voice (or social language) represents an ideological-belief system, or a way of seeing the world. According to the notion of heteroglossia, voices do not exist on their own, but are related to other voices (Blackledge, 2005). In Bakhtin’s (1981: 293) own words, ‘The word in language is half someone else’s. It becomes “one’s own” only when the speaker populates it with his own intention, his own accent’. Even within a single utterance, different voices may co-exist, clashing or coinciding, making digs at each other or conceding to each other (Blackledge, 2005). While the centripetal force produces voices that strive towards unification and centralisation, the centrifugal force is associated with voices that emphasize diversification and challenge conventional meanings (Maybin & Swann, 2007). Furthermore, different voices are necessarily dialogic in nature (Bakhtin, 1981). As the co-existence of the plurality of voices do not always merge into a single ideological consciousness, they exist as different discourse styles which can be in dialogical relationships with each other (Bakhtin, 1981).

While heteroglossia underscores the dynamic multiplicity of different voices and social

languages, ‘the multiplicity of voices is not always immediately apparent within a speech community or sociolinguistic region because dominant ideologies espoused by social groups in positions of power often subdue peripheral discourses, thus resulting in the assumption and creation of a singular style within a particular textual space’ (Jenks & Lee, 2016: 388). To achieve a nuanced understanding of the various ideologies underpinning ELF as a complex language phenomenon in Hong Kong, it would be important to pay attention to ‘the simultaneous co-presence and interrelatedness of varying ideologies of English’ (Jenks & Lee, 2016: 388) which circulate in the same sociolinguistic space.

### **Examining recent empirical research on English(es) in Hong Kong from a language ideological perspective**

Different varieties of English exist in Hong Kong, including native and localized varieties of English, and the English(es) spoken by Hong Kong speakers of English also vary considerably. While educated speakers of English may still exhibit ‘many localised features of speech’ (Bolton & Kwok, 1990: 149), exonormative orientations towards native-speaker norms, especially British English, remain strong in Hong Kong society (Sewell, 2009).

Recent empirical research on Hong Kong people’s attitudes towards different Englishes continues to reveal the prevalence of the native speaker ideology in Hong Kong (e.g., Chan, 2013, 2018). In a study involving over a hundred Hong Kong secondary school students, Chan (2018) found that most participants preferred to sound like a native speaker of English because of the high status accorded to native-speaker pronunciation in Hong Kong. By contrast, the local variety of English, i.e., Hong Kong English (HKE), was stigmatized by the participants who seemed unwilling to associate their identities with HKE. Chan (2018) argues that a local identity appears to be associated with native-like English, rather than HKE. In another study by Chan (2013) involving a group of Hong Kong university students, the participants’ strong preference for native English was also found to be prevalent. Chan (2013) explained that the participants’ preference for native-speaker pronunciation could be due to its association with a high level of English proficiency and education level, which could help them to project a professional image.

While the native speaker ideology accounts for Hong Kong speakers’ preference for native English and their disapproval for the local variety

of English, recent empirical research also indicates the rise of a competing language ideology, that is, the ideology of language as identity, which supports the view that HKE serves a marker of a local identity (e.g., Chan, 2013; Hansen Edwards, 2015, 2018). In a study by Hansen Edwards (2015) involving a group of Hong Kong university students, HKE was found to be a preferred variety of English and a marker of a local identity for a minority of the participants. In a larger longitudinal study, Hansen Edwards (2018) points to more evidence of an increasing number of Hong Kong speakers wanting to speak HKE and a decreasing number of Hong Kong speakers holding the native speaker ideology. Interestingly, the degree of acceptance of the ideology of language as identity seems to vary among Hong Kong speakers of English, depending on their reported use of HKE and their preference (or otherwise) to display a local identity. Hansen Edwards' (2015, 2018) studies found that the participants' self-reported use of HKE and their preference for a local identity was positively correlated with their positive attitudes towards HKE. More specifically, the study found that speakers who reported to speak HKE and use it to convey a Hong Kong identity showed positive attitudes towards HKE; speakers who spoke HKE but were unsure whether they want to speak HKE or another variety of English tended to show ambivalent attitudes towards HKE (or 'linguistic schizophrenia'); and speakers who doubted the existence of HKE tended to display negative attitudes towards HKE.

It is also important to point out the role of contextual variation in mediating the degree of acceptance of the ideology of language as identity among Hong Kong speakers of English. Chan's (2013) study found that despite the participants' preference for native English, the participants seemed to have less reservations about HKE in less formal and more interactive communication contexts. He argues that Hong Kong people's acceptance of HKE and their desire to preserve their local identity through HKE could be context-dependent, especially with respect to 'the degree of formality, the nature of the interaction and the role of interlocutors of particular contexts' (Chan, 2013: 72).

### **What about the ideology of ELF in Hong Kong? Insights from empirical research**

While ELF is a widespread phenomenon in Hong Kong, only a small amount of empirical research

on the perceptions of ELF in Hong Kong can be found to date (e.g., Lai, 2019; Sung, 2016, 2018a, 2018b). Based on the limited yet useful research on ELF in Hong Kong, I would argue that Hong Kong speakers of English only show a superficial orientation to the ideology of ELF and that when they allude to the ideology of ELF, they also draw on other language ideologies in understanding ELF as a language phenomenon simultaneously, including (i) the native speaker ideology, (ii) the ideology of linguistic hierarchization, and (iii) the ideology of linguistic pragmatism, among others. While these ideologies are not always compatible with the ideology of ELF, their understanding of ELF seems to be inseparable from other existing language ideologies.

A review of recent empirical research suggests that there is less than wholehearted acceptance of the ideology of ELF among Hong Kong speakers of English. In a recent study involving a group of young Hong Kong prospective English teachers, Lai (2019) found that the participants showed understandings of the academic concept of ELF and displayed acceptance of different Englishes in ELF communication. While the study found that the lingua franca role of English was well recognized by the participants, her study also discovered that the concept of ELF 'remains a rhetoric rather than a reality' (Lai 2019: 19) for the majority of the participants. In another study, Sung (2018a) investigated a group of Hong Kong university students' perceptions of their ELF use and found rather mixed views towards ELF. While the participants displayed positive orientations towards ELF and acknowledged that the purpose of ELF communication is to achieve mutual understanding among people from different L1 backgrounds, they perceived the need for a 'common standard' for different speakers to orient to in order to ensure intelligibility. Of note is that the so-called 'common standard' was still very much associated with native-speaker norms.

It is also worth noting that the native speaker ideology seems to be present in the minds of Hong Kong speakers of English when they conceive ELF as a language phenomenon. Lai's (2019) study discovered that the participants still attached great prestige to native English, especially American English and British English, in ELF contexts. A reason for their aspiration towards native English, Lai argues, could be that they did not attach much of their cultural identity to English and assumed only minimal language ownership. Sung's (2018a) study also found that while the participants accepted the plurality of Englishes in ELF communication,

they still oriented to the hegemonic position of native English in ELF communication and placed a high premium on native-speaker norms for measuring ELF speakers' English competence.

Apart from the native speaker ideology, Hong Kong speakers of English also seem to draw on the ideology of linguistic hierarchization in conceptualizing ELF. As Lai's (2019) study reported, the participants not only showed deep-rooted preference for native English, but they also seemed to accept the linguistic hierarchy among different varieties of English, with native varieties of English ranked top, followed by the local variety of English, and other non-native varieties of English ranked the lowest. As Lai (2019) argues, English appears to be perceived by the participants as a commodity that comes in different brands which connote a hierarchy of power and status. In most participants' minds, she argues that 'inequalities and asymmetry in international communication still prevailed, which placed non-native users of English lower on a hierarchy than native speakers, and there were still tendencies to view "Other" cultures and languages as "deficient"' (Phillipson, 2000: 275). In a study that investigated Hong Kong university students' perceptions of exposure to different accents of English in the ELT classroom, Sung (2016) also found that while the participants were aware of the value of exposure to different native and non-native accents and took an interest in understanding different varieties of English for ELF communication, they still showed negative attitudes towards certain non-native accents of English, demonstrating their ideology of linguistic hierarchization.

A further language ideology, that is, the ideology of linguistic pragmatism, appears to be brought to the fore in the minds of Hong Kong speakers of English when understanding ELF. Lai's (2019) study found that the participants' preference for the native-speaker norms could be attributed to pragmatic reasons, including their emphasis on the notions of 'correctness' and 'standardness', as well as their perceived need for a clear and codified standard for classroom teaching. Also of note is that the majority of the participants held a pragmatic attitude towards achieving native-like English proficiency, acknowledging that 'nativeness' did not seem to be the reality but remained only an ideal which might not be achievable. Sung's (2016) study also found that the participants prioritized pragmatic concerns when understanding ELF. He found that they had reservations about the pedagogical value of intensive exposure to multiple accents of English in the classroom, and placed more emphasis

on the acquisition of 'standard' or 'native' English pronunciation (for productive purposes) than on understanding different accents of English (for receptive purposes).

## Discussion

What seems to emerge from the recent empirical research on English(es) in Hong Kong is the complex, multifarious and multilithic nature of English in Hong Kong, especially in terms of its uses, roles and meanings in the local context. Specifically, English is not only merely conceived of as a tool for lingua franca communication, but also perceived as a form of cultural capital for social mobility, a symbol of social status and education level, a distinct marker of local identity, and a model of reference for pedagogical purposes, among others. As Pennycook (2016: 34) rightly points out, 'what we mean by English is always contingent on local relations of power and desire, the ways that English means many different things and is caught up in many forms of hope, longing, discrimination and inequality'. As a result of the varied and sometimes inconsistent roles, values and meanings associated with English in the minds of Hong Kong people, there appears to be the co-presence of multiple interrelated ideologies of English in Hong Kong (Jenks & Lee, 2016, 2021).

To return to the question as to whether Hong Kong speakers of English are showing signs of growing acceptance of the ideology of ELF, a tentative conclusion would be that there seems to be a superficial orientation to the ideology of ELF among Hong Kong speakers of English. While Hong Kong people seem to acknowledge the lingua franca role of English and the plurality of Englishes in ELF communication, they do not necessarily relinquish their preference for native English, abandon their sense of insecurity about their local variety of English (i.e., the native speaker ideology), reject their use of English for identity purposes through HKE (i.e., the ideology of language as identity), or discard their views about the hierarchical nature of different varieties of English (i.e., the ideology of linguistic hierarchization). That is to say, Hong Kong speakers of English who use ELF do not necessarily embrace the ideology of ELF in its entirety, particularly with respect to its assumptions regarding the de-privileging of native English, the de-coupling of English from identity, and the conception of ELF as a democratic and equitable space for international communication.

Drawing on the concept of 'heteroglossia' (Bakhtin, 1981), I would also argue that the ideology of ELF is but one ideology among the myriad

language ideologies that co-exist in the complex language ideological landscape of Hong Kong. Together with the emerging ideology of ELF, other language ideologies, including the native speaker ideology, the ideology of language as identity, the ideology of linguistic hierarchization, and the ideology of linguistic pragmatism also co-exist in the broader language ideological landscape in Hong Kong.

While different language ideologies may co-exist simultaneously in Hong Kong, it is highly likely that these ideologies vary in salience according to context. Specifically, the various co-present language ideologies may be invoked to varying extents, depending on context (see Chan, 2013). For instance, while the native speaker ideology may be foregrounded in formal contexts, the ideology of language as identity may figure more prominently in informal contexts. It is also likely that the ideology of ELF may take precedence over other ideologies in lingua franca contexts where intelligibility is of primary concern, and that the ideology of linguistic pragmatism may be brought to the fore when pedagogical decisions are to be made, especially in the classroom context.

By considering the complex sociolinguistic context of Hong Kong, I would suggest that the ideology of ELF is unlikely to be the single, dominant ideology in Hong Kong in the near future. It is likely that the native speaker ideology will still confer power and status to native varieties of English, especially British English and American English, and the ideology of language as identity will continue to encourage Hong Kong speakers of English to accept the development of HKE as a means for expressing a uniquely local identity through English and take ownership of English as ‘their’ language. And with the increased awareness of ELF use in the local context (Sung, 2018b), the ideology of ELF will add to and further complicate the already complex local language ideological landscape. As the various interrelated language ideologies interpenetrate and intersect each other, the tensions between the various ideologies will continue to underpin the ambivalent perceptions of ELF among Hong Kong speakers who will be involved in the ongoing process of negotiating the myriad and often competing language ideologies in coming to terms with their use of English in Hong Kong, including its use as a lingua franca.

## Conclusion

Understanding ELF in Hong Kong cannot be reduced to the simple question of whether Hong

Kong speakers of English hold the ideology of ELF or the native speaker ideology. As revealed in the analysis above, the ideology of ELF co-exists with other ideologies in the minds of Hong Kong people. It would therefore be imperative for us to take account of the simultaneous co-presence of the various language ideologies (including sometimes competing ones) and their interplay in order to fully understand the complex language ideological landscape in Hong Kong, of which the ideology of ELF is sure to be a feature in the years to come.

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