The Hong Kong English Accent:
Variation and Acceptability

Andrew Sewell
Department of English
Lingnan University

Abstract

Most studies of attitudes towards the Hong Kong English accent have concluded that Hong Kong has a strongly exonormative orientation, with no sign of endonormative stabilisation (see, for example, Luk, 2010). This paper contends that these findings are partly a result of a varieties-based approach to Hong Kong English, which tends to neglect the considerable variation in feature use that exists between speakers. As a complementary perspective, this paper outlines a features-based approach which acknowledges this variation. The results of an accent survey involving 12 local accents and 52 local listeners are presented, and the findings are discussed with reference to variational patterns in the use of features. The results indicate that the phonological features of accents are important determinants of listener responses, and suggest that Hong Kong English accents may be acceptable for pedagogical purposes if they do not contain certain salient features. An apparent correspondence between the acceptability and intelligibility characteristics of features is noted and tentatively explained using the concept of salience. The implications of the study's findings for issues such as variety status, the distinction between "variants" and "errors," and pedagogy, are also considered.

Keywords: Hong Kong English, phonological features, accent variation, accent acceptability, accent intelligibility

Introduction

Jasmine Luk's (2010) paper *Differentiating Speech Accents and Pronunciation Errors—Perceptions of TESOL Professionals in Hong Kong* makes a valuable contribution to our understanding of several issues related to the Hong Kong English accent. The paper explores the relationship between language *forms* (in this case, phonological features) and the *attitudes* people hold towards them. In doing so it also raises the vexed issue of the status of Hong Kong English; according to Mollin (2006), the criteria of function, form and attitude are essential considerations in determining the status of a variety. In fact, these areas—variety status, language forms and attitudes—are interconnected, as Ferguson (2009) explains in the context of ELF (English as a Lingua Franca). Variety status is partially dependent on attitudes and is a prerequisite for any codification of language forms. Codification or "norming" of some kind will influence whether these forms are seen as legitimate variants or as errors, and is necessary for consistent teaching and assessment (Ferguson, 2009).

Although both the World Englishes (WE) and ELF paradigms are questioning the relevance of pronunciation norms based on native speaker accents, the findings of Luk (2010) tend to reinforce the conclusion that Hong Kong is still at the

"nativisation" stage of development, in the model of Schneider (2003; see also Deterding, Wong, & Kirkpatrick, 2008). There is a strongly exonormative orientation, and the generally negative attitudes of local professionals do not support the idea of Hong Kong English as an independent variety (Luk, 2010; see also Tsui & Bunton, 2002). Most of the features in Luk's study were perceived to be errors, even though only a minority was felt likely to obstruct intelligibility. This repeats the pattern of almost every similar study of Hong Kong English (see, for example, Candler, 2001; Forde, 1995; Luk, 1998).

There is, however, one aspect of Hong Kong English phonology that has not been covered in detail by previous studies. This is the wide variation in feature use, and thus in accent type, which exists between speakers. In this paper, I will explore the nature of this variation and its importance for the issues of attitudes, variety status and pedagogical matters such as the classification of features as "variants" or "errors." By moving from a perspective based on the concept of *variety* to one based upon *variation*, I will suggest that the oft-repeated conclusion of exonormativity may not in fact be as conclusive as it appears.

The Hong Kong English Accent: Features and Attitudes

Since the pioneering study of Luke and Richards (1982), there have been several descriptive accounts of Hong Kong English phonology (e.g., Hung, 2000; Setter, Wong, & Chan, 2010). These studies share the desire to move away from prescriptivism and describe the local variety "on its own terms" (Hung, 2000, p. 338). However, a disadvantage of this variety-based perspective is that it tends to neglect the issue of variation by focusing on "typical" features and accents. This is perhaps a weakness of the WE paradigm in general. Mahboob and Szenes (2010, p. 580) offer a critique of nation-based naming practices in WE, which lead researchers into describing "discrete linguistic features that are used to contrast one variety with another." The understandable emphasis on legitimation has led to a tendency towards reification, in which "[t]he inherent variability in language … is thus reduced to a proliferation of distinct language 'varieties', each having its own invariant systematicity" (Benson, 2001, p. 20). The strategic use of reification has helped to raise the profile of these varieties, for example *vis-à-vis* "Standard English," but has often come at the cost of neglecting variation *within* them.

Thus the inventory of phonological features given by Hung (2000) is characterised as a "common underlying phonological system" (p. 337), although Hung acknowledges the existence of a cline of variation in Hong Kong English. Similarly, the descriptive study of Setter *et al.* (2010) concentrates on the features of Hong Kong English, but devotes only one paragraph to the issue of variation. Of course, a certain amount of generalisation is required for theorising, and we may consider the concept of "variety," among many other concepts, to be a "convenient fiction" (Seidlhofer, 2006, p. 46). However in accent studies, this fiction may be misleading. The selection of "typical" accent samples often involves ensuring that they contain several of the phonological features listed in descriptive studies. An example is Kopperoinen (2011), in which the guideline for representativeness was that "several features typical of the accent had to occur in the extract" (p. 77). Among studies carried out in Hong Kong, Li (2009) involved pronouncing a sentence "using a few features which are typical of NNSs in Asia" (p. 87). In Luk (2010), phonological

features were also selected from the relevant literature and are described, quite correctly, as being "common" (p. 28).

However, features which are common in terms of their occurrence within a hypothetical system may not be especially common within a speech community (another "convenient fiction," admittedly). The distribution of features across speakers varies according to factors such as the proficiency level or language affiliation, age and speech style of the speaker. Moreover, when certain features are used, they can have dramatic effects on listener perceptions. Schilling-Estes (2002, p. 394) reminds us that "a single occurrence of a highly salient feature can carry strong social connotations." It may be that the sought-after typicality or representativeness of accent samples is precisely what causes listeners or raters to react negatively. A features-based, variationist perspective[1] is thus a necessary complement to the varieties-based approach to accent studies.

The study of Sewell and Chan (2010) described how the consonantal features of Hong Kong English phonology could vary widely in their distribution across speakers. A mini-corpus of spoken Hong Kong English derived from local television programmes (25 speakers, with a total duration of just over 30 minutes) was used to analyse this distribution. The results showed that there was a great deal of inter-speaker variation, lending support to the contention that it is difficult to make generalisations regarding the Hong Kong English accent; some speakers used almost all of the consonantal features studied, while others used few or none. (It should, however, be noted that most of the speakers had fairly high levels of proficiency; the "typical" features of Hong Kong English would probably be more evenly distributed across first-year university students, for example, although this is a matter for empirical research.) A summarised list of the consonantal features analysed in the study is shown below in Table 1. The features are ranked according to the percentage of speakers using them at least once.

Table 1
Consonantal features analysed in Sewell and Chan (2010)

Consonantal feature	Abbreviation	% of speakers using the feature at least once
Conflation of [n] and [l], e.g., line → nine	nl-CONF	8
/r/-substitution, e.g., ring → wing	PHONSUB-R	12
/v/-substitution, e.g., very → *wery	PHONSUB-V	19
TH-fronting, e.g., three → free	TH-FRONT	27
Initial consonant cluster modification, e.g., please → peas	CCM-I	32
TH-stopping, e.g., those → dose	TH-STOP	76
L-vocalisation or deletion, e.g., will → [wiu]	L-VOCAL	80

The study also showed how features tended to cluster together in implicational patterns, so that certain features were almost always accompanied by other features. Implicational patterns can apply to either the presence or the absence of features in a speaker's accent; just as the presence of certain features implies the presence of others, the absence of certain features implies the absence of others. For example, if a speaker used nl-CONF, there was a high probability that the features *below* it in Table 1

would also be present in that speaker's sample. If, on the other hand, a speaker did *not* use a particular feature in Table 1, it was likely that they also did not use any of the features *above* it. The existence of some kind of implicational patterning was suggested by Bolton and Kwok (1990, p. 167), who observed a "clustering" of tokens of Hong Kong English features. Halliday (1978, p. 158) summarises it thus: "not everything goes with everything else … there are regular groupings of features that are recognisable as typical configurations."

Research Perspectives on Variation

How can these variational patterns be explained and conceptualised, so that they may be incorporated into research? A useful starting point is provided by the contributions of World Englishes researchers such as Pakir (1991) and Alsagoff (2007; 2010), both of whom focus on variation in Singapore English. In Pakir's model, variation can be seen as occurring along two clines, a cline of formality and a cline of proficiency. Thus, while high-proficiency speakers may command a range of stylistic subvarieties, which they deploy according to situational factors, low-proficiency speakers may be unable to move beyond a colloquial subvariety. This model of variation resembles that proposed by Bolton and Kwok (1990) for the Hong Kong context, which situates speakers on a cline between "marginal bilingualism" and "ambilingualism" (this approach focuses on the *user*, rather than on variable *use* as in the Singaporean context).

The Cultural Orientation Model (COM) of Alsagoff (2007; 2010) explains user (or intra-speaker) variation as arising from the "local/global" tension in its various manifestations, such as solidarity/international intelligibility and intimacy/distance, as well as informality/formality. Although the COM characterises variation in the Singaporean context as being largely a result of style shifting, Alsagoff (2010, p. 344) also acknowledges that variation or shifting is partly determined by the English proficiency of the speaker. As in Pakir's model, low-proficiency speakers are more limited in their ability to reproduce styles or move along continua of variation. The continua included in the COM model are shown in Table 2 below.

Table 2
Alsagoff's COM model of variation (with Singapore English as an example)

International Singapore English (ISE): globalism	Local Singapore English (LSE): localism
Economic capital	Socio-cultural capital
Authority	Camaraderie
Formality	Informality
Distance	Closeness
Educational attainment	Community membership

Source: Adapted from Chew (2009, p. 142), based on Alsagoff (2007, p. 39)

The COM model may be useful in explaining some aspects of variation in the Hong Kong context, although the sociolinguistic profiles of Singapore and Hong Kong are of course very different. While Table 1 demonstrates the existence of inter-speaker variation in Hong Kong, the existence of intra-speaker variation (or style shifting) awaits empirical investigation. The multiple continua of the COM model could explain, however, how politicians (for example) may combine elements of

"authority" with elements of "community membership" (Chew, 2009, p. 142) by using less salient features of Hong Kong English.

Another useful concept is provided by Benor (2010), who employs the term "ethnolinguistic repertoire" to denote the process by which individuals "actively construct their identities (ethnic and otherwise) by deploying linguistic resources from various sources" (p. 161). The focus on "repertoire" echoes Alsagoff's COM and also reflects a desire to move away from "ethnic-group-level characterisations" (ibid.). The constraints affecting repertoire use are also acknowledged, and include "linguistic and cognitive factors" (p. 173).

Whichever model is used, by thinking in terms of continua of variation and repertoires we can avoid the situation where survey respondents are responding to internalised stereotypes, rather than the accents of real speakers. A features-based approach to accent research focuses on the features that accents actually contain, and considers their variable distribution both between and within speakers.

The Present Study: Variation and Acceptability

In the present study, I examine how the attitudinal reactions of listeners vary according to the phonological features present in accent samples. As the listeners were undergraduate students, another objective was to evaluate the acceptability of the local accent for pedagogical purposes. Authentic accent samples were taken from television programmes broadcast in Hong Kong, and were selected so that they were approximately the same length (around ten seconds) and did not contain grammatical errors (in order to avoid the conflation of phonological and grammatical feature effects). A set of 12 accent samples, with 11 speakers from Hong Kong and one from the United Kingdom, was evaluated by 52 first-year undergraduate students in three intact classes at Lingnan University in Hong Kong. The students were mainly English majors, and 42 of them were female. Details of the speakers and of the sources and contexts of recording are given in the Appendix.

The study was intentionally focused on speakers of a relatively high proficiency level; however, it was not thought that these speakers represented unattainable or unrepresentative examples of Hong Kong English. Samples of actual conversation were chosen in preference to more controlled procedures such as the matched-guise technique (Lambert, 1967), in which trained speakers read standardised passages with predetermined variations. It was felt that such manipulation would create artificiality in the recordings, as well as possibly disturbing the natural patterns of co-occurrence of phonological features. Coetzee-Van Rooy (2009, p. 33) urges that researchers should "continue the struggle to work with authentic data", although this is acknowledged to be time-consuming (Van der Walt 2000, in Rajadurai, 2007, p. 96).

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). These include paralinguistic factors, such as intonation, and extralinguistic factors such as speech rate and tone of voice. Attempts were therefore made to assess the effects of some of these factors, and measurements were made in the areas shown in Table 3 below.

Table 3

Linguistic and paralinguistic factor measurements

Factor type and subtype		Measurement method
Linguistic:	• Lexical complexity	Complexity score derived from number of multisyllabic words and their frequency ranking in the British National Corpus (Leech, Rayson, & Wilson, 2001)
	• Syntactic complexity	Number of clauses per T-unit (see Hunt, 1965)
Paralinguistic:	• Speech rate	Number of words per minute
	• Intonational variation	Pitch span (difference between maximum and minimum pitch within the utterance)

These measurements were included in the preliminary statistical analysis along with measurements of phonological accuracy, which were derived from the questionnaires completed by the students.

Questionnaire Design

In Part 1 of the questionnaire, 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, especially in the sense of acceptability for pedagogical purposes. Item E assessed this directly by asking the students whether they thought the accent was appropriate for English teaching purposes in Hong Kong (for example, in the form of listening materials). The other five items addressed the dimensions of correctness, acceptability, pleasantness and familiarity, as in the questionnaire used by Jenkins (2007). 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. Part 1 of the questionnaire survey form is shown below in Figure 1.

Part 1: listen to each speaker and put a tick in one box for each of the questions a-f.

Speaker 1

		Agree strongly					Disagree strongly
a	The speaker sounds like a Hong Kong person.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
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 in HK.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
f	This speaker has a high level of education and / or a high status job.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Figure 1. Part 1 of the survey form

In Part 2 of the questionnaire, students were asked to mark the features that affected their Part 1 ratings. The procedure was as follows: after hearing the samples once and giving their global impressions in Part 1, they heard the samples again with transcripts in front of them 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 the 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"—this issue is dealt with later). The students had recently completed a basic course in English phonetics and phonology, which provided them with some of the requisite metalanguage. Part 2 of the survey form is shown below in Figure 2.

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, 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:

<u>s</u>upermarket
C

NB: Please do not mark more than <u>THREE</u> features per speaker. Decide which features were <u>most</u> 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.

<u>Speaker 1</u>

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:

Figure 2. Part 2 of the survey form

Data Analysis

Statistical analysis of the questionnaire data was conducted using SPSS (version 11.5). The scores for item A, regarding perceived accent strength, were found to be negatively correlated with the scores for the other five items. As perceived accent strength was not thought to be part of acceptability, and because Part 2 of the questionnaire provided more detail about the types and effects of phonological features, it was removed from the emerging construct of acceptability. The remaining five items (B to F) showed an internal consistency measurement (Cronbach's alpha) of 0.8486, suggesting that they were measuring the same underlying attribute or construct. An average measure of the five items ("overall acceptability") was used in the subsequent data analyses. As item E (pedagogical acceptability) was strongly correlated with the other four items, it was not used separately in these analyses.

The first stage of the data analysis was to compare the effects of the phonological features (or "errors") marked in Part 2 with the effects of the linguistic and paralinguistic factors listed in Table 3, to determine their relative contribution to variations in the acceptability scores. A regression analysis showed that among the measured factors, only phonological error (i.e., the number of errors marked by the students) exerted a significant effect. It explained 23.9% of the variation in the ratings (a "modest" explanatory model, according to Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007, p. 538). The major caveat with such analyses is that significance does not necessarily

mean causation, as other unmeasured variables may also play a role. In this study, for example, there was a lack of detailed attention to suprasegmental features.

The second stage of analysis involved comparing the effects of the different types of error. The errors first had to be coded and allocated to categories. A difficulty here was that few students marked intonation errors, and insufficient metalanguage prevented them from specifying the nature of the error. The phonological features entered into the analysis were thus mainly segmental (vowel and consonant) features, with a few connected speech or word stress markings. Student identifications of errors were confirmed or disconfirmed by repeated listening using the WASP program (part of the Speech Filing System developed by the Department of Phonetics and Linguistics at University College, London and available for download at http://www.phon.ucl.ac.uk/resource/sfs/).   There was a grand total of 493 identified and confirmed errors; these were initially allocated to ten error categories, as shown below in Figure 3. Table 4 explains the error categories and their subdivisions.
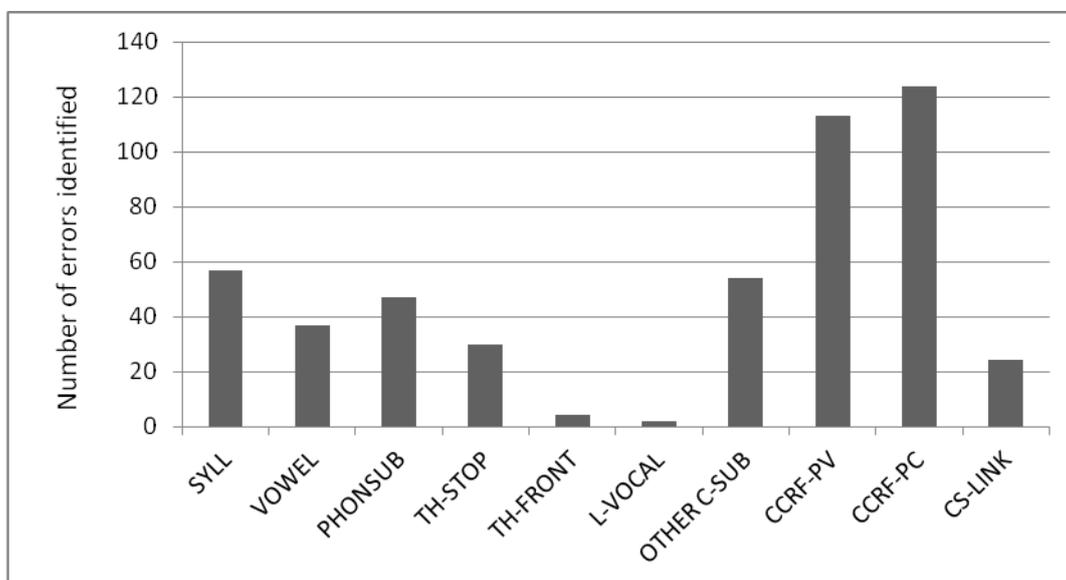
Figure 3. Distribution of student-identified errors across categories

Table 4

Explanation of the error categories used in the study

Category code	Description of category and subcategories	Example (relevant part of word or phrase underlined)
SYLL	Alterations to syllable structure, usually a result of excessive vowel reduction linked to rapid speech	*political* [pʰˈlɪtək]] (absorbed vowel in 1st syll.)
VOWEL	Vowel modifications (marked "V") a) VOWEL SUB: vowel substitutions b) FULL VOWEL: use of a full vowel (non-reduction) in unstressed syllables	*maintain* [mɛnˈteɪn] (vowel shortening in 1st syll.) *production* [pɹoʊˈdʌkʃn̩] (full vowel in 1st syll.)
PHONSUB	Consonantal (phonemic) substitutions, probably transfer-related a) PHONSUB-V: /v/ substituted by [w][2] b) PHONSUB-R: /r/ substituted by [w][2]	*advantage* *reason*
TH-STOP	Substitution of /ð/ with [d]	*that*
TH-FRONT	Substitution of /θ/ with [f]	*forthcoming*
L-VOCAL	The vocalisation or deletion of postvocalic /l/	*people*
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	*cards, aims* *have, because* *built* (pronounced as [d]), *department* (marked as sounding like [b]), *department* (glottalised) *continued, have*
CCRF	Final consonant cluster reduction a) CCRF-PV: in prevocalic or prepausal position b) CCRF-PC: in preconsonantal position	*relaxed attitudes, privileged as) found virtually, suggests the*
CS-LINK	Linking phenomena in connected speech	*by it* (linked with "ɹ" rather than [j] glide)

The relative importance of phonological errors having been established, the next stage was to compare the effects of the error categories listed in Table 4. A second regression analysis showed that the twelve categories and subcategories explained 20.3% of the total variation in the acceptability ratings. Five of the error categories were significant at the $p < 0.001$ level: SYLL, CCRF-PV, PHONSUB-V, VOWELSUB and OTHER C-SUB. The other seven categories did not exert significant effects, but it must be noted that some features (for example, TH-FRONT and PHONSUB-R) either had few possible contexts of occurrence or simply did not occur very often, thus reducing the chance of achieving significance. The accuracy of student error identification was generally very high, and there were few missed identifications. Errors were not seen as being equal in severity; some features were frequently noted (for example, CCRF-PC), yet did not achieve statistical significance in overall terms. The position adopted by this study is that statistical significance reflected the combined effects of factors such as frequency of occurrence, noticeability of the error, and perceived severity of the error. Significant errors or features can thus be interpreted as those that had overall evaluative significance for the listeners in the study. A summary of the significant and non-significant categories is given in Table 5 below.

Table 5
Significant and non-significant feature categories

Significant features*		Non-significant features	
Feature	*Standardised beta coefficient*	*Feature*	*Standardised beta coefficient*
SYLL	- 0.219	CCRF-PC	- 0.130
CCRF-PV	- 0.218	TH-S	- 0.101
PHONSUB-V	- 0.195	TH-F	- 0.087
VOWEL SUB	- 0.188	PHONSUB-R	- 0.055
OTHER C-SUB	- 0.147	FULL VOWEL	- 0.052
		CS-LINK	0.035
		L-VOCAL	- 0.006

* $p < 0.001$

Discussion

In this study, the highest overall acceptability rating was achieved by a Hong Kong speaker with several North American accent features, and the UK native speaker came second. At first glance this might be taken as further confirmation of the exonormative preferences of Hong Kong students, but there is more to consider. It was not merely the case that sounding more "nativelike" resulted in a higher acceptability rating. For example, Speaker 8 achieved the third-highest acceptability rating while being described by a student as "a typical HKer [Hongkonger]" who "doesn't sound like an NS." At this point, taking a features-based approach enables discussion to proceed to another level.

A noteworthy shared characteristic of the five significant error categories in Table 5 is that they would all be expected to reduce international intelligibility, using Jenkins' (2000) Lingua Franca Core (LFC) research as a guide. While the SYLL category of "excessive vowel reduction" was developed for the present study and is not mentioned in the LFC, student comments often referred to its effects on intelligibility (one student appended the comment "the word *political* is very unclear" to Speaker 6's transcript). The significance of CCRF-PV (prevocalic consonant cluster reduction) is echoed by the LFC stipulation that final clusters should be simplified "only according to L1 rules of elision" (Jenkins, 2000, p. 159). CCRF-PC or preconsonantal cluster reduction did not have significant effects, and this is the most prevalent type in native-speaker varieties (Deterding, 2010, p. 373). The significance of PHONSUB-V and OTHER C-SUB reflects the general importance of the consonantal inventory for intelligibility (Jenkins, 2000, p. 159).

In Jenkins (2000) it is suggested, on the basis of research evidence, that vowel length (or quantity) modifications cause more international intelligibility problems than vowel quality modifications. Two of the three occurrences of VOWELSUB errors actually did involve length modifications (e.g., vowel shortening in the first syllable of *maintain*). This feature also received the second highest "error" rating in Luk's study (2010, p. 30). The quantity/quality distinction is somewhat problematic (see Schneider, 2004, p. 1128), but the significance of the VOWELSUB category supports the general case for the importance of vowel errors. However, the non-reduction of full vowels in unstressed syllables (FULL VOWEL, e.g., pronouncing *production* as [pɹoʊˈdʌkʃn̩]) did not significantly reduce acceptability. This would be

seen as a non-core feature in the LFC, and is often claimed to be a feature that actually serves to *increase* intelligibility (see Deterding, 2010).

The correspondence between intelligibility and acceptability is also visible in the study of Luk (2010). Features with a high OI (obstruction to intelligibility) value were also generally given a high SS (social stigmatisation) value by the judges; in fact, the Pearson correlation coefficient between OI and SS values in Table 4 of Luk's study (2010, p. 32) is both strong and significant (r = 0.799; $p < 0.001$, 2-tailed). What is the reason for this apparent correspondence between intelligibility and acceptability? In the present study it could be explained as an artifact of the questionnaire design, given that one of the questionnaire items (item C) asked whether the speaker was easy to understand. However a more likely explanation is that intelligibility and acceptability are both partly linked to linguistic principles, such as that of salience. Kerswill and Williams (2002, p. 105) identify several criteria for "salience" in the literature, among them being frequency (high frequency items are salient; see Cheshire, 1996) and prominence (features in prosodically prominent positions are salient). Prosodic prominence is greater in initial position (Cabré & Prieto, 2006, p. 225) and in stressed syllables (Goldsmith, 1996, p. 4). Kerswill and Williams (2002, p. 91) cite Trudgill (1986) as supporting the position that degree of phonetic difference and involvement in phonological contrast are at the core of the "salience notion."

Adopting three components of salience (frequency, prosodic prominence, and participation in phonological contrast) for the purposes of this study, it appears that the significant or low-acceptability HKE features have a higher salience profile. For example, VOWELSUB is more salient than FULL VOWEL because it occurs in stressed syllables, increasing its prosodic prominence. It can also generate phonological contrast, as between *fill* and *feel*, whereas FULL VOWEL cannot. Certain phonemic substitutions such as the substitution of [w] for /v/ or /r/ are also likely to be perceptually salient: possible contexts for their use occur quite frequently, they can occur in stressed syllables, and they are capable of creating phonological contrast (as between *ring* and *wing*, for example). Non-significant substitutions, such as the substitution of [d] for /ð/ (TH-STOP) are on the other hand relatively less salient—although /ð/ occurs frequently, TH-STOP affects mainly unstressed syllables (e.g., in *the*, assuming that the speaker makes distinctions between stressed and unstressed syllables), and does not play a significant role in maintaining contrast (there are few minimal pairs involving /ð/ and /d/).

Naturally, one must be aware of the dangers of circularity that are inherent in functional explanations; there is no direct evidence of the effects of salience. In addition, it would be simplistic to assume that there is a direct causal relationship between feature use and acceptability. A more likely interpretation is that the features are indexical of overarching linguistic or non-linguistic attributes (such as language proficiency or authority, for example), and that it is perceptions of these qualities that are the underlying determinant of the ratings. What I am arguing for here, however, is the importance of features or feature combinations as important determinants of listener responses, and the possibility of explaining feature use as being due to a combination of various linguistic and non-linguistic factors (as suggested by the COM model and the concept of ethnolinguistic repertoire outlined earlier).

Regardless of the possible link between intelligibility and acceptability, it is worth pointing out that survey respondents frequently react negatively to intelligibility-reducing features, whether or not they have explicit knowledge of such phenomena. In the list of segmental features provided by Luk (2010, p. 30), the majority of the features would in fact be expected to reduce intelligibility, according to the available research evidence (e.g., Jenkins, 2000). In other words, the respondents were correct in diagnosing them as "errors," if we adopt a provisional definition of "error" as being a feature that has been shown to reduce intelligibility. Efforts on the part of teachers and learners to remove these features need not be seen as "efforts to conform to the exonormative models" (Luk, 2010, p. 37), but rather as the understandable desire to achieve communicative range and clarity. Of course, this involves the assumption that intelligibility in intra-regional and international terms is always desirable, but it would appear to be a desirable part of a "repertoire" for most speakers.

To summarise the findings of the study, certain salient phonological features exerted a significant effect on acceptability ratings. These effects were clearly visible when the 12 speakers were ranked according to their ratings; the speakers in the upper quartile did not use any of the significant features in Table 5, while the speakers in the lower quartile used at least one. It was not necessarily the case that highly-ranked speakers were thought to sound nativelike, as mentioned in the case of Speaker 8. The features-based approach allows a more detailed picture of accent acceptability to appear.

Limitations of the Study

The main limitations of the study would seem to be as follows. As mentioned above, a disadvantage of using authentic speech samples is that some features simply do not occur very often. The non-significance of PHONSUB-R in this study is somewhat surprising, because of its salience, and is probably due to its infrequent occurrence in the samples. Although one could argue that a low frequency of occurrence is likely to reduce the salience or noticeability of the feature, and thus its effects on acceptability, further research with a wider range of features is necessary. In addition, the present study focuses mainly on segmental features, and further research into suprasegmental features is needed.

Although the analyses in this study suggest a link between certain features and acceptability, they obscure the fact that there may be considerable variation between speakers in terms of how they use the features. TH-STOP is a case in point: while a majority of the speakers studied used this feature at least once (see Table 1), none of them used it categorically, in all possible contexts. Thus although TH-STOP does not appear to significantly reduce acceptability, according to the present study, this may depend on how it is used. A speaker who uses [d] for /ð/ in all contexts may be rated differently. A related issue is the fact that features tend to co-occur, as explained earlier in this paper, and perceptions of individual features may be subject to some kind of halo effect according to how speakers use them.

Finally, as the study focused on listeners with a relatively high proficiency level (perhaps approaching Alptekin's (2002) characterisation of the "successful bilingual"), there is scope to extend research to groups with lower proficiency levels. The effects

of age and gender should also be considered. When selecting accent samples, a wider range of speech styles and genres could also be included, to explore contextual effects on acceptability.

Conclusions and Implications

In the introduction to this article I mentioned several interconnected issues: variety status, language forms and the error/feature distinction, and pedagogy. The implications of this study for these areas will thus be considered together. While earlier studies in Hong Kong have emphasised listeners' exonormative orientations, it appears that students find high-proficiency local accents—otherwise described as those which do not contain salient local features—to be acceptable for pedagogical purposes. This suggests that there are subvarieties of the local accent which are positively evaluated, and this in turn may be an indication of endonormative stabilisation (although perhaps not precisely along the lines envisaged by Schneider, 2003). At the level of accent, there should be no doubt that Hong Kong English exists.

Some may argue that the highly-evaluated samples were in fact "nativelike," and that this implies exonormative rather than endonormative orientations. Ferguson (2009, p. 119) notes the desirability of avoiding "implicit recourse to some native or nativelike benchmark" when delineating clines of proficiency in an era of international communication. However a consideration of continua of variation, and of the intelligibility characteristics of features, supports the viewpoint that an endonormative standard for English pronunciation in Hong Kong is unlikely to have salient segmental features (a conclusion also reached by Luk, 2010, which emphasises the likely role of suprasegmental features such as rhythm).

It is worth noting that accents do not have to be markedly "local" in terms of features in order to signal local identity (Joseph, 2004, p. 144). Along with other dichotomies such as native/non-native speaker, the endonormative/exonormative distinction starts to break down once we appreciate that "every horizontal space (e.g., a neighbourhood, a region or a country) is also a vertical space, in which all sorts of socially, culturally and politically salient distinctions occur" (Blommaert, 2010, p. 5). Globalisation processes foster heterogeneity; as a result, we may find that high-proficiency speakers from different countries show more similarities with each other than they do with low-proficiency speakers from their own country or region.

Turning to the issue of pedagogy, Bolton and Kwok (1990, p. 170) conclude that it would be "downright dangerous" to make itemised lists of phonological features for teaching purposes. However, there is a case for suggesting that features such as TH stopping, L-vocalisation and some kinds of final consonant cluster simplification should not be penalised in language testing because they do not affect international intelligibility (Jenkins, 2000), and occur widely even in the speech of high-proficiency users (Sewell & Chan, 2010). In summary, Joseph (2004, p. 161) makes the valid point that it is:

> only if and when teachers come to recognize that the "errors" in Hong Kong students' English (at least the regularly occurring ones) are precisely the points at which a distinctive Hong Kong identity is expressed in the

language, will a genuine Hong Kong identity begin to emerge, and be taken as a version of Standard English rather than as a departure from it.

The "regularly occurring" features mentioned above are also unlikely to affect either local acceptability, as seen in the present study, or international intelligibility.

The above recommendations are not particularly radical, especially as many examiners will tend not to notice these features (as discussed in the previous section, they are less salient). It is worth observing, however, that certain non-standard features may sound "odd" to some listeners, while not reducing intelligibility (or local acceptability, according to this study). A case in point is the use of full instead of reduced vowels, as in *confuse* being pronounced [kɒnˈfjuːz] instead of [kənˈfjuːz]. I would tend to agree with Deterding (2010) that this feature is likely to increase, rather than decrease, intelligibility—especially as I myself recently misheard the word *restroom* as *restaurant* when pronounced by an American student as [ˈɹesɹm̩], with a reduced (or absorbed) vowel in the second syllable. The avoidance of vowel reduction should also not be penalised by examiners, although the total avoidance of reduction is likely to affect speech rate (see Dauer, 2005, p. 548).

Considerations of identity are also relevant here. It may be the case that rather than wishing to emphasise a local identity in English communication, users may prefer flexibility and the ability to achieve a "neutral" or unmarked identity. The ideal may be a kind of "negative capability" where speakers do not wish to sound like native speakers, but also wish to avoid sounding too local in some situations. As suggested by the COM model of variation, proficient speakers may "sample" features from different repertoires in order to signal complex identities. If we attempt to codify features of local varieties that are not widely accepted, perhaps because they index dispreferred identities or reduce speakers' ability to achieve "mobility potential" (Blommaert, 2010), the codifications themselves will fall into disrepute.

We are thus left with the dilemma of needing to legitimise some local variants, while avoiding the pitfalls of inappropriate or premature codification (see also Dewey, 2007, p. 348, as cited in Ferguson, 2009, p. 129). The pedagogical manifestation of this dilemma is the need to prepare our students for the real world, while avoiding the uncritical reproduction of outmoded and inappropriate norms. The temptation to supplant these with alternative norms may be equally problematic, and this leaves one wondering whether norms themselves are the problem; an awareness of variation, and a concentration on "repertoire expansion" rather than "error eradication" (Ferguson 2009, p. 130) may be preferable as pedagogical aims, especially at higher levels of proficiency. Nevertheless, coherent teaching and assessment does require norms of some kind, whether these are seen as "models" for formative imitation or "goals" for summative assessment.

The dilemma can be better understood by using the concepts of agency and structure. Luk (2010) usefully invokes Foucault's (1988) concept of "technologies of the self" to describe the process in which individuals align themselves with prevailing systems of power and their associated values. The concept thus illustrates the connection between individual identity formation (agency), and supra-individual institutions such as the educational system (structure). However whatever conceptual framework we employ—for example, sociocultural theory (Lantolf, 2004) or

Bourdieu's (1990) concept of habitus—we need to characterise the relationship between agentive acts, or "acts of identity," to make use of LePage and Tabouret-Keller's (1985) term, and the structures within which they are performed.

While the imposition of outmoded norms by educational structures can be seen as an example of symbolic domination, and while there is a need to critically evaluate these norms—as in the ongoing "feature/error" controversy—it is also important to avoid the kind of "scholarly relativism" which Bourdieu (1991, p. 53) himself warns against. The adoption of certain local variants as norms may lead to the codification of unintelligibility, or act as a cover for those who are unable to master the language (Alsagoff, 2007, as cited in Chew, 2009). It would be a pity if the WE and ELF messages were to be misinterpreted as meaning "accent does not matter," as Kopperoinen (2011, p. 91) appears to suggest: "[s]tudents could also be told explicitly that their own accents are acceptable." As the present study has shown, acceptability and intelligibility depend on the features that accents contain.

From the point of view of agency, it is only by fostering an appropriate critical awareness among learners that they will be able to deal with the impositions of structure, while also being more able to challenge it—for example, as may occur when students become teachers or administrators. At the practical level of teaching English pronunciation, this may involve making students aware of accent differences, so that they move away from ill-informed stereotypes (see Luk, 2010, in the case of Australian English) and understand the "facts of variation." For many learners, one of the most important of these is: English can be spoken with a Hong Kong accent and be both internationally intelligible and locally acceptable.

Notes
1. By "features-based," I am referring to the actual phonetic and phonological features used by speakers, and not to the distinctive features (e.g., CORONAL and SONORANT) of phonological theory. A features-based approach could, in principle, be extended to grammar and lexis; see Schaetzel, Lim and Low (2010) for an account of this with regard to Singapore English.
2. I am aware that the actual phonetic quality of both of these substitutions may be closer to that of a labiodental approximant, rather than the labial-velar approximant [w] (my thanks to Dr. Martin Weisser for pointing this out to me). However, I have used the [w] symbol here, partly in deference to previous Hong Kong English studies (including that of Luk, 2010, in this journal), and partly because it is perceived as being a "w"-like substitution by many Hong Kong English users.

References

Alptekin, C. (2002). Towards intercultural communicative competence in ELT. *ELT Journal*, *56*(1), 57–64.

Alsagoff, L. (2007). Singlish: Negotiating culture, capital and identity. In V. Vaish, S. Gopinathan & Y. B. Liu (Eds.), *Language, capital, culture: Critical studies of language and education in Singapore* (pp. 25–46). Rotterdam: Sense Publications.

Alsagoff, L. (2010). English in Singapore: Culture, capital and identity in linguistic variation. *World Englishes*, *29*(3), 336–348.

Benor, S. (2010). Ethnolinguistic repertoire: Shifting the analytic focus in language and ethnicity. *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, *14*(2), 159–183.

Benson, P. (2001). *Ethnocentrism and the English dictionary*. London and New York: Routledge.

Blommaert, J. (2010). *The sociolinguistics of globalization.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Bolton, K., & Kwok, H. (1990). The dynamics of the Hong Kong accent: Social identity and sociolinguistic description. *Journal of Asian Pacific Communication*, *1*(1), 147–172.

Bourdieu, P. (1990). *The logic of practice*. Cambridge: Polity.

Bourdieu, P. (1991). *Language and symbolic power*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Cabré, T., & Prieto, P. (2006). Exceptional hiatuses in Spanish. In F. Martínez-Gil & S. Colina (Eds.), *Optimality-theoretic studies in Spanish phonology* (pp.205–239). Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins.

Canagarajah, S. (1999). *Resisting linguistic imperialism in English teaching.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Candler, R. (2001). *An investigation into Hong Kong non-native speakers' recognition of and attitudes towards different accents of English*. Unpublished MA dissertation. Hong Kong: University of Hong Kong.

Cheshire, J. (1996). Syntactic variation and the concept of prominence. In J. Klemola, M. Kytö & M. Rissanen (Eds.), *Speech past and present: Studies in English dialectology in memory of Ossi Ihalainen* (pp. 1–17). Frankfurt: Peter Lang.

Chew, P. G.-L. (2009). *Emergent lingua francas and world orders.* London: Routledge.

Coetzee-Van Rooy, S. (2009). Intelligibility and perceptions of English proficiency. *World Englishes*, *28*(1), 15–34.

Cohen, L., Manion, L., & Morrison, K. (2007). *Research methods in education*. London: Routledge.

Dauer, R. M. (2005). The Lingua Franca Core: A new model for pronunciation instruction? *TESOL Quarterly*, *39*(3), 543–550.

Deterding, D. (2010). Norms for pronunciation in Southeast Asia. *World Englishes*, *29*(3), 364–377.

Deterding, D., Wong, J., & Kirkpatrick, A. (2008). The pronunciation of Hong Kong English. *English World-wide*, *29*(2), 148–175.

Ferguson, G. (2009). Issues in researching English as a Lingua Franca: A conceptual inquiry. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics*, *19*(2), 117–135.

Forde, K. (1995). A study of learner attitudes towards accents of English. *Hong Kong Polytechnic University Working Papers in ELT and Applied Linguistics*, *1*, 59–76.

Foucault, M. (1988). Technologies of the self. In L. H. Martin, H. Gutman & P. H. Hutton (Eds.), *Technologies of the self* (pp. 16–49). Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press.

Goldsmith, J. (1996). Phonological theory. In J. Goldsmith (Ed.), *The handbook of phonological theory* (pp. 1–23). Oxford: Blackwell.

Halliday, M. A. K. (1978). *Language as social semiotic: The social interpretation of language and meaning.* London: Edward Arnold.

Hung, T. T. N. (2000). Towards a phonology of Hong Kong English. *World Englishes*, *19*(3), 337–356.

Hunt, K. W. (1965). *Grammatical structures written at three grade levels*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.

Jenkins, J. (2000). *The phonology of English as an international language*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Jenkins, J. (2007). *English as a Lingua Franca: Attitude and identity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Joseph, J. (2004). *Language and identity*. Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Kerswill, P., & Williams, A. (2002). 'Salience' as an explanatory factor in language change. In M. Jones & E. Esch (Eds.), *Language change: The interplay of internal, external and extra-linguistic factors* (pp. 81–110). Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.

Kopperoinen, A. (2011) Accents of English as a lingua franca: A study of Finnish textbooks. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics*, *21*(1), 71–93.

Lambert, W. (1967). The social psychology of bilingualism. *Journal of Social Issues*, *23*, 91–109.

Lantolf, J. P. (2004). Introducing sociocultural theory. In J. Lantolf (Ed.), *Sociocultural theory and second language learning* (pp. 1–26). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Leech, G. N., Rayson, P., & Wilson, A. (2001). *Word frequencies in written and spoken English: Based on the British National Corpus*. Harlow: Longman.

LePage, R., & Tabouret-Keller, A. (1985). *Acts of identity*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press.

Li, D. C. S. (2009). Researching non-native speakers' views toward intelligibility and identity. In F. Sharifian (Ed.), *English as an international language: Perspectives and pedagogical issues* (pp. 81–118). Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters.

Luk, J. (1998). Hong Kong students' awareness of and reactions to accent differences. *Multilingua*, *17*, 93–106.

Luk, J. (2010). Differentiating speech accents and pronunciation errors—Perceptions of TESOL professionals in Hong Kong. *Hong Kong Journal of Applied Linguistics*, *12*(2), 25–44.

Luke, K. K., & Richards, J. C. (1982). English in Hong Kong: Functions and status. *English World-Wide*, *3*, 47–63.

Mahboob, A., & Szenes, E. (2010). Construing meaning in World Englishes. In A. Kirkpatrick (Ed.), *The Routledge handbook of World Englishes* (pp. 580–598). Abingdon, UK: Routledge.

Mollin, S. (2006). *Euro-English: Assessing variety status*. Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag.

Pakir, A. (1991). The range and depth of English-knowing bilinguals in Singapore. *World Englishes*, *10*(2), 167–179.

Pennycook, A. (2001). *Critical applied linguistics: A critical introduction*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Rajadurai, J. (2007). Intelligibility studies: A consideration of empirical and ideological issues. *World Englishes*, *26*(1), 87–98.

Schaetzel, K., Lim, B. S., & Low, E. L. (2010). A features-based approach for teaching Singapore English. *World Englishes*, *29*(3), 420–430.

Schilling-Estes, N. (2002). Investigating stylistic variation. In J. K. Chambers, P. Trudgill & N. Schilling-Estes (Eds.), *The handbook of language variation and change* (pp. 375–401). Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

Schneider, E. (2003). The dynamics of new Englishes: From identity construction to dialect birth. *Language*, *79*(2), 233–281.

Schneider, E. (2004). Global synopsis: Phonetic and phonological variation in English world-wide. In E. Schneider, B. Burridge, B. Kortmann, R. Mesthrie & C. Upton (Eds.), *A handbook of varieties of English, Vol. 1: Phonology* (pp. 1111–1137). Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.

Seidlhofer, B. (2006). English as a Lingua Franca in the expanding circle: What it isn't. In R. Rubdy & M. Saraceni (Eds.), *English in the world: Global rules, global roles* (pp. 40–50). London and New York: Continuum.

Setter, J., Wong, C. S. P., & Chan, B. H. S. (2010). *Hong Kong English.* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Sewell, A., & Chan, J. (2010). Patterns of variation in the consonantal phonology of Hong Kong English. *English World-wide*, *31*(2), 138–161.

Trudgill, P. (1986). *Dialects in contact.* Oxford: Blackwell.

Tsui, A. M., & Bunton, D. (2002). The discourse and attitudes of English language teachers in Hong Kong. In K. Bolton (Ed.), *Hong Kong English: Autonomy and creativity* (pp. 57–78). Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.

Van der Walt, C. (2000). The international comprehensibility of varieties of South African English. *World Englishes*, *19*(2), 139–153.

Appendix   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.