

# **The vital few: Agents of change in contact varieties of English in multilingual Asia**

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Restructured varieties of English that have emerged in the Asia-Pacific region afford rich explorations for the dynamics of contact in multilingual ecologies. Singapore English (SgE), considered as already having attained endonormative stabilisation by the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, is often analysed as showing influences from the more dominant – economically, numerically – southern Sinitic language(s), e.g. in the emergence of Sinitic-type tone in its prosody. However, while in all other New or learner Englishes with tone language substrates the usual pattern is for high tones to align with accented syllables, SgE's prosody by contrast is consistently word-/phrase-final-prominent. An explanation may be found in the Peranakans – descendants of 18<sup>th</sup>/19<sup>th</sup>-century southern Chinese seafaring traders in Malaya and local women, who then became a prestigious, privileged minority group in the Straits Settlements with pro-British alignments and early access to English education. Word-/phrase-final prominence is found in the Peranakans' English, which in turn derives from their original vernacular Baba Malay. In this we may note the significance of a founder population's features as persistent and influential in a multilingual ecology. A counterpoint is the newly emerging variety of Hong Kong English (HKE), whose existence and status as a New variety of English is often queried, primarily because the speakers of this variety are Cantonese-dominant, hardly using English regularly and spontaneously in the majority of their everyday domains, but for two exceptions. In computer-mediated communication (CMC), English is significantly preferred over Cantonese, and in popular culture and the media, Cantonese-based concepts have currency. Both platforms appear to be driving linguistic innovation and the development of HKE, e.g. in the frequency of use of English calques of Cantonese terms, in particular in the younger, university-going community. Even while SgE and HKE are varieties developing in markedly different scenarios – one in a postcolonial era, the other in the current knowledge economy – their evolution appear to exemplify the law of the vital few: although comprising a small minority, the Peranakans and the tertiary students would seem to be the agents of innovation and change, a consequence of being multilingual, early/primary English adopters/users, and dominant in their ecologies.