

Hearing the Inner Voices of Asian English Poets

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Abstract Poetry is often, even if not always, thought of as a work to be read audibly. Literary analyses of each poem and biographical information of the poet aim at providing deeper understanding, but few students of literature actually attend seriously to the poet's phonology. By first providing an analysis of the tonality Hong Kong English with side view glances to Singapore, this paper provides arguments for how much more exciting poetry can be not just for new Englishes, but for all languages in today's world where so many languages and cultures are in contact.

Keywords: *phonology, poetry, English, Hong Kong, 1. An Inspiration from History*

1. An Inspiration from History

With the exception of visual poetry, most poems are intended for recitation so that the poet's feelings may be heard, an aspect particularly evident when meter, rhyme, pun and equivocation are employed. On the printed page, except for cases where local expressions are used, there is very little clue as to what the poem must have sounded like in the heads of these poets who wield a local variety of standard languages, say English. In Hong Kong, Singapore or anywhere else in Asia, there are poets who write in English, although the kind of English is not always easily discernible. These poets often can speak English in at least two different registers: one that is more formal that projects an image of a capable professional (i.e. acrolectal); and one with an accent that will allow the speaker to be identified with a locality. In literary works, the syntax and the idiomatic expression would be reflected on the printed page. The phonology would generally escape the reader, and sometimes even the poet herself. This issue is not as trivial as it may appear, as may be illustrated with the following story.

Su Shi 蘇軾 (1037-1101) was a literary giant in the Song Dynasty whose poetry continue to be revered by Chinese scholars. In volume 26 of the *Complete Collection of Su Shi's Poems* 《蘇軾詩集卷二十六》, there is a very interesting story of a playful composition made at the west mountain in Wuchang where at the pavilion *Jiuquting* a line was engraved on one of the pillars as an invitation for anyone with adequate literary talent to provide another on the adjacent pillar to form a matching couplet. The line read 玄鴻橫號黃檨峴 *yuán hóng héng hào huáng hú xiàn* —a black bird calls across the yellow glen, a very apt description of the scenery from where the vantage point of the pavilion. With nary a thought, Su Shi responded with 皓鶴下浴紅荷湖 *hào hè xià yù hóng hé hú* —the white crane dove down into the red lotus lake. This apparently beautiful poesy was received with merriment and laughter rather than admiration and applause. To modern eyes, the merriment is unfathomable, until that is a careful reconstruction of middle Chinese reveals what the two lines might have sounded like:

[ɣyan ɣuŋ ɣuan ɣau ɣuan ɣuk ɣen]
[ɣau ɣak ɣa yk ɣuŋ ɣa ɣo]

(taken from Chen 1984)

The lines alliterate using velar consonant onsets, and together with the tones on each syllable, the entire reading would come across as a Kungfu Panda meets Darth Vader taunt. Together with this story is a poem where every single syllable alliterated using velar plosives, providing the necessary evidence of the phonological play

This story puts the spotlight on how much one would have missed from being ignorant of what the sounds are. No amount of analysis of imagery, metaphor or the historical contexts would have revealed its true nature. In this case, a failure in phonological understanding

would have led to a horrible distortion. Similar examples can be found with modern reconstruction of the phonologies for readings of *The Canterbury Tales* (<https://alanbaragona.wordpress.com/the-crying-and-the-soun/>), the *Lord's Prayer* in various stages of English and other Chinese poetry such as Li Bai's *Qiang Jin Jiu* (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sVw9iyq59zo>) or even *Guan Ju* from the very ancient *Book of Odes* (*Shi Jing*) (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bqt3_02lxGo).

While the dead poets may feel no hurt from our choice pronunciations/renditions of their works, the matter is not trivial when our children write English poetry in their Englishes or when they write Chinese poetry in their Chinese. Their rhymes and rhythm as they hear them in their heads when they compose are likely to break down when read in so-called standard varieties. One can imagine the embarrassment and negativity should the mental soundtracks of these children be unjustly mocked as failures.

Section 2 presents a phonological description of Hong Kong English tonal prosody that reveals a mountain-scape profile of cascading plateaus. This is exemplified in section 3 and section 4, both also touching on the complexes of the poets, thereby offering a close-up look into the reality of the inner voices of Asian English poets. Section 5 offers a conclusion.

1. HONG KONG ENGLISH PROSODY

The English spoken in Hong Kong (henceforth HKE) is a contact variety first noted in 17th century Macau (Bolton 2003:139) when the English traded with China through the waters near the Yue (Cantonese)-speaking areas. This variety of English then found nurturing soil in Hong Kong, annexed to the British via the Convention of Chuanpi (1840), and later the Treaty of Nanjing (1842).

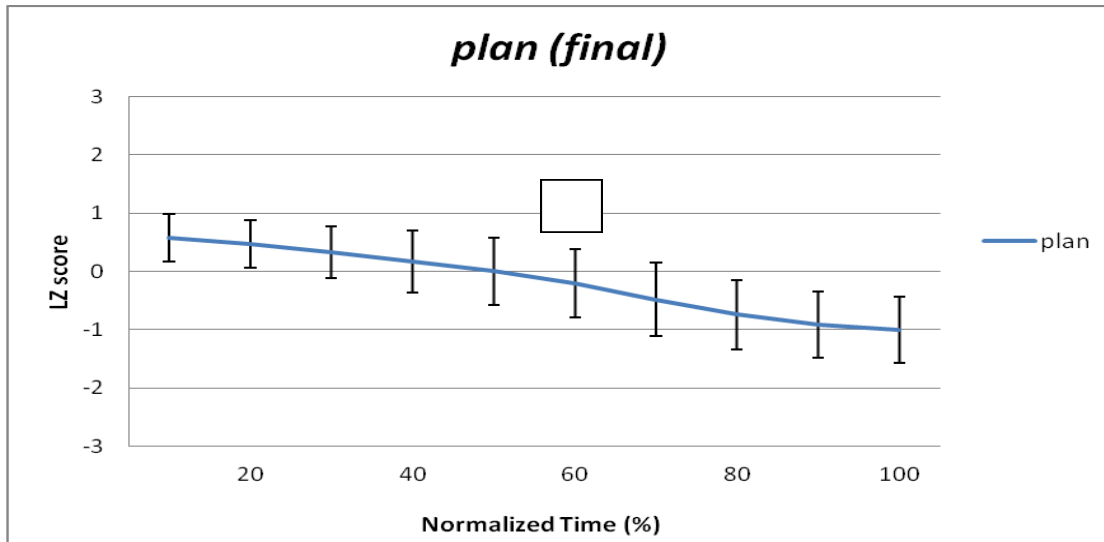
Driven by the needs for trade and communication, a number of bilingual dictionaries sprung up in the 19th

century, where English words and expressions are transliterated into Chinese characters together with a translation of the terms into Chinese. T'ung's (1862) *Chinese English Instructor* is one that is particularly comprehensive in scope accompanied by a preface explaining carefully how the dictionary is to be used. It is noteworthy that T'ung specifically pointed out that the work was *written by the author, a native of Canton province, in the Canton dialect, chiefly to suit the Canton people who have transactions, or are connected, with foreigners* (vol.1: preface). Wee and Cheung's (2015) analysis of the entries revealed that the stressed syllables of the English words were often transliterated with syllables. What is interesting about this finding is that the same English words today when pronounced in HKE, would have these syllables systematically rendered with a high (not higher) tone, first noted in Luke (2000). Over the course of 150 years, the rendering of stress have settled on to a consistent pitch value,¹ a symptom that suggests how modern HKE might be evolving along on its own.

2.1 BASIC HKE TONE PATTERNS

It would however be naïve to think that HKE simply assigns a high tone to stress syllables. Starting with monosyllabic words, all HKE monosyllabic words have a F(alling) tone unless they are syllables that have a short vowel closed by a plosive, in which case that syllable will have a H(igh) tone. The F tone examples are shown in (1) with examples and a pitch profile.

- (1) Monosyllabic HKE words: F(alling) tone only
- i. plan
 - ii. pinch
 - iii. tree



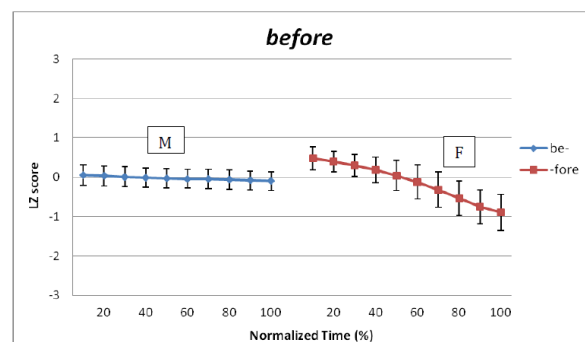
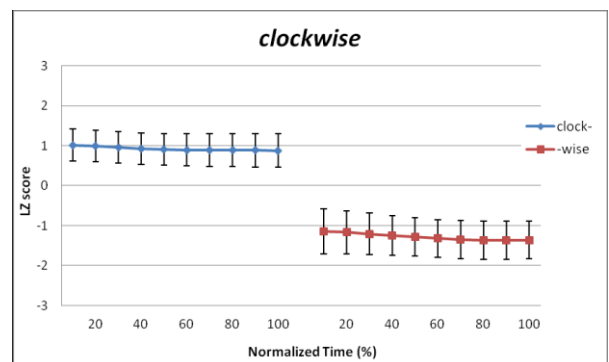
The pitch extractions in (1) and elsewhere are obtained using Praat (ver. 5.3.23, Boersma and Weenink 2012) at a sampling frequency of 22050Hz. Recordings are collected from four males and four females aged 18-20 recognized by others as sounding typical of Hong Kong and who use English fairly regularly in their daily lives (mostly at the university). For the recordings, each word is articulated three times as a single utterance to obtain utterance-initial, medial and final F0 patterns. A prompt —what you wanted to say was ...l is used to cue subjects to utter each triplet given as a single utterance.

Using Xu’s (2012) TimeNormalizedF0 Praat script, F0 frequencies are taken at every 10% interval for the rhyme of every syllable to generate mean F0 frequencies across speakers (Mean Time-normalized F0). F0 values in Hertz are converted into logarithmic z-score (LZ) using the formula $LZ = (F0_i - M)/SD$, where $F0_i$ is the sampling point, M is the mean F0 of all sampling points and SD the standard deviation around M, all in \log_{10} (following Zhu 1999, used also in Ishihara 2000). This allows for the different vocal ranges of the speakers to be compared on the same scale. The error bars provide the standard deviation at each interval point.

The reason why closed syllables with short vowels do not have F(alling) tones in HKE is probably physiological, since final plosives are generally voiceless so that the low tail of the F tone would not be articulated. With disyllabic words, there are only three tone profiles in HKE, involving combinations of the H(igh), L(ow), M(id) and F tones, shown in (2), also accompanied by two pitch track graphs so that one may now see the H, M and L tones.

- (2) Disyllabic HKE words
- | | | |
|---------------|--------------|-------------|
| a. H-L type | b. H-F type | c. M-F type |
| i. apple | i. sometimes | i. create |
| ii. clockwise | ii. outsell | ii. giraffe |
| iii. greeted | iii. inborn | iii. before |

$1^{st} \sigma \backslash 2^{nd} \sigma$	-H	-M	-L	-F
H-	*	*	✓ (2a)	✓ (2b)
M-	*	*	*	✓ (2c)
L-	*	*	*	*
F-	*	*	*	*

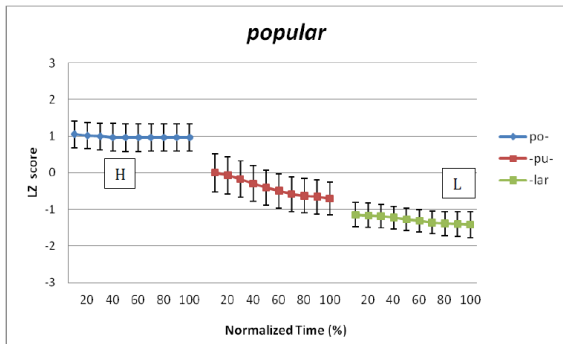


1 Tonogenesis can stem from (i) segmental properties such as the voicing of onsets and the loss of codas (see Hyslop 2009 and references cited therein) or (ii) metrical stress (see Kingston 2011).

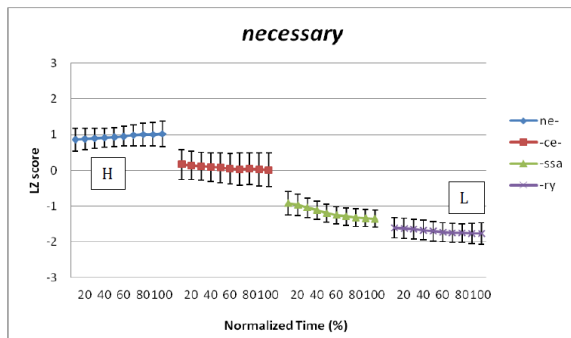
With H, M, L and F, one would have expected ditonal combinations to yield 16 possibilities. As the table in (2) shows, only three are attested, which calls for an explanation.

Moving on to longer sequences, the puzzles deepens, as one now sees also pitch profiles that appear to be indicative of transitions and not likely to be tonal at all.

(3) a. F0 profile of *popular*



b. F0 profile of *necessary*



In (3) above, one can see pitch profiles that gradually glide downwards across any number of syllables sandwiched between H and L. A good way of describing these syllables is to simply say they are toneless (represented as —o|) and receive whatever pitch values that come about as a physiological default. Armed now with the rudimentary H, M, L, F and o, (4) presents the tone profiles of the HKE trisyllabic words

(4) Trisyllabic HKE words

- a. H-o-L type
 - i. yesterday
 - ii. beautiful
- b. H-M-F type
 - i. runaway
 - ii. roundabout

- iii. popular
- iii. go-between
- c. H-H-L type
 - i. kidnapper
 - ii. handwriting
 - iii. newspaper
- d. H-H-F type
 - i. undersold
 - ii. overwrite
 - iii. kangaroo
- e. M-H-L type
 - i. prohibit
 - ii. emergence
 - iii. erotic
- f. M-H-F type
 - i. about-turn
 - ii. Repulse Bay
 - iii. alarm clock
- g. M-M-F type
 - i. introduce
 - ii. dislocate
 - iii. recommend

1 st & 2 nd σ \ final σ	-H	-M	-L	-F	-o
H-H-	*	*	✓ (4c)	✓ (4d)	
H-M-	*	*	*	✓ (4b)	
H-o-	*	*	✓ (4a)	*	
H-F-	*	*	*	*	
M-H-	*	*	✓ (4e)	✓ (4f)	
M-M-	*	*	*	✓ (4g)	
M-o-	*	*	*	*	
M-F-	*	*	*	*	
o-H-	*	*	*	*	
o-M-	*	*	*	*	
o-o-	*	*	*	*	
o-F-	*	*	*	*	

It is probably not necessary to provide any more pitch tracks, but the table again shows us how only very few combinations of the tones are attested, calling for an explanation to the patterns. For the purposes of this paper, it does not matter if we call the profiles given in (1) – (4) tone or pitch melodies. What matters is that they do not sound like British or American English. These are the sounds that come out of the mouths of HKE speakers. These are the sounds that are the patterns in the unfettered poet's mind in she was a HKE speaker who has not been forced into British/American metrical patterns.

Another important pattern found in HKE tones is to be found in the concatenation of words to form longer strings. In general, H tones are observed to spread to the end of a word if followed by another word, exemplified below in (5).

(5) Concatenation of HKE words

- a. *greeted* /H-L/ ~
greeted [H-H] *him*
- b. *beautiful* /H-o-L/ ~

- c. *beautiful* [H-H-H] *girl*
newspaper /H-H-L/ ~
newspaper [H-H-H] *vendor*
- d. *overwrite* /H-H-H/ ~
overwrite [H-H-H] *this*
- e. *prohibit* /M-H-L/ ~
prohibit [M-H-H] *alcohol*

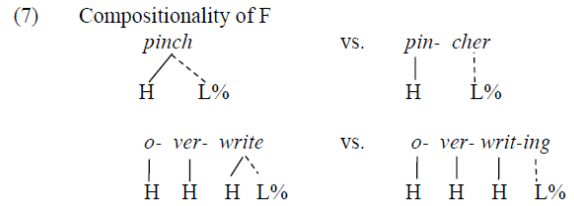
This H-tone spread can result in a large span of H-tones when words are strung to make a sentence, as in (6). This plateau of H-tones before the fall at the end of the sentence creates a melodious effect that could feel like a cresting wave, especially if sentences are strung to make a paragraph.

- (6) *The irregular situation looks better now.*
 M HHH H HHH H H H F

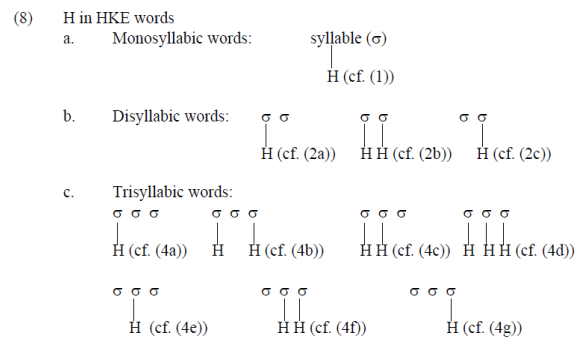
2.2 BREAKING DOWN THE TONAL ELEMENTS

The intricate patterns of HKE have been variously analyzed in Cheung (2009), Gussenhoven (2012, 2014) and more recently Wee (2015a). It turns out that the complicated patterns can be captured by surprisingly few postulates.

Firstly, Cheung (2009) provided argumentation that the L tone is in fact an utterance-final boundary marker, which linguists normally write as L%. Though this position was challenged by Gussenhoven (2014), a more comprehensive study by Wee (2015a) vindicated Cheung's claim through showing that the L% is a declarative boundary tone. In other words, a declarative sentence in HKE would end with L%, which is not unlike many other known human languages such as English, German and so on. Treating the L tone as L% provides an explanation to why it is found only word-finally in (1) – (4), also to cases like (5) and (6). After all, when words are uttered in isolation, the word itself is the utterance, and the L% would attach itself to the final syllable. When concatenated, the L% would only apply to the final syllable of the utterance. Further the fact that F occurs also only word-finally and sentence-finally suggests that the F is an H-L% composite. This is supported by examples in (7) where suffixation breaks the F up into H and L%.



Having factored out the L%, Wee (2015a) observed from the data in (1) – (4) that HKE words must have at least one H tone, but otherwise have no restrictions on which and how many of the syllables may be assigned H. The patterns are summarized in (8).



Where H is in the final syllable, and where that also is the end of the utterance (such as when the word is read in isolation or at the end of a declarative sentence), it would concatenate with L% to yield F.

Notice that (8) exhausts all the logical possibilities for H assignment, which coincides precisely with the number of attested patterns found in (1) – (4), thereby providing a natural explanation to the empty cells in the tables in (2) and (4). An implication of Wee's claim is that the H tone in HKE must be lexically assigned and is unlike metrical stress which can be derived by rule. This claim, though contrary to assumptions made in Hung (2005) and Setter et al (2010), is supported by the fact that HKE speakers generally (i) find stress in words hard to perceive; (ii) have trouble with vowel alternations in words like *maintain~maintenance* and must learn them by rote; and (iii) do not distinguish stress assignment that alternates with syntactic category, e.g. *REcord ~ reCORD* (for more examples see Hung 2005).

We have by now accounted for the tone values of all the syllables except for the initial syllables in di- and tri-syllabic words that do not receive H. Being toneless, these would receive the physiologically easiest mid tone M. With this, we are now ready to state the principles for tone assignment in HKE.

(9) Principles of Tones in HKE

- i. Syllables in HKE are underlying specified for H
- ii. Associate M to any word-initial syllable that is not underlyingly H.
- iii. Associate L% to utterance final position.
- iv. M-spread: Spread M rightwards to all pre-H syllables
- v. H-spread: Except for the H nearest the utterance-final boundary, spread H rightwards to an adjacent toneless syllable
- vi. Except for the utterance final syllable, HKE bans contour tones.

The principles in (9) do not cover functional words, which tone patterns remain to be studied. However, Wee (2015a) did provide the following generalizations.

(10) HKE tones on function words

- i. Pronouns that serve as syntactic arguments (e.g. *him, her, he, she, it, they, them, theirs, mine, hers*)² behave like monosyllabic lexical words, i.e. they are assigned H and can become F when concatenated with boundary L%.
- ii. Demonstratives (e.g. *these, those, that, this*), even when used as determiners, behave like monosyllabic lexical words, i.e. they are assigned H and can become F when concatenated with boundary L%.
- iii. Pronouns that serve as possessors (e.g. *his X, my X, her X*) and determiners (e.g. *a, an, the*) receive M tones.³
- iv. Modals (e.g. *may, might, can, could, shall, should, must, will, would*, also auxiliaries like *do* and *have*) receive M tones even

- v. Negator *not* receives H and behaves much like other monosyllabic HKE lexical words.
- vi. Negation clitic *n't* assigns H to its host, overriding the H assignment stated in (v). The clitic surfaces as H utterance medially, but L% utterance-finally.⁴
- vii. Monosyllabic prepositions⁵ (e.g. *in, on, with*) receive M in all instances, except *through* which tone patterns behave like a HKE lexical word.
- viii. Disyllabic prepositions (e.g. *under, between, across, beside, along, against*) behave like disyllabic lexical words.

	H	M
pronouns	✓	
demonstratives	✓	
possessors		✓
modals		✓
not	✓	
n't	Assigns H to stem	
prepositions (σ)		✓
prepositions (σσ)	o-H/H-o	

2.2 INTONATION

Recall in section 2.1 that the declarative in HKE is indicated by an L% boundary tone. This subsection presents a slightly more nuanced picture of the HKE intonation, beginning with an experiment reported in Wee (2015a).

Two female native HKE speakers (age 21 and 29) were asked to provide recordings varying across seven punctuation types: (i) sans punctuation, (ii) ellipsis —...!, (iii) comma —.!, (iv) period —.!, (v) exclamation —!!!, (vi) double exclamations —!!!, and (vi) question —?!. The results of the F0 profiles are schematized in (11).

² This includes *his* as the masculine version of *hers*.

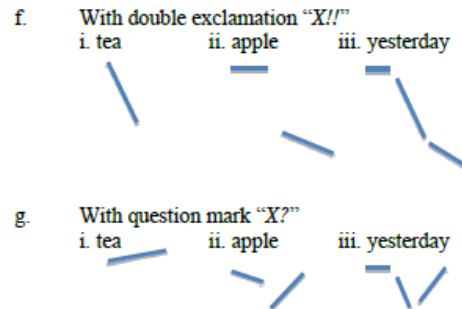
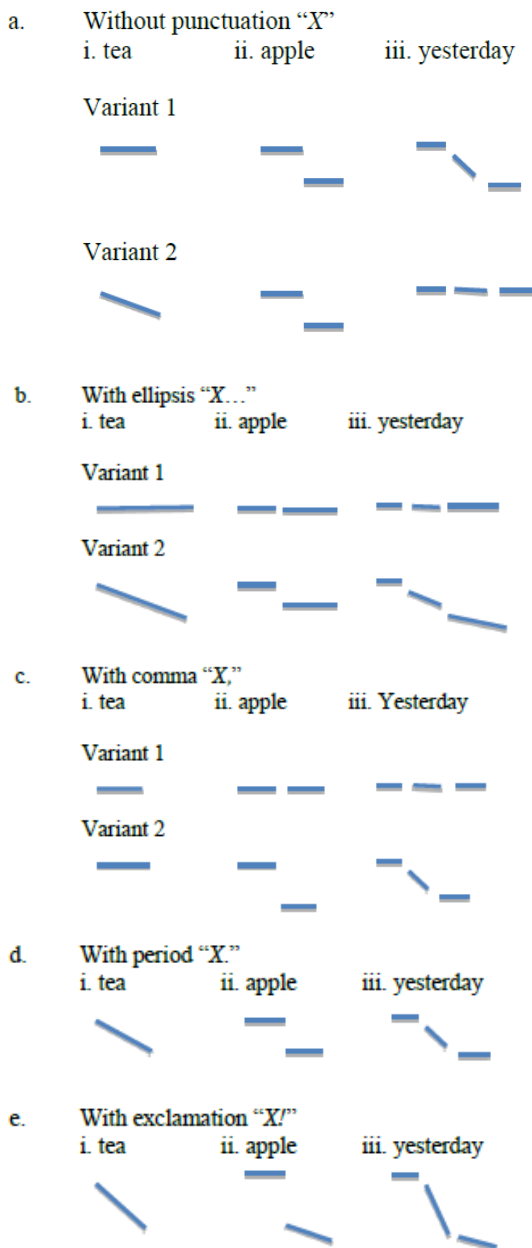
³ Uttering these words in isolation is hard to imagine, but this can happen if the speaker is truncating from a fuller phrase like *his cat*, or

answering questions like, —what is the second word in the sentence *John should come?* In such cases, the tone is still M.

⁴ As to how the *n't* gets an H tone, a number of guesses are possible. My guess is that it is stipulated for H which must be associated to its host and will delink from the clitic to give way to L%. As a light syllable it is too short to accommodate F.

⁵ However, when ending a sentence, monosyllabic prepositions get F tones, behaving like monosyllabic words.

(11) Intonation productions



The variation seen in (11a-c) is interesting is attributed to an uncertainty among speakers on interpreting if the stimuli were at the end of an intonation group where perhaps a pause might follow. The profiles in (11d-g) are stable and consistent across speakers. In (11d-f), it can clearly be seen that degrees of emphatic intonation are corresponding exaggerations on pitch interval and duration of the simple declarative that is indicated by the —periodl.

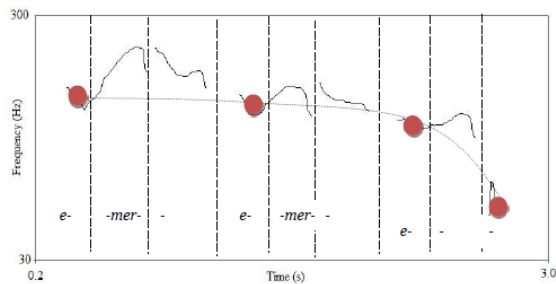
From (11g), one can infer that the interrogative is marked by a RISE%, contra Gussenhoven's (2012, 2014) postulation that it is H%.⁶ The interrogative boundary is RISE% because otherwise, one cannot explain why *yesterday* would need the penult – *ter-* to fall before –*day* shoots up to a high target. Also, because the RISE% is what marks a question in HKE, even for words like *tea*⁷ which ended up having the H pushed with much articulatory effort to an even higher pitch.

The melodies of HKE are not confined to the lexical Hs, Ms and intonation endings L% and %Rise. In HKE, there is also a more subtle cascading cadence that comes with something called DOWNSTEP, which is induced by the mid tone M.

2.3 CASCADING CADENCES

As noted in section 2.1, the H tone only spreads to the end of a HKE word when non- utterance final, and will be blocked by any M tone that initiates the following word. For example, *overhead projector* is H-H-H M-H-L%. What is interesting about the M tone here is that it would trigger downstep (commonly found in African languages such as Dschang and Tiv (Pulleyblank 1983). To see this effect, consider the word *emergence* M-H-o read three times in a row as a single utterance. The result is shown in (12).

(12) *Emergence* uttered thrice as in a single breath (sample from female, age 20)



In (12), vertical dotted lines present approximate syllable boundaries. Across the graph, a finely dotted line traces the projection of the tones for the three M syllables corresponding to *e-* in *emergence* before ending in the final syllable *-gence*. As explained in earlier sections, the *-gence* in initial and medial articulations will get the H from *-mer-*. The final *-gence* shows a very sharp drop which is the L%.

The crucial thing to note about (12) is the H tones of the *-mer-*, which are cascading downwards like steps (hence the name downstep), but each is still clearly H by virtue of being higher than the respective preceding M tones. The downstep is triggered by the M because otherwise the H would maintain approximately the same height.

⁶ See also Yiu's (2015) phonetic study which showed that there is a target H% at the boundary for interrogatives, though the data presented therein would also be consistent with a %Rise interpretation. Also Chen and Mok's (2015) phonetic study on the HKE intonation question showed a clear rising contour even when following a high-toned syllable such as *car*.

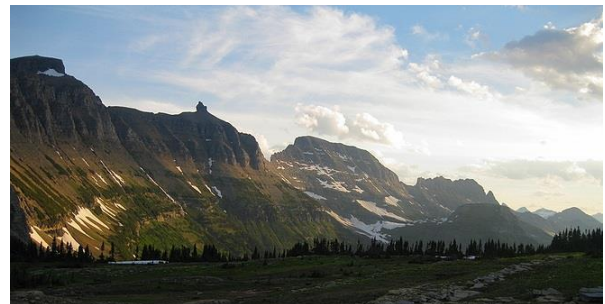
⁷ In an interrogative intonation, *tea* will no longer be F since the F is the result of H concatenated with the declarative boundary marker L%. In interrogation, it would be H+RISE%

2.4 INTERIM SUMMARY

This section explains some of the most salient aspects of HKE tonal patterns, including the intonational boundaries. The results may be summarized as follows.

- (13) Intonation boundary tones: L% (declarative) and Rise% (interrogative) Lexical tones: H lexically stipulated
- H-spread: H is spread to an adjacent toneless syllable within the word
- M-assignment: M is assigned to initial syllables that are not assigned H
- Downstep: M triggers downstep on the following H would be a musical mountainous landscape.

From (13), one can imagine what the music of HKE must be like. It would have cascading cadences of spans of H plateaus. Each intonation phrase having a low ending if it is a declarative, but soaring up as it rises to indicate an interrogative. A poem read in HKE would be a musical mountainous landscape.



3. THE HONG KONG COMPLEX

At a Hong Kong Baptist University poetry reading night on Nov 18, 2015, I got to ask Nicholas Wong during break time if during composition his mind processed the sounds in HKE. His answer was, —always in English, though I sometimes f*cked up my syntax^l. This short exchange had an added impact given a quotation from Mr Wong which is found on the internet:

Seeing the term [second language] often drives me crazy because it reinforces a linguistic inferiority in me.
Kaya Press, Interview with Nicolas Wong, 7 May 2015, 7am
<http://kaya.com/2015/05/interview-nicholas-wong/>

Wong is not alone in this feeling. The similar frustration sometimes jumps from within the mind on the actual pages. A composition by Tammy Ho Lai-Ming, a Hong Kong poet, reads:

[...]
But let's not boast to our neighbours
How much more beautiful we are,
How much more intellectually-trained.

They don't care. They live less ambiguously. They speak
One dialect only. Already they are free
From feeling embarrassed when pronouncing
/t/ as /t/, /n/ as /n/ or /z/ as /s/. They don't feel
Excluded when two real English speakers

Are in the same room, commenting on
Memoirs of A Geisha or
Bill Ashcroft's postcolonial theories.
We dare not open our mouths, lest our strong HK
Accent betrays our humble origin. The terrible
Flatness of our tone, the inflexibility of our tongue. (Ho 2015:84)

I find it hard to explain the layers of complexity that must underlie the experience of literary creativity in Hong Kong. A poet who has a voice (HKE), being robbed of it because of a socially imposed external

standard (British or American), is compelled to adapt to a second language. A second language that is exonormative⁸ and layered with false hopes (from the poet to the audience) and false impressions (from the audience of the poet) because that language belonged to none, except perhaps the policy makers' whose good intentions were for the populous to communicate with the rest of the world. This situation is probably true not only of Hong Kong's English poets, but presumably potentially applicable to all poets who write in a language that they do not feel is entirely their own. With the growing widespread use of Putonghua that is based on the Beijing standard, we can expect similar tendencies of Sinophone poetry as well. I am less sure about Francophone and Hispanophone or Lusophone cases, though one wouldn't be surprised if a Quebecois or a Haitian might sometimes be apologetic for their grammars against a Parisian standard.⁹

⁸ Use of an external standard, say British or American. See Schneider (2011:34).

⁹ Though one should note the Canadian director/actor Xavier Dolan whose acclaimed films are in J'oual rather than in International French. <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/globe-debate/nobodys-laughing-at-xavier-dolan-now/article20992162/>

Consider the following poem by a primary four student:

When I Am Happy

When I am happy, I jump up.

When I am sad, I drink 7-up.

When I am angry, I eat a Chupa Chup.

When I am lonely,

I throw some plastic cups.

Chris Tsui

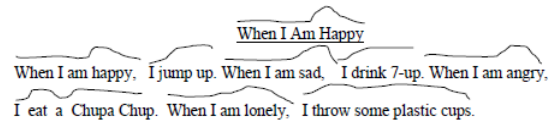
Primary 4, Victoria Primary School

In Lim and Page (2001:58)

The first thing that one notices is the rhyme [ʌp] *up*, *up*, and *cups*, with *Chup* being out of place because

the brand is pronounced [tʃʊpə tʃʊps]. The poet here obviously intends for *Chups* to be pronounced [tʃʌps] to fit the rhyming scheme, though the official pronunciation would have that as [tʃu:ps]. Correction would certainly spoil much of the fun in this very innocent work. That aside, if one were to venture a HKE reading with the tones in place, the poem takes on an additional veneer of playfulness. Here is the poem again, with pitch profiles indicated above each line based on the tonal studies provided in section 2.

(14) HKE poetry with pitch profiles



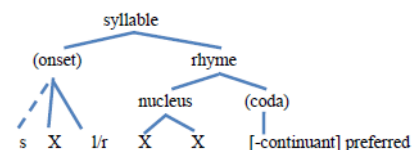
There is music in the poem that is otherwise lost if we were to read it in RP using whatever metrical stress applicable. There is no doubt that reading in any accent would produce interesting flavours and effects. The claim here is not that one accent is superior over another, but that the voice of the poet is one part of the art that should not be missed, and would be missed if one had no access to the phonology.¹⁰

To be fair, one has no idea if the poet had in his mind a very Hong Kong sounding English or something in imitation of a local rendering of the British standard by his teachers. However, the fact that there is a HKE phonology out there that is not often heard in the poetry readings in Hong Kong by Hong Kong poets is cause for reflection.

The meter and music is just one aspect of prosody. There is much more. For example, many HKE has a syllable structure that is quite unlike RP. Wee's (2015b) recent study suggests that the syllable structure may look like (15).

¹⁰ One is reminded of James Joyce (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=grJC1yu4KRw>) and Robert Burns (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2bRDae-87sM>).

(15) The HKE syllable template



In (15), the syllable is shown to have obligatory nucleus that allows for branching, optional onset and optional coda. The coda is highly selective as to the

number and kinds of segments allowed in that position, whereas the onset allows for greater complexity. This syllable is quite different from those allowed in RP or Gen Am where codas can have up to four segments and the third segment in the onset could be either [j], [w], [l], or [r]. Further, HKE syllables do not contrast for length (or to be technically correct, weight) and are all bimoraic (i.e. all heavy). In short, HKE is syllable-timed rather than accent-time, which means all syllables take up roughly the same amount of time, in contrast to RP/Gen Am where each primary stress is roughly evenly spaced and syllables would have to stretch or be squashed to fit in, exemplified in examples like (16) if you try reading so that the time interval between * are roughly the same. This can be done with a metronome set at largo (approx. 60BPM) for RP/Gen.Am and vivace (approx. 170BPM) for HKE.

(16) Syllable versus accent timing

* * * *	accents in RP/Gen.Am.
<i>Incredibilibistic hypotheses and absurd theories</i>	
* * * * * * * * * * * * * * * *	syllables in HKE

4. SOUNDS OF SINGAPORE IN ENGLISH

It is hard not to talk about Singapore which is in so many ways such a sister city to Hong Kong. I recall a childhood where poetry reading was modelled on the British Standard, but it now seems that Singaporeans are quite comfortable in their own skin in the recent years.

Like Hong Kong, Singapore was formerly a British colony with a strong Chinese presence. Unlike Hong Kong, Singapore enjoys great diversity in significant proportions even across the majority ethnic Chinese. There is significant presence of Malay and a handful of Indian languages. It is hard to discern the linguistic sources of various phonological aspects of Singapore English (henceforth SgE), though Lim (2009, 2011, 2014) and Ng (2012) have offered some discussion. Of particular interest is Ng (2011) whose descriptions of SgE tone patterns are given below.

(17) Singapore English Tone Patterns (adapted from Ng 2011)

- a. High tone (H) is assigned to the final syllable of the phonological word.
- b. Mid tone (M) spans all non-final stressed syllables.
- c. Low tone (L) is assigned to initial unstressed syllables.
- d. Remaining unstressed syllables receive mid tone by rightward spreading from stressed syllables.

e.g. sée (H), Énglish (MH),
 élephant (MMH),
 Índonésia (MMMH),
 machíne (LH), hibíscus
 (LMH), América
 (LMMH)

In Ng’s telling, the stressed syllables, indicated in (17) with an accent, receive M tones which spread until the penultimate syllable. Final syllables receive H and initial syllables, if unstressed receive L. Ng’s main phonetic evidence for stress in SgE comes from vowel intensity, albeit noting the absence of pitch and duration correlates as well as the paucity of perceptual studies to support any claim of stress perception by SgE speakers. I remain somewhat sceptical of the stress analysis given that SgE speakers have consistently found stress to be elusive, but that is tangential for the present discussion.

Instead of embarking on a comparison of the tonologies of SgE and HKE, it might be more straightforward to get a sense of the local flavour through listening to the poem —Ode to the Memory of Ah Meng¹ by Gwee Li Sui (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3JkO0ZlwpPE>), the third stanza is provided below accompanied by a phonetic transcription of the author’s reading.

(18) Ode to the Memory of Ah Meng (third stanza, Gwee 2015)

So it was that she our Foreign Talent
 [so it wɔs ðæt ʃi ɐw fɔ:ɹən te.lənt]
 H M P M H M R H H H

grew into our choice First Lady. She our
 [gru in.tu ɐwə tʃɔ:ɹs fə:s ler.di ʃi ɐwə]
 H M M ML H H M H H ML

illegal immigrant found employment
 [i.li.gəl i.mi.grənt faʊnd ɛm.plɔɪ.mənt]
 M H H M M H H M H H

with the State – though detained to her last hour!
 [wi ðə steɪt dou di:ten tu ɜ les ɐwə]
 M M R H M P M M H R F

Ah Meng our rare durian-loving angmo,
 [ɛ meŋ ɐw re dʒu:reɪn lə.vɪŋ a.mo]
 M H M H M H H H M H

Our ambassador who was not travel-fit ...
 [ɐwə ɛm.be.sə.də hu wəs nɔt trɛ.vɪ fɪt]
 M M M M H M L H M H H

As mum, she failed to stop at two or three,
 [ɛs mam ʃi feld tʊ stɒp ət tu ɔ tʰri]
 M P M H M H M H L P

worse, let her kids run wild, swing to-and-fro!
 [wɔs le? ɜ kits rən wɪl swɪŋ tu ən flo]
 H H L F R R R H M P

As grand Monkey Mentor, she had her Mit
 [ɛs græn mən.jkɹ mən.tɔ ʃi hət hɛ mit]
 M H R H H H M M R

The People breakfasts regularlee!
 [tɛ pi.pəl bræk.fəs ɹ.ɡjʊ.lə.li]
 L M H M H M M L

Legend:

- . : syllable break
- H : high tone R : rising tone
- M : mid tone F : falling tone
- L : low tone P : peaking tone

There are a number of interesting observations one can make from the above reading. The use of peaking tones is one striking feature. For those of us who are familiar with the language ecology of Singapore, syllables with a peaking tone are actually quite common among Malay speakers of Singapore English, though this has hitherto not been systematically studied. Another interesting observation is how Gwee's reading matches by-and-large the descriptions in (17), but with various exceptions, such as the use of rising or peaking tones. Two possibilities are open here, both likely true in varying degrees: (i) Ng's descriptions in (17) are incomplete and (ii) Gwee is influenced by his education in speaking —properl English. The validity of (i) comes from the fact that the descriptions in (17) have not considered the multi-racial composition in Singapore English. Evidence of (ii) is a little trickier and would actually require more careful listening. It turns out that Gwee's articulation for certain words are not always consistent. For example *our* is sometimes pronounced as two syllables and sometimes as monosyllabic. The monosyllabic pronunciation is the textbook version advocated in Singapore at least in the 1980s when Gwee and one of the authors of this paper (Wee) were in school.

5. CONCLUSION

If poetry is to be seen as the brainchild of the poet, it is one with a voice which is by no means less essential than the rest of its anatomy. It can be a voice lost in the past, waiting and wanting to be revived; it can be one with fingerprints, bearing traces of its origin and uniqueness. Prima facie, an Asian—among all regions—poet writes in a English universally acknowledged as possessed by a literate man of good education, yet it can also be an —Englishl from the local spectrum, an aspect of meaning, sentiment or charm that should not be missed. For otherwise, we fall prey, composer and reader alike, to the tyranny of the exonormative standard.

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