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The Hong Kong English Accent: Judgements by Listeners in Britain

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Abstract

Studies of attitudes towards the Hong Kong English accent conclude that Hong Kong has a strongly exonormative orientation with little sign of endonormative stabilization. Hong Kong teachers of English still have a strong orientation towards (British or American) native-like accents in terms of acceptability and intelligibility.

Sewell's (2012) accent survey involving Hong Kong speakers and listeners using both questionnaire and error/variant-identification tasks concluded that the phonological features of accents are important determinants of listener responses, suggesting that local accents may be acceptable if they do not contain certain salient features of the Hong Kong English phonological inventory. In addition, an apparent correspondence between the acceptability and intelligibility characteristics of features was noted.

This paper presents a partial replication of Sewell's research using British listeners, indicating that, while there is not a great deal of diversity of opinion in terms of acceptability of accents, different issues affect listeners' ratings of intelligibility.

Hong Kong people have always faced an identity crisis for political, historical and linguistic reasons. As ethnic Chinese ruled by British

colonial governors for over a century (1842 – 1997), it would have been natural for Hongkongers to rejoice when Hong Kong's sovereignty was returned to China, an event commonly referred to as the Handover. However, under British rule, Hong Kong became a capitalist society while China remained a communist system, and for this reason most Hongkongers did not feel they would readily identify themselves as national 'Chinese'. After the Handover, especially with the opening up of China and the rise of China to supremacy in the international political stage, more and more Hongkongers have become willing to define themselves as 'Chinese'. In spite of this, a lot of Hong Kong citizens still insist their nationality is 'Hong Kong'.

Hong Kong's linguistic situation can be described as 'trilingual and biliterate'. 'Trilingual' refers to the three languages that are spoken in Hong Kong: Cantonese, English, and Putonghua (spoken Mandarin Chinese), while 'biliterate' refers to the two written languages used: written Standard Chinese and English. While both Chinese and English are the official languages of Hong Kong, for historical reasons English is the predominant language of the government, the legal system, and the professional and business sectors.

The language situation in education differs from other official areas of English use. Before the Handover in 1997, the vast majority of secondary schools used English as the medium of instruction. Immediately after the Handover, however, that policy changed, as the government preferred that schools use the mother tongue (that is, Cantonese), except in English lessons. Li (1999) observes that there was conflict between the government's policy of 'mother tongue education' and parents' preference for English. Outside the realm of education, English is an important lingua franca for Hong Kong as a means of communication with the outside world, in the fields of banking and finance, business, and in the tourism and hospitality industry. At the time of the Handover, business in overseas multi-national corporations was largely conducted in English (Hyland, 1997, p. 193); one survey reports that English is used in over 66% of communication in the workplace (Blomfield & Pierson 1987, cited in Hyland, 1997, p. 193), although it may be assumed that much of this is written communication. Those wishing to do business with China consider Hong Kong to be a desirable location, in that it is well known as a successful centre for international finance and trade; English has clearly been a factor in this success (Hyland, 1997, p. 193). Given this, it is understandable that English should be a perceived as a socially

prestigious language, associated with increased income and a high level of education (Cheng & Zi, 1987), i.e., as 'value added' (Li, 1999).

ACCEPTABILITY OF HONG KONG ENGLISH ACCENT IN HONG KONG

Although there have been many publications describing the Hong Kong English (HKE) accent in terms of an emergent variety (see, e.g., Hung 2000; Setter, Wong & Chan, 2010), recent studies of attitudes towards the HKE accent have concluded that Hong Kong has a strongly exonormative orientation, with little sign of endonormative stabilization (see, e.g., Luk, 2010). What is meant by this is that speakers still look towards British and (increasingly) American English as models and that, while there are identifiable phonological features across speakers of English in Hong Kong, there is still a great deal of variation. Teachers of English in Hong Kong still have a strong orientation towards (British or American) native accents in terms of acceptability and intelligibility. 'Speakers' native-like accents are viewed favourably in comparison with those who have more obvious Hong Kong phonological characteristics.

Some recent studies have indicated that HKE is relatively intelligible when compared to other varieties. Kirkpatrick, Deterding and Wong (2008), for example, found that educated HKE was highly intelligible to Singaporean and Australian listeners in comparison with Singapore English (SE), which had been tested in an earlier study (Kirkpatrick and Saunders 2005) – although it should be noted that listeners did well in both HKE and SE. Setter, Mok, Low, Zuo and Ran (under revision) looked at the effect of juncture cues in HKE, SE and British English (BE) and again found that Hong Kong, Singapore and British listeners performed better when listening to HKE. Pairs of phrases such as *I scream* and *ice cream* were presented to listeners who were asked to select the phrase they had heard. These two studies may indicate HKE is suitable as a model for the Asia Pacific region as it is more intelligible than SE and BE, but issues of acceptability and the continuing preference for native-speaker accents is likely to be a confounding factor.

This paper is a partial replication study and adaptation of Sewell (2012), which investigated the attitudes of 52 HKE-speaking participants towards 12 speakers, 11 of whom were speakers of HKE, the other being a native speaker of BE. He looked at the intelligibility of speakers, the acceptability of the speakers' accents and compared that information with the number of phonological errors of different types identified by the listeners. The results indicated that the phonological features of accents are important

determinants of listener responses, and suggest that high-proficiency local accents may be acceptable to listeners – even for pedagogical purposes – if they do not contain certain features of the Hong Kong English phonological inventory; for example, pre-vocalic final consonant cluster simplification and substituting a non-native vowel were problematic, but most substitutions of dental fricatives were not.

The current paper undertakes a similar investigation with listeners who are (mostly) native speakers of BE. The reason for doing so is to see whether the results are broadly the same as Sewell (2012) or whether there is a marked difference in attitude, intelligibility and errors identified. Direct statistical comparisons are not possible on this occasion owing to the slight differences in methodology.

METHODOLOGY

In the present study, we examine how the attitudinal reactions of listeners vary according to the phonological features present in accent samples. Another objective was to evaluate the acceptability of the HKE accent for pedagogical purposes. This may not seem relevant in a UK context but students are exposed to lecturers from all over the world. The authentic accent samples Sewell (2012) took from television programmes broadcast in Hong Kong were used, selected so that they were approximately the same length (around 10 seconds) and did not contain grammatical errors (in order to avoid the conflation of phonological and grammatical feature effects). Details of the sound files are given in Appendix A.

The set of 12 accent samples, 11 speakers from Hong Kong and one native speaker of BE from the United Kingdom, was evaluated by 90 students at the University of Reading, UK (28 male, 62 female). 72 of the students were native speakers on the BA (Hons) in English Language or English Language and Literature, with one postgraduate student on the MA in English Language Teaching. In addition to these speakers, there were also 18 speakers for whom English is either a second or a foreign language; three of these were postgraduate students on the MA in English Language Teaching, one was a visiting PhD student from Spain and the remaining 14 were undergraduate Erasmus students from continental Europe.

Sewell (2012) chose samples of actual conversation in preference to more controlled procedures. It was felt that controlled speech would create artificiality in the recordings, as well as possibly disturbing the natural patterns of co-occurrence of phonological features. The main

problem with using authentic data is that a wide range of factors may affect listener judgments, in addition to those linguistic factors selected for measurement (in this case, phonological features).

Questionnaire Design

We adopted Sewell's (2012) questionnaire in this study. In Part 1, students were asked to rate the accent samples in six areas, using a six-point Likert scale. These questionnaire items were intended to assess perceptions of acceptability. Item E asked participants whether they thought the accent was appropriate for English teaching purposes in Hong Kong (for example, in the form of listening materials), and so this was modified for the current study to ask simply whether the speaker's accent was acceptable as a model for pronunciation teaching *per se*. The other five items addressed the dimensions of correctness, acceptability, pleasantness and familiarity. Correctness is addressed by item B; acceptability (in the sense of 'pedagogical acceptability') by item E; pleasantness by item D; and familiarity by item A, which originally asked whether 'The speaker sounds like a Hong Kong person'; again in the current study this was altered to ask whether the speaker sounded like a native speaker of English to reflect the context in which the study was taking place, as many participants were not familiar with HKE. Part 1 of the questionnaire survey form is shown in Appendix B.

In Part 2 of the questionnaire, participants were asked to mark the features that affected their Part 1 ratings. After hearing the samples and giving their global impressions in Part 1, they heard the samples again, this time looking at the transcripts, and marked features on the transcripts with appropriate labels and explanations (e.g. 'V' for vowel error, 'C' for consonant error, 'CS' for connected speech, and so on. The students were instructed to mark only three features that negatively affected their ratings (hence the use of the problematic term 'error' in this context, which does not imply any prejudgment of actual 'error'). The students studying BA and MA programmes at Reading had completed a course in English phonetics and phonology which provided them with most of the requisite metalanguage; it was assumed the Erasmus students had done so as part of their own Linguistics programmes. Part 2 of the survey form is shown in Appendix C.

Data Analysis

Statistical analysis of the questionnaire data was conducted using Microsoft Excel and SPSS version 19. Responses in Part 1, 'agree strongly' to 'disagree strongly', were given ratings from 1-6 for the purposes of calculation in Excel, with 1 allocated to 'agree strongly' and 6 to 'disagree strongly'. The 'acceptability rating' was acquired by weighting equally and averaging the responses for each statement, then averaging these in turn. The responses to statement (b), 'the speaker has a lot of pronunciation errors', were weighted in reverse as in this case a high rating ('disagree strongly') signified high acceptability, contrary to the other statements. Responses to Part 2 were assigned error categories (explained in more detail below) before being entered into Excel. Both sets of data were then entered into SPSS for further statistical analysis using ANOVA. Where statistical significance is given it is set at $p \leq 0.05$.

RESULTS

Part 1

Figure 1 shows the overall results from Part 1. In the table, Speakers 1 and 6 are the same person and Speaker 11 is the native speaker of BE; this is indicated with different shadings.

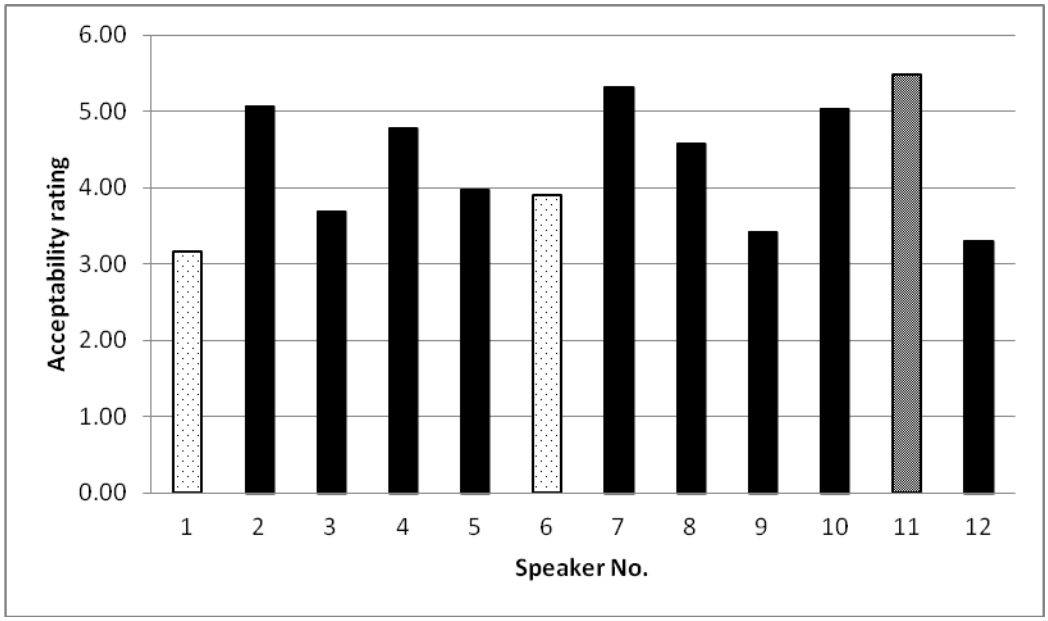

Figure 1. Average acceptability ratings for each of the 11 speakers

From Figure 1 it is possible to see that all speakers were judged to be acceptable at a rating above 3 (i.e., above 50%) but that only Speakers 2, 7, 10 and 11 are rated above 5. Speaker 11, the most highly rated, is the native BE speaker. When we consider the background of the remaining speakers we find that the second most highly-rated speaker, Speaker 7, is a retired civil servant in his 60s, and that Speakers 2 and 10 are politicians in their 50s and 40s respectively. Speaker 4, the fifth most highly-rated, is also a politician in his 50s and Speaker 8, the next, is an NGO chairperson in her 50s. The speakers who fare the worst tend to be journalists and younger speakers of HKE; Speaker 9 is a government or industry spokesperson in her 30s and Speakers 1 and 12 are both journalists (although Speaker 6 fares better and is the same person as Speaker 1).

There are a large number of statistically significant differences, and a general significance level of $p<0.001$. While we do not believe it is necessary to cite all the significant differences, it is worth mentioning that Speaker 11's rating is significantly different from everyone except for Speakers 7 and 10, suggesting these three speakers are most consistently judged to be the most acceptable.

Part 2

The next stage of the data analysis was to compare the effects of the phonological features marked in Part 2 with the measured linguistic features listed in Table 1, to determine the relative contribution made by the features. The distribution of the 810 identified errors across the ten error categories are shown below in Figure 2. Table 1 explains the error categories and their subdivisions; an asterisk next to the code in Table 1 indicates categories added to Sewell's original list. Most of the new categories added are to do with suprasegmental aspects of speech, such as stress and intonation; Sewell (2012) comments that few students in the original study marked intonation errors, not having the metalanguage to specify them. We have also added CCRI to indicate initial consonant cluster simplification as there were a number of references to this category.

Table 1. Explanation of error categories used in the study, adapted from Sewell (2012)

Category code	Description of category and subcategories	Example (relevant part of word or phrase underlined)
VOWEL	Vowel modifications (marked 'V') a) VOWEL SUB: vowel	*m<u>a</u>intain*

	substitutions	[mɛn'teɪn] (vowel shortening in 1st syll.)
	b) FULL VOWEL: use of a full vowel (non-reduction) in unstressed syllables	*pr<u>o</u>duction* [pɹoʊ'dʌkʃn̩] (full vowel in 1st syll.)
PHONSUB	Consonantal (phonemic) substitutions, probably transfer-related a) PHONSUB-V: /v/ substituted by [w] b) PHONSUB-R: /r/ substituted by [w]	*ad<u>v</u>antage* *<u>r</u>eason*
SYLL	Alterations to syllable structure, usually a result of excessive vowel reduction linked to rapid speech	*<u>po</u>litical* [pʰ'lɪtəkl̩] (absorbed vowel in 1st syll.)
CCRF	Final consonant cluster reduction a) CCRF-PV: in prevocalic or prepausal position b) CCRF-PC: in preconsonantal position	*relaxe<u>d</u> attitudes, privilege<u>d</u> as) fou<u>n</u>d virtually, suggest<u>s</u> the*
CCRI*	Initial consonant cluster reduction	*c<u>l</u>othing* ['koʊðɪŋ] (/l/ missing after /k/) progress ['pɒgres] (/r/ missing after /p/)
STRESS*	Differences in stress placement a) STRESS-S: Sentence stress and rhythm b) STRESS-W: Word/phrasal stress	*they have all the cards <u>now</u>* *fish-<u>far</u>mers*
INTONATION*	Differences in intonation patterns	*KCRC to be run like a government de<u>part</u>ment, and TR run like a government de<u>part</u>ment* failure to signal new information
OTHER C-SUB	a) devoicing of final consonants or consonant clusters in plurals or verbs b) devoicing of voiced fricatives c) consonant substitution (mainly idiosyncratic) d) consonant deletion	*car<u>ds</u>, aim<u>s</u>* *ha<u>v</u>e, becau<u>s</u>e* *buil<u>t</u>* (pronounced as [d]),*de<u>p</u>artment* (marked as sounding like [b]), *depar<u>t</u>ment* (glottalised) *continue<u>d</u>, ha<u>v</u>e*
CS-LINK	Linking phenomena in connected speech	*by it* (linked with 'r' rather than [j] glide)
L-VOCAL	The vocalisation or deletion of postvocalic /l/	*peop<u>le</u>*
TH-STOP	Substitution of /ð/ with [d]	*<u>th</u>at*
TH-FRONT	Substitution of /θ/ with [f]	*for<u>th</u>coming*

**Note:* Categories added for this study

Looking at the data, the largest categories are CCRF-PV and OTHER C-SUB (statistically significantly different to all categories except each other)

and PHONOSUB-V, all of which correspond to three of the five significant error categories identified by Sewell (2012). TH-STOP is also relatively large, as is STRESS-S, the latter being new to this study. CCRF-PC, however, which is the largest error category in Sewell's study, is small among the current group of listeners; however, he notes that CCRF-PC did not achieve statistical significance, and goes on to say that '[t]he position adopted … is that statistical significance reflected the combined effects of factors such as frequency of occurrence, the noticeability of the error, and the perceived severity of the error' (Sewell, 2012, p. 10).

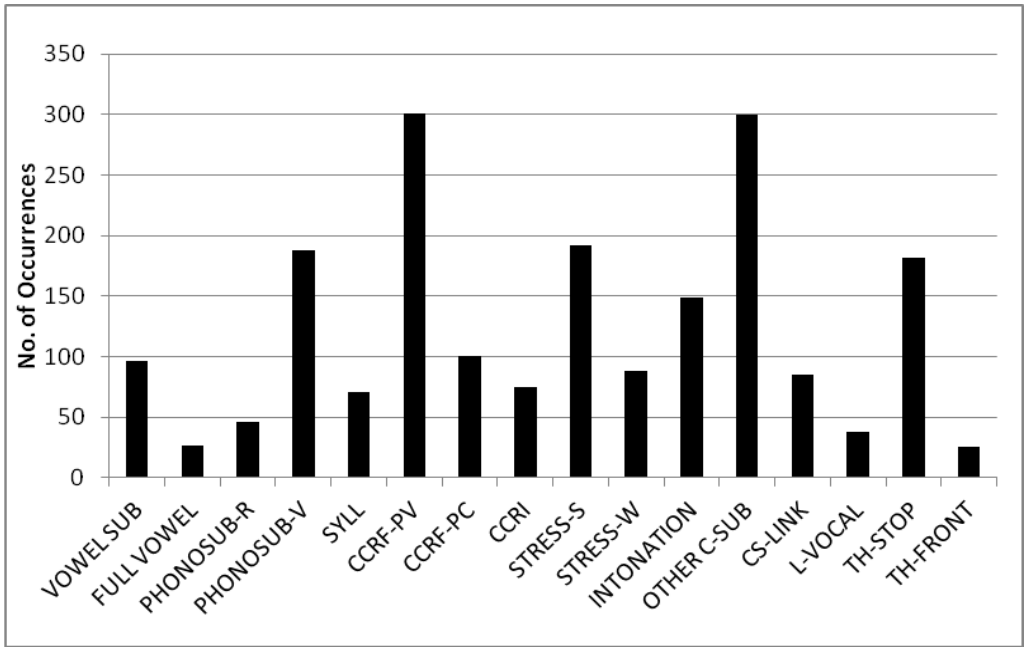

Figure 2. Distribution of identified errors across categories

In addition to PHONSUB-R, participants noted fewer than 50 examples of TH-FRONT, L-VOCAL and FULL VOWEL. This could be because examples of these features can be found in some accents of BE (e.g., Speaker 11 regularly used vocalised /l/) and that they do not impede intelligibility. For example, thought is often pronounced as /fɔːt/ in London instead of /θɔːt/, and Northern BE accents such as Manchester often have a full vowel in the first syllable of confused, pronouncing it /kɒnˈfjuːzd/ instead of /kənˈfjuːzd/.

In Table 2, the error types and number are listed by speaker. Speakers with an acceptability rating below 4 are shaded, and those above 5 are underlined.

There are some differences between the UK participants and those from other backgrounds. UK participants noted greater numbers of TH-STOP,

PHONSUB and CCRF-PC, whereas non-UK participants noted greater numbers of FULL VOWEL, STRESS-W and STRESS-S. As there are a relatively small number of non-UK participants, it is not possible to test whether these differences are statistically significant.

A chart comparing the results of all three groups is given in Figure 3. Results from all studies have been weighted and averaged in order to compare them directly. Only the categories appearing in Sewell's (2012) study are presented for comparison. The HKE participants noted far fewer instances of PHONSUB than those in the current study and far fewer general consonant errors, but more CCRF-PC errors. The HKE participants' identification of vowel errors more closely matched those of the UK participants, but their identification of TH-STOP more closely matched those of the non-UK participants.

DISCUSSION

Although the listeners in the UK-based study rated the BE speaker as the most acceptable, at least two other speakers with Hong Kong accents are rated almost as highly. Speaker 7, a retired civil servant in his 60s, was probably around 45 years of age at the time of the Handover and so would have spent a considerable amount of his working life under British administration; one would expect, therefore, his English to be closer to BE native-speaker norms and therefore judged as more acceptable. Speaker 10, on the other hand, is in his 40s and so, with the Handover taking place in 1997, his linguistic experience will have been rather different; however it is interesting to note that fewer errors have been identified for this speaker than for Speaker 7. As Speakers 2, 4 and 10 have all been rated relatively highly, are all politicians and are all down the lower end of the scale in terms of errors, this might indicate that it is still seen as desirable for someone in a leading political role in Hong Kong to have a native-like accent, both from the point of view of the speaker and the listener. The observations of Cheng and Zi (1987) and Li (1999), that English is a socially prestigious, 'value added' language, still seem to hold true.

Table 2. Error types listed by speaker

Error Type	Speaker (acceptability rating below)												
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	Total
VOWEL SUB	4	2	4	0	5	5	7	2	6	6	1	2	44
FULL VOWEL	0	0	2	0	5	0	0	0	4	0	0	0	11
PHONOSUB-R	14	0	2	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	18
PHONOSUB-V	27	0	0	0	29	0	0	0	0	0	0	27	83
SYLL	3	3	11	2	0	5	0	1	3	3	0	0	31
CCRF-PV	0	3	3	44	14	0	2	32	16	0	0	34	148
CCRF-PC	17	5	0	5	0	0	7	0	0	0	0	12	46
CCRI	0	2	0	0	3	5	0	1	2	0	0	18	31
STRESS-S	6	4	2	6	4	17	6	22	6	3	2	1	79
STRESS-W	1	1	1	2	0	15	4	0	2	1	1	4	32
INTONATION	6	6	1	1	1	9	3	12	3	2	1	1	46
OTHER C-SUB	28	21	35	4	19	8	3	4	22	6	5	3	158
CS-LINK	0	14	19	3	0	0	2	1	0	0	0	0	39
L-VOCAL	0	4	4	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	10
TH-STOP	13	4	23	2	1	2	2	0	24	11	0	6	88
TH-FRONT	0	0	0	0	0	15	0	0	0	0	0	0	15
Total	119	69	107	69	82	81	36	75	88	32	11	110	

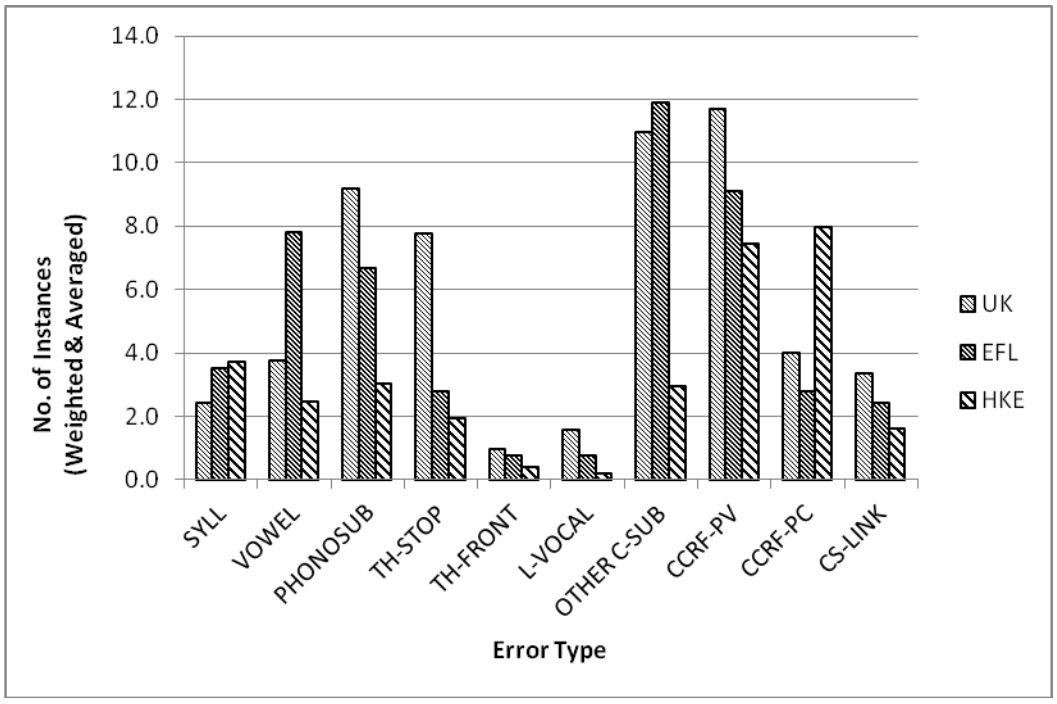

Figure 3. Distribution of identified errors across categories: comparison of studies

Speaker 4 is the odd one out in this group (2, 4 & 10) in that his acceptability rating is below 5. This may be because he has been identified as having a large number of pre-pausal or pre-vocalic final consonant cluster errors (44 in total), despite having few in other categories. This was also viewed as problematic in Sewell (2012).

The acceptability/intelligibility of Speaker 11 is unsurprising based on the familiarity of the majority of the listeners with the accent. However, it seems that the notion of 'native speaker' is one which participants are ready to confront. Here are the words of one British participant, written in a reflective blog-type post:

> I also realised that I'd made a rather embarrassing assumption. This was that, for all speakers who did not sound like British speakers of English, I automatically assumed that English could not have been their native language. It was only when I thought about it afterwards that it occurred to me that it is very possible that English could still be a person's native language, even though they don't sound like the Queen!

Limitations

This partial replication study does not allow us to directly compare the data from Sewell (2012) with the current data. One of the reasons for this is that the first author used the study as a training exercise for her students on the module *English in the World*, most of whom are undergraduates, and chose to adopt a more transparent method of analysis which would be familiar to them. Future research and further analysis of the data will address this.

We would also like to have a larger, more defined group of 'other speakers of English'. While this may not be possible within the confines of the *English in the World* module, it would be possible to conduct the study using contacts in other countries to collect sufficient amounts of data from a large enough pool of defined L2 English speakers.

Finally, the Hong Kong participants in Sewell's original study did not have the metalanguage to describe suprasegmental features, so no comparison is possible. As a limitation, Sewell states that the study 'focuses mainly on segmental features, and further research into suprasegmental features is needed' (2012, p. 13). We also hope to address this going forward.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Although there are a number of flaws in this study, we feel that research such as this could help determine which features are 'errors' leading to issues of intelligibility and which are more likely to be an expression of the HK identity through language, i.e., which features belong to the HKE 'ethnolinguistic repertoire' (Benor 2010, p. 161). For example, final consonant cluster reductions are identified as errors by all groups, but the substitution of [w] for [v] and general consonant differences may be more a part of HKE, as HK listeners did not pick up on these as often. What can clearly be seen is that phonological features are determinants of listener responses in terms of acceptability and intelligibility, and that these do not differ much across the listener groups involved, be they HKE speakers, BE speakers or other speakers of English.

As BE speakers are far from being the only possible interlocutors for speakers of HKE, further research is needed using listeners from a variety of linguistic backgrounds to work out which features of HKE are a barrier to communication and which are not – particularly if there is any future for the variety as a model of English in the South East Asia region.

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APPENDIX A

Speaker biodata and source of recording

Speaker No.	Gender M/F	Origin (presumed)	Approx. age	Occupation	Source and context of recording	Type of speech
1*	M	Hong Kong	50s	Journalist	*The Pulse* December 2007(studio discussion)	Unscripted
2	M	Hong Kong	50s	Politician	*The Pulse* February 2008 (recording of public address)	Scripted
3	M	Hong Kong	50s	Journalist	*The Pulse* May 2007(studio discussion)	Unscripted
4	M	Hong Kong	50s	Politician	*The Pulse* May 2007 (studio discussion)	Unscripted
5	M	Hong Kong	50s	Government or industry spokesperson	From HKICE (recording of public address)	Scripted
6*	M	Hong Kong	50s	Journalist	*The Pulse* May 2007 (studio discussion)	Unscripted
7	M	Hong Kong	60s	Civil servant (retired)	*Pearl Report* March 2006 (interview)	Unscripted
8	F	Hong Kong	50s	NGO chairperson	*Pearl Report* March 2006(interview)	Unscripted
9	F	Hong Kong	30s	Government or industry spokesperson	*The Pulse* June 2007 (interview)	Scripted (probably)
10	M	Hong Kong	40s	Politician	*The Pulse* April 2007 (studio interview)	Unscripted
11	M	Southern England	30s	Journalist	*Pearl Report* March 2006 (studio interview)	Unscripted
12	M	Hong Kong	50s	Journalist	*The Pulse* December 2007(studio discussion)	Unscripted

* Speaker 1 and Speaker 6 were the same person.

APPENDIX B

Part 1 of the survey form

Part 1: Listen to each speaker and put a tick in one box for each of the questions a-f. You may listen as many times as you wish.

Speaker 1

		Agree strongly					Disagree strongly
A	The speaker sounds like a native speaker of English.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
B	This speaker has a lot of pronunciation errors.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
C	This speaker is easy to understand.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
D	I like the way this speaker sounds.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
E	This speaker's accent is acceptable as a model for pronunciation teaching purposes.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
F	This speaker has a high level of education and / or a high status job.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

APPENDIX C

Part 2 of the survey form

Part 2: Listen again and then try to decide which words, sounds or other features were most important in helping you make the decisions you made in Part 1. You can refer to any of these areas:

Vowel sounds (V) Consonant sounds (C) Consonant clusters (CC) *Word stress (WS) Connected speech: sentence stress, rhythm, linking etc. (CS)* *Intonation (I)*

For 'NEGATIVE' features ONLY, please mark the transcript by underlining the relevant parts and using the above codes. For example, if you think there is a consonant problem in the word 'supermarket' you can mark it like this:

Supermarket
C

NB: Please do not mark more than THREE features per speaker. Decide which features were most important in forming your impression.
If you do not think there are any errors, you do not need to mark anything. You may note 'positive' features and/or further explain your Part 1 answers in the space provided.

Speaker 1

They don't see an advantage in doing anything risky, and they don't have to because they think that they have all the cards now

Any other comments about this speaker (positive or negative):