Asian Journal of English Language Teaching, 18, 105–122
© 2008 The Chinese University of Hong Kong

ICQ English: Sociolinguistic and Pedagogical Perspectives

Judy Woon Yee HO
Lingnan University, Hong Kong

ICQ English, like other forms of English used in computer-mediated communication, is emerging as a low variety. It deviates from Standard English in many ways yet it is widely understood, accepted, and adopted by specific social groups for specific communicative purposes. Working within these sociolinguistic realities, English teachers are faced with the challenge to help students achieve a high proficiency level in Standard English. The present research analyzes in detail the English grammatical features of 40 ICQ histories submitted by 21 university students in Hong Kong, with a view to exploring the linguistic processes at work. Issues of strengthening learners' sense of linguistic appropriateness in relation to genre, audience, purpose, and medium are addressed, and the implications for developing effective literacy pedagogies are discussed.

Introduction

The last few decades have seen tremendous technological advancements and a rapid development of computer-mediated communication (CMC). These new forms of communication have transformed human life in many ways especially in the use of language.

Consequently great interest has been generated in linguistic studies of CMC. Collot and Belmore (1996) regarded electronic language as a new variety of English and analyzed the lexical and grammatical features of a large corpus of computer-mediated messages sent to a bulletin board system. In another study, Al-Sa'di and Hamdan (2005) focused on the sentence structure, i.e., sentence length and sentence complexity, and lexical features, i.e., word truncation, orthography, word formation and taboo words in Yahoo Messenger and Internet Relay Chat (IRC) English chats. The authors pointed out the attributes of both spoken and written

language in Cyber-English and regarded this variety of English as "a newly emerging, hybrid form with its own characteristics and uses" (pp. 421–422). Not only did Ho (2006) discuss the hybridization of spoken and written language, she also explored another form of hybridization—admixture of Cantonese, Standard Written Chinese and English in ICQ texts and explicated a multi-leveled functional complementarity between the varieties. Other studies on e-mail or/and ICQ texts produced by Chinese writers include James (2001), Gao (2001), and Lee (2002).

While these studies elucidate the complexity of CMC as a mode of communication and demonstrate dynamic change in literacy practices, those who are keen to uphold language standards may view English used in CMC negatively. As Charles Wright lamented in his article "O grammar, where art thou?": "The rules of grammar and correct spelling—those subtleties of the English language—are being made redundant, so that increasingly one feels oneself communicating not with an intelligent peer, but with a highly gifted ape." (*(e)mag*, March 2001, p. 28, cited in Gibbs, 2006, p. 26). This resistance to new changes is understandable, as Barber (1993) has pointed out, "We are so thoroughly trained in one form of the language that we are likely to dismiss innovations as mistakes or vulgarisms" (p. 277).

In Hong Kong, the social adherence to an exonormative model of Standard English (SE) is firm, despite the fact that a distinct localized variety of English—Hong Kong English (HKE) has been established. The non-standard variety has been described and studied at different linguistic levels: phonological (Bolton & Kwok, 1990; Hung, 2002), grammatical (Gisborne, 2002; Lee & Collins, 2004), lexical (Butler, 1996; Benson, 2002), and pragmatic (James, 2001), but it is not socially sanctioned. Most of the linguistic forms of HKE are disapproved of as linguistic errors or deficiencies, especially by language teachers (Tsui & Bunton, 2002). There is a fervent belief in the use of SE, as mastery of the language of communication in international trade and business is perceived to maintain or increase the competitiveness of Asian economies like Hong Kong and Singapore (Bolton & Lim, 2002; Rubdy, 2001). Unlike Singaporeans who find a sense of belonging and pride in their own variety, Colloquial Singapore English (Rubdy, 2001; Lim, 2004), HKE speakers show a lower level of acceptance and sense of ownership of theirs. Despite some recognition that "languages are constantly evolving, proving the vibrancy of a society," there is criticism against "linguistic leapfrogging" and against "the shorthand terminology

used in speech and written by students"—induced by MCM and resulting in "falling grades in Cantonese, Putonghua and English … to a worrying degree." (A few words of advice, 2004). The business community has also voiced its complaints about English standards of university graduates ruined by ICQ and MSN. Michael Tien Puk-sun, a tycoon and the chairman of the Government's Standing Committee on Language Education and Research, "strictly enforces a language code with staff at his companies: They must write in proper English and complete sentences when they communicate in writing" (Don't mince your words, 2005).

This attitude of strictly complying with the rules of SE and viewing language change as "corruption and decay" needs to be reviewed. Crystal (2006a) has suggested that there is nothing we can do to stop language change and new forms that come with it because it is a reality of life. Instead, we should "learn to understand it, come to terms with it, and thus manage it" (p. 89). As shown in the historical developments of the English language, huge social and technological currents bring about linguistic changes that are often beyond the control of authorities or gatekeepers of standards. At this point in time, CMC is one of those currents which may be "bubbling up from below" in Hong Kong (Bolton, 2002, pp. 49–51).

ICQ, a form of CMC, is the abbreviation of "I Seek You." It is an instant-messaging program which enables participants from different geographical locations to communicate in real time. Messages are typed and sent like written texts, but they can be instantly repaired by the sender and simultaneously responded to by the receiver like face-to-face oral texts.

ICQ English, like other kinds of CMC English, is emerging as a low variety. It deviates from SE in many ways, yet it is widely understood, accepted, and adopted by a specific social group. It serves various functions: to disseminate information on a massive scale, to ensure accuracy of ideational meaning, to strengthen interpersonal relationships, as well as to claim in-group identity and consolidate solidarity (Ho, 2006).

Working within these sociolinguistic realities, English teachers are faced with the challenge to help students achieve a high "English standard" or a high level of proficiency in "SE." The purpose of the present research is to address this challenge by analyzing the grammatical features of ICQ English so as to explore the linguistic processes at work and their consequences for the teaching of English at the university level.

Corpus

Students enrolled in two English courses (Language and Society, and Advanced Professional Communication Skills) in a university in Hong Kong were invited to participate in the research. A total of 19 English majors and 2 Business majors volunteered. They were asked to submit their own histories of ICQ chats recorded over a cumulative period of at least 5 hours. The subjects had complete control over the selection of histories, but they were required to mask all personal identities of the ICQ writers and referents in the texts. They also completed a questionnaire about the social and linguistic backgrounds of the ICQ participants.

The total number of ICQ participants was 68. The overwhelming majority (93%) were Hong Kong Chinese who were Cantonese speakers. A substantial percentage (82%) was university students in the age range of 19–22 who had learned English for over 16 years (see details in Table 1).

Forty ICQ histories (24,490 lines, 197,579 words) were collected. The corpus presents 142,852 English words (72%) and 54,727 Chinese characters (28%). Most ICQ histories (95%) were written in an admixture of English and Chinese both at inter-sentential and intra-sentential levels. More words are represented in English orthography than Chinese characters. Many Cantonese words are transliterated through Romanization or translated into English in a morpheme-for-morpheme manner. This practice has grown out of necessity and convenience since inputting Chinese characters usually requires greater time and effort than typing English letters. So the latter becomes a better choice in view of the demand of online, real-time communication for speed. To facilitate analysis in this study, *English words* are defined as text units represented by English letters and discretely separated by space strokes on the computer keyboard. This means that Romanized and translated Cantonese morphemes are technically counted as English words. Such a categorization has its inadequacies, but it helps to illustrate the hybrid nature of the new variety.

It also has to be acknowledged that the corpus is limited in its sampling method. The Hong Kong Chinese subjects formed a fairly homogeneous group despite some individual differences in the use of SE and non-Standard English. A consistent use of SE in ICQ (by only two Hong Kong Chinese in the present sample) was found as an exception.

Table 1. Social and Linguistic Backgrounds of ICQ participants (*N* = 68)

Age	Number of Participants
15	2
16	2
19	8
20	9
21	24
22	15
23	1
24	3
25	1
30	2
35	1
Educational Level	**Number of Participants**
Form 1–Form 3	2
Form 4–Form 7	10
Tertiary or above	56
Ethnic/Linguistic Backgrounds	**Number of Participants**
Hong Kong Chinese	63
Mainland Chinese	1
Native Speakers of English (e.g., Americans, British, Australians, Overseas Born Chinese)	1
Nonnative Speakers of English (e.g., Singaporeans, Filipinos, Indians, Japanese, French)	2
Others	1 (Overseas university student, linguistic background not given)

Due to space constraints, only the most frequent and illustrative features are selected for discussion. All the examples taken from the corpus are numbered in parentheses. Cantonese sentence particles are italicized by the author.

Discussion

Grammatical Features of ICQ English

To meet the requirement for speedy input of messages, ICQ users tend to simplify grammatical rules. This may simultaneously be motivated by the bilinguals' need to reduce linguistic processing load. In many cases, transfer of L1 features combines with the simplification of L2 grammatical rules, as the following observations show.

Deletion of Morphological Inflections

Cantonese is noted for its relative lack of morphological inflections. It does not mark subject-verb agreement, comparatives, plurality, and subject/object morphologically. This simultaneously satisfies the need for grammatical economization as below:

I. There is no subject-verb agreement for the third person singular in the present tense.

(1) i want to break up *ga la.…* but he always bother me *ar*

II. Morphological markers for comparatives such as "*-er*" are not used.

(2) you're clever than me. and I'm smart than you.

III. The common marker of plurality "*-s*" is omitted.

(3) i need to finish 2 film review.

IV. The "*-ing*" suffix is deleted in gerund/noun formation.

To fulfill a requirement for grammaticality in SE—the subject of a sentence has to be a noun, a noun phrase or a noun clause. The words *tell* and *read* in (4) and (5) are verbs, which can be changed into gerunds with an *-ing* ending. A gerund will provide the sentence with a noun in the subject position, but this rule is ignored.

(4) just tell me what u remember is ok

(5) read at lesson is ok.

Syntactic Deletions

V. Articles are omitted.

Articles may be an obvious candidate for deletion as there are no articles in Cantonese.

(6) she ask u to send message to her *lei*~~

(7) what's that? for elderly?

In (6), *a* is not used to show a countable singular noun *message* and in (7), *the* is not provided to indicate a generic noun *elderly*.

VI. Subjects and objects are deleted.

ICQ texts behave very much like oral speeches, therefore they are more context-dependent than traditional written text. In Chinese which is a topic-prominent language, the subject/object references are particularly context-sensitive. In (8), the subjects *you* and *I* are deleted, but the participants know very well that it is D who has finished the exam and it is D who has not looked for a job because he wants a break.

(8) C: finished exam?
D: yup
C: found job?
D: no *lar*~~~
want to rest
C: oic
rest for three months?

Sometimes the objects are not mentioned, and the sense is still clear. In (9), the object *it* is omitted even though *send* is a transitive verb because the anaphoric reference to *anything cute* is clear.

(9) if I see anything cute in Victoria park, I'll send to u.

VII. The copula is dropped.

In both Mandarin and Cantonese, adjectives often exhibit grammatical qualities and behavior that resemble those of verbs. Linguists describe this category of verb-like adjectives as state verbs (Tsao, 1990) or stative verbs (Matthews & Yip, 1994). The words *angry* in (10) and *late* in (11) are adjectives in English, but ICQ participants use them as

they would in Cantonese, i.e., treat these adjectives as verbs showing a mental state or a condition. This is evident in (10) when the copula *am* for *angry* is missing, and in (11) when the modal verb *can't* is followed by the main verb *late,* instead of *be* verb + *late*.

(10) you should know that I seldom angry.

(11) can't late for wong's paper.

VIII. Prepositions are deleted.

In nearly all the phrasal verbs which are found to lack a preposition, their Cantonese counterparts do not require it. This may suggest a direct transfer of Cantonese usage when ICQ users type the texts rapidly. Since the target readers share the same linguistic background, understanding may safely be assumed despite the absence of prepositions. The missing prepositions in examples (12) to (17) are provided in brackets by the author.

(12) u want to choose from the topic or to think (of) another one?

(13) because i need to take care (of) my scout *la*.

(14) I'm just searching (for) our prof in yahoo.

(15) HK people discriminate (against) them.

(16) how long it takes to apply (for) an international card.

(17) wait (for) him *la* then.

Expressions of Time Relations

There is no distinctive tense system in Cantonese, and time notions such as past and present are not marked with inflections. Instead, an intricate system of verbal aspect which distinguishes between events, states, and processes is central to the markings of subjective viewpoints (Matthews & Yip, 1994). In ICQ English, there is a strong tendency to rely on adverbial phrases to show time relations and mix the tense system in English with the aspect system in Cantonese.

Past tense

In examples (18) to (20), reference to the past is made with the use of adverbials such as *yesterday* in (18), *few years ago* in (19) and *before*

the talk in (20). None of the verbs *call, start, meet,* and *ask* is morphologically marked.

(18) he call me yesterday

(19) i start to learn crying few years ago

(20) i meet her before the talk. she ask me about u.

As shown in (21) to (23), there is an inclination to focus on the state of an action or occurrence of an event rather than the time of the happening. The time notion is adequately expressed in the adverbial phrases *last night* and *last week*. Hence the auxiliary verb *have* of the present perfect tense in (21) to (23) may be said to signal the subjective view of the situation. Sentence (21) is an affirmation (or rather accusation) of the completed state of cheating and sentence (22) is an attempt to ascertain the occurrence of the trip. The word *have* becomes a likely functional equivalent of the Cantonese perfective aspect marker *zo2*. The focus is different in (23). The main concern of the message sender is that the talking did not occur. So it is likely that she uses *have* like the Cantonese experiential aspect marker *gwo3*. The Cantonese equivalents of (21), (22), and (23) are given in (21a), (22a), and (23a) respectively.

(21) u have cheated me last night.

(22) have u gone to Tsing Yi last week?

(23) u haven't talk to me last night.

(21a) *nei5 cam4maan3 ngaak zo2 ngo5*
you last night cheat ASP me
You cheated me last night.

(22a) *soeng6 sing1kei4 nei5 hai6 mai6 heoi3 zo2 cing1yi1*
last week you be-not-be go ASP Tsing Yi
Did you go to Tsing Yi last week?

(23a) *nei5 cam4mann3 mo3 tung4 ngo5 king1 gwo3 gai2*
you last night no with me talk ASP talk
You did not talk to me last night.
(*king1gai2* is a single unit in Chinese verb-object construction but separable by an aspect marker.)

Present perfect tense

The present perfect tense is usually used to express completion of a past action that has current relevance. In ICQ English, the auxiliary verb *has* or *have* is used to replace the meaning entailed in the Cantonese perfective aspect marker *zo2*. The adverbial expressions of *recently, already,* and *for a long time* are among the most common markers of the present perfect tense. The basic verb form usually replaces the past participle. (24) exemplifies these points.

(24) i have take it already.

A simpler way is to use the base verb + Cantonese sentence particle *la* instead of the English present perfect tense (have/has + past participle) and/ or adverbials like *already*. In (25), the ICQ participant had been talking to her friend about her health problems and in response to the suggestion that she should go and see the doctor, she replied:

(25) see the doctor *la*. see 4 times *la*. still cant recover.

The full version in SE is "I have already seen the doctor. I have already seen him 4 times but I still can't recover." Compared with (25), the standard form is much longer and requires greater effort.

Continuous tenses

In the present sample, the continuous tenses take one of the following simplified forms:

"be" + bare infinitive	(26) I'm just play games.
Ø "be" + *-ing*	(27) i waiting reply.
auxiliary verb + Ø "be" + *-ing*	(28) i have sitting down here to do this paper for the whole day.

It seems that either the *be* form or the *-ing* is considered a sufficient clue to show the continuous aspect and time relation. In (26), the use of the present *be* signals a current activity even though the progressive sense is not further "confirmed" by *-ing*. In (27) and (28), the -ing is used like the Cantonese progressive aspect marker *gan2*. Since there are no adverbs of time or other contrary signals, (27) is assumed to indicate the present continuous tense. The risk of misunderstanding is low as ICQ

participants are able to interpret meaning from the immediate context. In (28), the adverbial phrase *for the whole day* implies the present perfect continuous tense *have been sitting*, referring to an action or activity which was initiated in the past and is still going on without a break in the time line.

Word Class

As another way of minimizing effort and simplifying English in ICQ chats, the morphological rules in forming word classes are not followed. This practice has a special appeal to speakers of a language which has few morphological markings in word class differentiation. The corpus does not provide sufficient evidence for any rule formulation with regard to word class and linguistic form. However, a kind of word-specific patterning is observed. Certain words always appear in certain class, probably due to frequency of exposure to these words in users' English learning experience. For example, the largest group of words which always appear in the same class is nouns. When a noun is used as an adjective as in (29) to (32), the principle of economy may account for the deletion of the suffix. However, it fails to provide an adequate explanation since the nouns in (33) to (35), *response*, *success*, and *inconvenience* are hardly shorter than their verb/adjective counterparts, *respond*, *succeed*, and *inconvenient*. Perhaps most learners of English are exposed to the nouns more often or were taught the nouns first. For example, the Cantonese-English mix "*mou3* response" ("no response") is often heard in bilingual conversations. Phrases like *with great success* and *a success story* are commonly found in English learning materials. The public announcement "We apologize for any inconvenience caused" is often seen in signs on road repairs and heard in train delays.

(29) My stomach is very pain. (adjective: painful)

(30) I have to handle with many trouble ppl. (adjective: troublesome [people])

(31) but this time is more urgent and hurry than before. (adjective: hurried)

(32) tonite's annual dinner is ok success. (adjective: successful. "OK" is used like a modifying adverb here.)

(33) how should I response? (verb: respond)

(34) u cannot success every time. (verb: succeed)

(35) it's not too inconvinence to go there. (adjective: inconvenient)

In fact, using one part of speech as if it were another without making any changes to its form, or what is known as "conversion" is not a unique practice of users of non-standard English. Barber (1993, pp. 222–223) notes that this is a highly productive process in Modern English, with many nouns such as *market, doom,* and *audition* used as verbs. This concurs with the findings of the present study. The socio-cultural context of CMC further liberalizes the constraints of morpho-syntactic links. Cantonese ICQ users change the word classes freely without complying with the morphological rules. Moreover, the most productive kind of conversion is that based on ICQ usage. The following examples (36) to (39) show conversion of adjectives to verbs:

(36) i can online in hall^^

(37) hey i have to off *la*

(38) my icq *was* suddenly offlined.

(39) don't invisible me!

The last example is a particularly effective attempt to say much in less. *Invisible* is a function in ICQ which allows the user to avoid any unwanted communication with the contacts on the list. When this function is enabled, the message sender's name will appear "offline" in the interlocutor's contact list but in fact s/he is still online. S/He can still send messages to others in this invisible mode. In this way s/he can choose whom to talk to and whom not to. When the ICQ user says: "Don't invisible me!" she means: "Don't enable the 'invisible' function because I don't want to think that you are offline when in fact you are not."

Another kind of conversion is also noticeable. It is *compressed conversion*, a process by which a verb phrase is compressed into a noun which is in turn used as a verb (40) to (43):

(40) i need to lunch. (verb phrase: have lunch)

(41) no need to taxi. (verb phrase: take a taxi)

(42) but i need to exam *wor*. (verb phrase: take the exam)

(43) You don't hi her this morning. (verb phrase: say hi to)

While it is easy to see conversion especially *compressed conversion* as a manifestation of effort minimization, the shared linguistic and cultural backgrounds of ICQ participants and the informal context of ICQ writing provide a great incentive for creativity which may require more effort and morphological additions.

This is most observable in the innovative process of conversion + analogy. A verb is obtained by being transformed from another word class and the grammatical rule of using the present participle to form the progressive tense is applied (44) to (47).

(44) A: Pat doing what?
B: now angrying.

(45) C: you are papering or revising?
D: papering.

(46) E: doing homework?
F: no *ah*. Icqing

(47) G: busy??
H: yes i am beebeeing!

In (44) B uses the adjective *angry* as a stative verb (see the previous discussion of Example (10) and copula deletion.) and turns it into the progressive tense by adding *-ing*. Examples (45) and (46) indicate compressed conversion of verb phrases + analogy. The word *papering* is a compressed form of *writing a term paper* and the word *icqing* refers to *using the ICQ*. The nouns *paper* and *ICQ* are converted into verbs and undergo another linguistic process, *analogy*. By copying the *-ing* form, they become the present participle of the base verbs, *papering* and *icqing*. It is reasonable to propose that the English *-ing* form has been appropriated to serve as the Cantonese progressive aspect marker *gan2*. The complexity of combining various linguistic processes from English and Cantonese is highlighted in (47). Instead of turning an adjective *busy* into a stative verb *busying*, H extends the compression of a verb phrase to that of a simile. Instead of saying "I am as busy as a bee," she takes the object of comparison *bee* as a verb, reduplicates it in the Cantonese way to mean *a little bit* and changes it into a verb *beebeeing* by adding the *-ing*. In effect, she is saying "Yes, I am a little busy at the moment." The creativity shown and the speed at which these processes are completed are amazing.

Implications for Teaching

The foregoing analysis of the grammatical structures in ICQ English shows highly complex linguistic processes at work. These processes reflect ICQ users' linguistic knowledge of both Cantonese and English and their ability to mix grammatical features of both systems in order to create meaning in the fastest possible way. Teachers may externalize these processes and raise students' metalinguistic awareness.

To begin, teachers may secure a high level of motivation by using students' own ICQ writing as teaching materials. They could encourage students to bring in authentic texts after appropriate measures have been taken to protect privacy. A class discussion may focus on how simplification of SE rules such as deletion of morphological inflections helps users to communicate efficiently in instant messaging.

A contrastive approach may also be adopted. Teachers can capitalize upon students' own L1 knowledge and teach the grammatical differences between English and Cantonese explicitly. For instance, a class discussion may aim at deepening students' understanding of how time is conceptualized and expressed differently in Chinese and SE. In ICQ English, Chinese writers tend to utilize their L1 resources such as adverbials and aspects to show time relations, but in SE, the use of tenses is expected.

An interesting observation of this study is that many deviations from SE especially compressed conversion found in ICQ texts exhibit a very creative and flexible use of English and the imaginative receptivity of interlocutors. Teachers may note similar examples of linguistic innovations in students' samples and utilize them to illustrate the close relationship of language forms to genre, audience, purpose, and medium so that students' ability to judge "linguistic appropriateness" (Crystal, 2006a) may be developed. Students may find that the oral aspect of the ICQ genre, the general purpose of informal socializing, the shared sociocultural backgrounds of the audience, and the requirements of synchronous online communication could well justify the disregard for SE grammatical rules and the liberal utilization of L1 resources. At the same time, teachers should point out that SE is a high variety which is widely used among native and non-native speakers of English and it is the only variety used in formal domains such as education and employment. To be able to understand and be understood and to function efficiently in these domains, students need to learn SE and abide by its rules. Writing

ICQ English on a regular basis and for an extended period of time may lower their consciousness of requirements in different writing tasks. To further strengthen their sense of the specific functions of different varieties, CMC-based writing tasks could be designed. Teachers may select an ICQ text, ask students to define its purpose and audience, and discuss its linguistic appropriateness. Then students may re-write the text as a different genre (e.g., a formal letter) to a different audience (e.g., a service provider) for a different purpose (e.g., making complaints and demanding compensations). Or alternatively, students may be given newspaper articles and asked to express the same ideas to their friends in ICQ formally. They should report to the class their interlocutor's response and the communication problems arising from the constraints of sentence length imposed by the medium. By analyzing the stylistic contrasts and the writing difficulties involved in various situations, students' awareness of appropriate language use will be heightened. When required to write for serious purposes, they will make a conscious attempt to use "proper" SE and edit inappropriate abbreviations and grammatical deviations.

Conclusion

In Hong Kong, as in Singapore, Thailand, and many other countries, IT literacy and IT application in education became an integral part of government policy by the end of the last century (Lee, Jor, & Lai, 2005). It was anticipated that students would be fully equipped to face new challenges posed by rapid IT developments and the Internet as resources of learning. One of these challenges is language change and its implications for language teaching. Language on the internet has become "a collection of distinct dialects, reflecting the different backgrounds, needs, purposes, and attitudes of its users" (Crystal, 2006b, p. 6). A prescriptivist, purist approach to the teaching of language would not help our students to manage the dynamic complexities of CMC. A change in public attitude—an inclusive acceptance of the diversities of language—will help to promote more effective language pedagogies. While SE is useful as a formal variety that facilitates mutual intelligibility, other varieties serve different but important functions.

Synchronous CMC is likely to develop into a dominant mode of communication and a significant influence in language change. In Hong Kong, where the official stance is that of maintaining "the English

standard" in education and employment, ICQ or CMC English will flourish as an informal variety. The study suggests a high degree of flexibility and adaptability of English to the linguistic and cultural contexts of CMC among Chinese users. The effectiveness of instant messaging helps to transmit, disseminate, and popularize young people's use of non-standard grammatical structures, especially within user circles of similar linguistic and cultural backgrounds. As teachers, we should adopt teaching approaches and methods which are responsive to these sociolinguistic realities. As researchers, we should explore how meaning is negotiated and co-constructed in the electronic medium (Pellettieri, 2000; Shetzer & Warschauer, 2000), and in particular, how grammar is used as a "meaning-making resource" (Halliday, 1994) in the new contexts of language use. Future analysis should be extended to all CMC text types produced by various user groups on the Internet so that we can make informed decisions about the best ways to help our learners become "linguistically prepared" (Crystal, 2006a) for complex communication tasks.

Acknowledgment

The author is grateful to Lingnan University, Hong Kong for granting a research fund (DA04A8) for this project.

References

A few words of advice: Watch your language. (2004, August 7). *South China Morning Post*, p. EDT10.

Al-Sa'di, R. A. & Hamdan, J. M. (2005). "Synchronous online chat" English: Computer-mediated communication. *World Englishes*, *24*(4), 409–424.

Barber, C. (1993). *The English language: A historical introduction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Benson, P. (2002). Hong Kong words: Variation and context. In K. Bolton (Ed.), *Hong Kong English: Autonomy and creativity* (pp. 161–170). Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.

Bolton, K. (2002). The sociolinguistics of Hong Kong and the space for Hong Kong English. In K. Bolton (Ed.), *Hong Kong English: Autonomy and creativity* (pp. 29–55). Hong Kong: Hong Kong 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.

Bolton, K., & Lim, S. G. (2002). Futures for Hong Kong English. In K. Bolton (Ed.), *Hong Kong English: Autonomy and creativity* (pp. 295–313). Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.

Butler, S. (1996). World English in an Asian context: The Macquarie Dictionary Project. *World Englishes*, *15*(3), 347–357.

Collot, M., & Belmore, N. (1996). Electronic language: A new variety of English. In S. Herring (Ed.), *Computer-mediated communication: Linguistic, social and cross-cultural perspectives* (pp. 13–28). Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Crystal, D. (2006a). *The fight for English: How language pundits ate, shot, and left*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Crystal, D. (2006b). *Language and the Internet* (2nd ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Don't mince your words at work. (2005, December 3). *South China Morning Post*, p. CITY2.

Gao, L. (2001). Digital age, digital English. *English Today*, *67*, 17–23.

Gibbs, D. (2006). Cyberlanguage: What it is and what it does. In D. Gibbs & K. Krause (Eds.), *Cyberlines 2.0: Languages and cultures of the Internet* (pp. 11–34). Albert Park, Australia: James Nicholas.

Gisborne, N. (2002). Relative clauses in Hong Kong English. In K. Bolton (Ed.), *Hong Kong English: Autonomy and creativity* (pp. 141–160). Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.

Halliday, M. A. K. (1994). *Introduction to functional grammar* (2nd ed.). London: Edward Arnold.

Ho, J. W. Y. (2006). Functional complementarity between two languages in ICQ. *International Journal of Bilingualism*, *10*(4), 429–451.

Hung, T. T. N. (2002). Towards a phonology of Hong Kong English. In K. Bolton (Ed.), *Hong Kong English: Autonomy and creativity* (pp. 119–140). Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.

James, G. (2001). Cantonese particles in Hong Kong students' English e-mails. *English Today*, *67*, 9–16.

Lee, C., Jor, G., & Lai, E. (2005). *Web-based teaching and English language teaching: A Hong Kong experience*. Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press.

Lee, C. K. M. (2002). Literacy practices in computer-mediated communication in Hong Kong. *The Reading Matrix*, *2*(2), 1–25.

Lee, J. F. K., & Collins, P. (2004). On the usage of *have, dare, need, ought* and *used to* in Australian English and Hong Kong English. *World Englishes*, *23*(4), 501–513.

Lim, L. (Ed.). (2004). *Singapore English: A grammatical description*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Matthews, S., & Yip, V. (1994). *Cantonese: A comprehensive grammar*. London: Routledge.

Pellettieri, J. (2000). Negotiation in cyberspace: The role of chatting in the development of grammatical competence. In M. Warschauer & R. Kern (Eds.), *Network-based language teaching: Concepts and practice* (pp. 59–86). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Rubdy, R. (2001). Creative destruction: Singapore's speak good English movement. *World Englishes*, *20*(3), 341–355.

Shetzer, H., & Warschauer, M (2000). An electronic literacy approach to network-based language teaching. In M. Warschauer & R. Kern (Eds.), *Network-based language teaching: Concepts and practice* (pp. 171–185). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Tsao, F. F. (1990). *Sentence and clause structure in Chinese: A functional perspective*. Taiwan: Student Book Company.

Tsui, A. B. 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. 57–77). Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.

Wright, C. (2001, March). "O grammar, where art thou?" *(e)mag*, *Sydney Morning Herald*, p. 28.

Judy Woon Yee HO holds a BA (Hons) in English and a Certificate in Education (University of Hong Kong), an MA in Applied Linguistics (University of Sydney) and a PhD in Linguistics (University of New England, Australia). She is an Associate Professor in the English Department, Lingnan University, Hong Kong.