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Frontmatter
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Chinese Englishes

A Sociolinguistic History

This book explores the history of the English language in China from the arrival of the first English-speaking traders in the early seventeenth century to the present. Kingsley Bolton brings together and examines a substantial body of historical, linguistic and sociolinguistic research on the description and analysis of English in Hong Kong and China. He uses early wordlists, satirical cartoons and data from journals and memoirs, as well as more conventional sources, to uncover the forgotten history of English in China and to show how contemporary Hong Kong English has its historical roots in Chinese pidgin English. The book also considers the varying status of English in mainland China over time, and recent developments since 1997. With its interdisciplinary perspective, the book will appeal not only to linguists, but to all those working in the fields of Asian studies and English studies, including those concerned with cultural and literary studies.

KINGSLEY BOLTON is an Associate Professor in the Department of English at the University of Hong Kong, where he lectures on sociolinguistics and World Englishes. He has published a number of books and articles on sociolinguistics, Asian Englishes, Hong Kong English, Chinese pidgin English and Chinese secret societies. From September 2003, he will be Professor in the Department of English at Stockholm University.

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Frontmatter
More information

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More information

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Kingsley Bolton
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For my parents, Enid Vilna Elias (1915–1991) and
Douglas Ronald Bolton (1916–2002)

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Kingsley Bolton
Frontmatter
More information

Contents

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978-0-521-03001-4 - Chinese Englishes: A Sociolinguistic History
Kingsley Bolton
Frontmatter
More information

Maps

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Frontmatter
More information

Illustrations

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Frontmatter
More information

Tables

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Kingsley Bolton
Frontmatter
More information

Preface

This book sets out to bring together and make sense of a substantial body of historical, linguistic and sociolinguistic research on the description and analysis of English in Hong Kong and China. My starting point was my own disciplinary background in sociolinguistics, a subject broadly defined as 'the study of language and society'. However, as my research progressed, I found it necessary to consider other approaches to the subject as well. I have therefore attempted to draw broadly, and I hope appropriately, from a range of other disciplines, including anthropology, history and sociology.

On 1 July 1997, British colonial Hong Kong ceased to exist. Hong Kong island, the Kowloon peninsula and the New Territories hinterland, together comprising an area of some 400 square miles with a population of some 6.5 million, was reunited politically with the People's Republic of China (PRC), with 1.3 billion citizens spread over almost 3,700,000 square miles, and the largest population of any nation-state in the world. In this process, a much-vaunted enclave of international capitalism was being placed under the control of what was, notionally at least, the largest surviving communist regime in the world. Hong Kong was now reinvented as the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR), whose future would be ensured by a series of diplomatic agreements guaranteeing the enclave a high degree of autonomy, and the continuation of its capitalist system.

As an educator and academic researcher who witnessed many of the events (albeit at varying degrees of distance) which determined Hong Kong's future in the period of late colonial rule, part of my motivation for carrying out this research was to explain many of the language-related issues in the territory, both to my students and myself. In time, this led into a deepening engagement with the linguistic history of both Hong Kong and China. A major theme which I hope emerges from this volume is that English in China has a long and barely remembered history, which can be traced back to the beginnings of British maritime trade with Canton (Guangzhou) and Macao. This early contact was the beginning of a long process of cultural, political and linguistic interaction that would connect in turn with such later developments as the opium trade at Canton,

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Frontmatter
More information

the 'semi-colonialism' of nineteenth-century treaty-port China, the fall of the Qing (Ch'ing) dynasty and the creation of modern China.

It is this history that I have attempted to recover, and come to terms with, in this study, while siting it in the wider context of the study of Asian Englishes. Chapter 1 attempts to provide a critical overview of current approaches to research within the field of Asian Englishes, 'new Englishes' and World Englishes, including English studies, corpus linguistics, the sociology of language, applied linguistics, pidgin and creole studies, lexicography and critical linguistics. I also assess the relevance of such perspectives to the discussion of English in Hong Kong and China, partly in order to clear the way for the description and analysis which follows in the succeeding chapters.

Chapter 2 deals with the sociolinguistic description of English and other languages in Hong Kong, where the discussion of language issues is grounded in the sociopolitical detail of the final years of British colonialism (from approximately 1980 until 1997, the year of the Hong Kong 'handover'). The earlier sections of the chapter deal with the sociopolitical history of Hong Kong in these years, describing the development of an immigrant refugee society, dramatic population growth and the creation of an Asian miracle economy. It is also the story of a distinct Hong Kong identity, reflected in the cosmopolitan and hybrid cultures of film, television, music, and print media. Above all, perhaps, it is a story of unremitting social and political change. The later sections of the chapter deal with the language background to Hong Kong society, from a historical as well as a contemporary perspective, in order to explain the particular dynamics of Hong Kong as a multilingual society.

Chapter 3 was researched and written in order to understand (what I came to think of as) the 'forgotten past' of English in southern China. This in turn involved me in the 'archaeology' of English, a research method for which I would now claim an important role in investigating the history of World Englishes. Essentially, the core components of this method are historical and textual: historical in the sense that the method requires an examination of extant historical research on western trade and settlement in China (as well as primary historical sources where available), and textual in that many of the source materials provided instantiations of earlier written, and sometimes spoken, forms of the language. More specifically, many of the texts I studied were the records of early maritime trading voyages to China, accounts of Canton trade, and the diaries and other writings of China missionaries and colonial officials. I was also able to uncover a substantial number of English and American glossaries of 'pidgin' and 'China Coast' English from nineteenth- and early twentieth-century sources, which were useful not only in revealing processes of language change, but also in shedding light on the discourses of Chinese pidgin English. In addition, I gained access to a number of Chinese-authored glossaries and dictionaries of English from the same period, which in turn proved to be invaluable sources of historically relevant sociolinguistic information. All of which has helped me uncover a history of English in South China which begins in the early seventeenth century,

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Kingsley Bolton
Frontmatter
More information

continues with the 'Canton jargon' of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and reaches to the 'Hong Kong English' of the present.

Chapter 4 returns to the present day with a discussion of the status, functions and features of English in the contemporary HKSAR. This chapter surveys the sociolinguistic background to the recognition of Hong Kong English, and the arguments in favour of a 'paradigm shift' to open up more creative possibilities for the language. After a discussion of the criteria necessary to the recognition of Hong Kong English, I also consider the ideologies of English in Hong Kong and the weight of the local complaint tradition in the discussion of language issues. The later sections of the chapter discuss the variety's creativity in literary as well as less formal contexts. I argue that the case for the recognition of Hong Kong English rests not only on the recognition of features of language, but also on the acceptance of a new space, or spaces, for the discourses associated with English in Hong Kong.

In the final chapter, chapter 5, I endeavour to connect the history of English in Hong Kong and southern China with that of the People's Republic of China. Here I provide a survey of English-language teaching in the PRC from the late Qing period to the present. From this it is evident that mainland China has its own history of Englishes to tell, from the self-strengthening era of the late Qing, through the Christian colleges of Republican China and the turbulent educational history of the post-1949 era, to the sometimes unexpected present of today. At a time when the PRC is moving towards full membership of the World Trade Organisation and the further opening of trade and other contacts with the world (including the 2008 Beijing Olympics), much more might be said about the possible futures of Chinese Englishes. That however would be the subject of another study, one which would deal with the contemporary and unfolding story of the continuing 'interface' between the world's largest two language cultures, both in China and throughout diasporic Chinese communities worldwide.[1] For now, it may be enough to begin to recover the past, a past with a history of almost 370 years of Chinese–English linguistic contact.

[1] I am grateful to Professor Tom McArthur for suggesting the use of the term 'Chinese–English interface' to refer to the complex cultural and linguistic interactions between the Chinese languages and World Englishes at a seminar on this topic at the University of Hong Kong in March 2000 (McArthur 2000).

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Kingsley Bolton
Frontmatter
More information

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Frontmatter
More information

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