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Consonant cluster variations in Hong Kong English: Attitudes and implications

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Recent decades have witnessed the emergence of new varieties of English, which call into question the ‘native’ speakers’ long-standing ownership of the language. Despite increasing local acceptance of Hong Kong English (HKE) (Chan, 2013; Hansen Edwards, 2015, 2019), there seems to remain reservations among teachers of English about the use of HKE in classrooms (Chan, 2021). At the same time, research to date tends to be devoted to an identification of features and an investigation of attitudes towards the variety. The relationship between these two strands of research has been under-explored.

This study examined the impact of consonant cluster variations (CCVs) on Hong Kong university students’ attitudes towards HKE. The CCVs studied include word-initial (e.g., *broadly* [ˈbrɔːd.li:] as [ˈblɔːd.li:]) and word-final ones (e.g., *important* [ɪmˈpɔːtənt] as [ɪmˈpɔːtə̃]). Using the matched-guise technique, we explored participants’ perception of the accent in terms of (1) position of CCVs within a word, and (2) appropriateness in contexts differing in formality and involving native and non-native interlocutors. Participants rated four speech samples recorded by the same HKE speaker reading the same English passage, varying in the presence/absence and positions of CCVs.

Participants were 354 students from an English-medium university in Hong Kong who spoke Cantonese as their first language. CCVs led to a more negative perception of the HKE accent. Specifically, word-initial CCVs were perceived more negatively than word-final ones, probably because onset clusters are more perceptually salient than coda ones. Regardless of whether CCVs were present, the students showed higher tolerance towards the use of the HKE accent in less formal English-speaking situations. However, the perceived presence or absence of ‘native’ interlocutors had no noticeable impact on the students’ judgment about the appropriateness of the accent. A possible explanation concerns the indigenisation of HKE norms, a process which has gradually made HKE pronunciation more acceptable in local contexts. The findings imply that CCVs have a considerable impact on attitudes to HKE and point to internal variations within the construct of ‘attitudes to HKE.’

Besides conceptual insights, this study provides pedagogical implications to teachers working in second-language English settings. Teachers should be aware of HKE as a legitimate variety as opposed to a set of errors to be eradicated. They need to acknowledge that word-final CCVs are not only inevitable but also have less impact on understandability than word-initial CCVs. More pedagogical attention may thus be given to word-initial consonant clusters. Teachers might be encouraged to accept the use of CCVs when they do not impede understandability. In judging whether they should be accepted, it is also important to consider the contexts in which the CCVs occur, which lie on a continuum varying in formality from high-stakes situations (e.g., interviews) to less formal ones (e.g., in-class discussions with classmates).

References:

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