Chinese Englishes: A sociolinguistic history

By Kingsley Bolton


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Introduction

The author of the book *Chinese Englishes*, Kingsley Bolton, was an Associate Professor in the Department of English at the University of Hong Kong. In the book, Bolton wanted to explore the sociolinguistic history of English in Hong Kong and China from first contact up to the present. The author argues that there is a rich forgotten history of English used in China and Hong Kong. He also explains the significant and complex role that English has played in education, commerce, and other areas of life there.

Content

The book is divided into five chapters. The first chapter is a general background about World Englishes. This chapter lays some foundation for the discussion about the use of English in Hong Kong and China. The author dives into the debates about English varieties around the world, between traditional varieties, such as those spoken in the United Kingdom, Australia, or North America, and newer varieties, such as those found in Africa, the Caribbean, or Asia. Bolton also attempts to link the study of the newer varieties named World or ‘new’ Englishes to other related disciplines such as English studies, corpus linguistics, sociology of language, applied linguistics, and others. Hong Kong English, English in China, and Chinese Englishes in general, are placed in the framework of these World or ‘new’ Englishes.

The second chapter focuses in on the sociolinguistics of English in late colonial Hong Kong. The chapter describes the political, social, and economic situation from 1980 to 1997, before Hong Kong was returned to China. With that backdrop, the author describes the different speech communities that speak Chinese, English, and other languages. He describes the debates about the use of English or Chinese as a teaching medium in politics, education, and Hong Kong life in general. He also examines the language contact situation of English and Chinese and introduces Hong Kong English as a variety of English. Finally, the chapter delves into some of the language ideologies surrounding Hong Kong English.
The third chapter is a study into the archaeology of English usage in China, from early contact in the 17th to the middle of the 20th century. This chapter is a fascinating look into the history of English in China. Bolton begins with a discussion of the meeting of the Portuguese and Chinese and contact between their languages as the Portuguese interacted with the Chinese first. He continues on to describe how that contact affects English and Chinese language contact. Then different examples of English used and contact with Chinese from journals to instruction manuals to dictionaries and many other sources are described. Chinese Pidgin English (CPE) is introduced and how that form of communication was used and changed with time. In the chapter, we see how foreigners and Chinese saw each other and the role that CPE played in those views. The chapter goes on to describe how English gained greater prominence as it was used and taught more as China changed as more foreigners entered the country.

The fourth chapter describes the emergence of a Hong Kong English variety. Bolton compares Hong Kong English to English used in the Philippines and India. The debate about the status of Hong Kong English among World Englishes is discussed. In that discussion, Bolton discusses the history and literature of Hong Kong English as well language attitudes and language ideologies relating to Hong Kong English. By the end of the chapter the author argues that these Englishes are not new Englishes but newly recognized.

The last chapter leaves Hong Kong and enters the history of English usage in all of China. Bolton describes the history of English in China starting from the beginnings of the use of English in missionary schools and debates about the benefits of those schools. Those beginnings are followed by broader use of English in other schools and elsewhere. Then, the state of English education during the Republican period (1911–1949) and after the revolution in 1949 and cultural revolution (1966–1976) are presented. The chapter concludes by describing views towards and use of English in modern-day China.

**Evaluation**

Overall, Bolton provides a plethora of information, history, and context surrounding the use of English in China and Hong Kong in the book. The flow of the book seems a little disjointed since it goes from recent past to distant past to recent times and moves between the different situations in Hong Kong and China. Nonetheless, the sociolinguistic situation is described well.

Bolton does a good job of presenting the rich sociolinguistic history of English in Hong Kong and China that may have been overlooked or forgotten. He presents many interesting examples of English as used in China from early contact to present day. He cites numerous written materials to support this history as well as provides a nice description of the people involved in that history. The book also goes into detail about different views towards the use of English in education, commerce, and daily life.

Bolton brings up an excellent discussion about English varieties around the world beyond just China and Hong Kong. That discussion does well to help stimulate thinking about those varieties of English that are newer compared to older, more established varieties. The book digs into the debate about the place of these different varieties of English, whether they are creating a more diverse English world or chipping away at Standard English.
The author gives some good examples of the effects of language contact on languages and people. In particular, early contact between Portuguese and Chinese followed by English and Chinese when early foreign traders visited China are chronicled. Bolton’s analysis also provides some insights into language contact in general, for instance, early resistance to the use of English, how interpreters used English, as well as the vocabulary that developed in English and Chinese due to contact. There is also a good deal of detail though about language contact in the modern era as well, especially in Hong Kong.

Bolton’s detailed description and history of Chinese Pidgin English (CPE) also adds insight into pidgin studies, particularly from a Chinese perspective. The description about the phonology of CPE explains some of the effects of language contact and the resulting pidgin. There is also a description of the changes in CPE as well as the eventual shift towards the use of English over CPE.

Diglossia and code-mixing in Hong Kong are also covered. There are many interesting examples of the use of English alongside Chinese in Hong Kong. There are also many examples of different types of calques, loans, and borrowing from English into Chinese and vice versa.

Further research into the use of English in other countries where Chinese-speaking populations like Malaysia and Singapore would have been enlightening. There is brief mention of English used in those countries, but a deeper analysis of the situation in those countries could provide more with which to compare and observe. He cites a number of articles and books by John Platt, Heidi Weber, and Mian-lian Ho, who cover Chinese English in Southeast Asia but some more detail in the book would have been useful.

**Conclusion**

Bolton expertly delves into the sociolinguistic history of English in Hong Kong and China. His book also takes into consideration many other factors and disciplines such as politics, economics, sociology, and history. He provides many details relating to the use of English in China and Hong Kong. Overall, the book provides an interesting read into the interplay between English and Chinese. There are also many examples of and insights into language contact and all the effects that follow from the meeting of these two very widely spoken languages.