

## Following *Langscape*...

GRAHAME T. BILBOW & LI LAN respond to Pam Peters's *Langscape* Survey (*ET*, 1995–2001) with commentary and comparisons based on their Business Corpus at Hong Kong Polytechnic University

### Introduction

*Langscape* is a joint project of *English Today*, Cambridge University Press and Macquarie University, organized by Professor Pam Peters at Macquarie in order to survey contemporary English usage worldwide. The project started in 1995 and produced its final report in Jan 2001: See *ET*65. Approximately 1,800 responses to questionnaires were received on various points of English usage in six sections in either postal form or e-form via the World Wide Web. The results have been regularly reported both in *English Today* and on the Web and have attracted much interest. The data elicited by *Langscape* reinforces the view that 'Because

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English is a world language, any account of usage that is limited to one person's views and resources is inadequate' (Peters, 1998:4).

This paper is driven by a desire to discuss some of *Langscape*'s assumptions about variation in English usage in relation to empirical evidence from the Hong Kong PolyU Business Corpus (PUBC)<sup>1</sup>, which was compiled by Hong Kong Polytechnic University with the aim of investigating business languages used in Hong Kong. The corpus contains 1.2 million words of text from a variety of business sources in Hong Kong. It differs from other corpora in that: (1) it covers three languages: English, Chinese and Japanese; (2) it bears local marks; and (3) it focuses on financial services, namely banking, accounting, auditing, insurance and investment.

The designer of *Langscape* intended to investigate the use of certain words by means of questionnaires which queried whether particular forms of a word are used more commonly than others.

The results of such questionnaire-based research must, however, be judged in the light of the fact that it rests on indirect evidence of experience and attitudes, rather than documented actual practice. As Hatherall has put it in general terms:

Are the subjects saying here what they do, or what they think they do, or what they think they ought to do, or indeed a mixture of all three? ... do we not, on this basis, arrive at a consensus on how subjects are likely to behave when faced with a particular questionnaire, rather than authentic data.... (1984:184)

This paper pursues certain issues raised by the *Langscape* Survey, and probes special usages among Hong Kong's English users. Nevertheless, it must be recognised that, as distinct from Singapore English, which is documented as a "true" variety of English, the English used in Hong Kong is less coherent and pervasive, with significant variation among users.

### 1 The use of letter e

The first *Langscape* questionnaire focused on the use of *e* in English, which is not only the

most frequent of the five vowel symbols, but also the most common letter of the alphabet. Although native English scholars have noted the loss of final *e*, e.g. changes from *facette* to *facet*, from *toilette* to *toilet*, from *citie* to *city*, second-language learners just tend to take this for granted as a feature of modern spelling.

Peters found from *Langscape* that her respondents are currently most inclined to use “-es” plurals with words ending in -o, such as *echo(es)*, *hero(es)*, etc., although they were never endowed with final -e in the singular. This suggests that the gratuitous *e* is beginning to disappear from the plurals of various words ending in -o. However, our evidence from the PUBC still shows the conventional way of pluralising such words (Table 1).

*Langscape* also revealed a strong tendency for dropping the letter *e* before the suffixes -able, -ment, -ing, and -y. Although most words used in *Langscape* do not occur in the PUBC, data from the corpus also shows mixed use of *e* in English as used in Hong Kong. However, a marked preference for the classical digraphs is clear (Panel 1).

As suggested by other morphological research, ‘the letter *e* is the key to many alternative spellings in twentieth-century English. Its presence or absence in suffixed forms of words is usually of no consequence to the meaning of the word, and won’t affect communication’ (Peters, 1998: 5).

## 2 To capitalize or decapitalize?

The tendency to reduce capitals in English writing can be seen as a process of modernization that has occurred since the eighteenth century. Twentieth-century English has tended to move away from this, though the practice is more advanced in some quarters than others.

Peters found that several variables affect whether capital letters are used or not. The regional and professional contexts of communication are an important influence, though individual words and phrases set their own agendas according to the speed with which they are assimilated. Europeans tend to stick to *Commonwealth*, but decapitalize *president*, while the Americans tend to do the reverse. Australians seem rather less inclined than others to shed the capital letter as used in various political expressions.

The words listed in *Langscape 2* are mostly literary words which are not commonly used in

**Table 1 The plural of words ending in -o (PUBC)**

-es	Frequency	-s	Frequency
cargoes	2	casinos	3
echoes	1	pesos	11
zeroes	1	portfolios	49
		ratios	46
		scenarios	10
		studios	4

### PUBC data: the letter e

eyeing	5	eying	0
ageing	4	aging	0
queueing	4	queuing	3
sizeable	24	sizable	2
discloseable	19	disclosable	2
exchangeable	3	exchangable	1
exerciseable	5	exercisable	14
knowledgeable	6	knowledgable	0
rechargeable	3	rechargable	0
measureable	0	measurable	3
rateable	1	ratable	0
acknowledgement	12	acknowledgment	3
judgement	40	judgment	25

business contexts. Only 4 of them, *government*, *commonwealth*, *bank* and *federal*, occur in the PUBC. All 12 *commonwealth*'s are capitalized. Of the 158 occurrences of the word *federal*, only 16.5% use lower case *f*. *Federal Court* and *Federal Funds* can be found in both cases. The concordances from the PUBC illustrate this (Panel 2).

There are sentences in which a previously mentioned proper name is repeated in a reduced form, relying on the generic component. Depending on the context of publication, this generic word may be decapitalized. The word *bank* provides a typical example. Since the PUBC is not semantically tagged, we could not check the word *bank*, which had a frequency of 3,148, in terms of its occurrence both as a proper name and as a repeated form. However, such usage can be explained by the fact that *bank* is polysemous, and the capital represents the writer's attempt in each case to connect it more specifically with the previous reference. The principles of cohesion are such that readers are likely to make the connection, yet a little redundancy is perhaps desirable. The

**PUBC data: capitalization**

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All-text materials relevant to federal and state health care compl  
 e also referred to variety of federal and state regulatory and enf  
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 created by Congress to study federal state, local and internati  
 ation and subject to ordinary federal tax rate up to maximum 39.6

word *council* appeared 411 times in the PUBC. Only 26 are in lower case, taking up 6% of occurrences. As can be seen in the concordance (Panel 3), the notion of discourse repetition impacting on the use of capitals does not seem to be operating in the PUBC.

The *Councils* here represent various government institutions and branches, namely the Legislative Council, the Executive Council, General Insurance Council of Hong Kong, Life Insurance Council, the Travel Industry Council, the Trade Development Council, the Consumer Council and so on.

It is also interesting to notice the various forms of the term *Hong Kong*, including full capitalization, partial capitalization and abbreviation (Table 2).

**3 Singular, plural and agreement**

The dilemma of grammatical agreement or concord is discussed in *Langscape 3*. Peters discerns three principles: formal agreement, notional agreement and proximity. Formal agreement is expressed in a sentence through the matching of words in terms of number, gender and person. Notional agreement draws attention to itself in cases where the agreement diverges from that which might be expected according to the formal principle. The divergence may take the form of a plural where the singular might be expected, or vice versa. Prox-

**Table 2**

Item	Frequency
Hong Kong	6,027
Hongkong	388
HK	2,504

imity is a major factor in the overruling of formal agreement, under the influence of the nearest noun or noun phrase. Again, this may work to replace the formal agreement in either direction. All three phenomena are found in the PUBC. Formal agreement is perhaps naturally the most common, as in:

- (i) *The setback in the stock market has been a painful experience for many of us.*
- (ii) *Customers who maintain an account with our bank can authorize a direct debit from their account to settle the remittance amount.*

Conversely, notional agreement depends on the writer’s concern with either the group or its individual members, and leads the reader to consider them as one or the other.

- (iv) *The Executive Committee meets regularly to review the management and performance of the Bank.*

Collective words such as *committee*, *government*, *board* and *company* were usually consid-

m against the Exchange or the Council for any loss or damage whatsoever for inspection or audit by an these Rules available to the Council had highlighted the “lack of tive markets. It said the council approval:- (a) whenever the Council has a statutory obligation to ness Risk and the CFO’. The Council has made the following appoin requirements 415. Where the Council has reasonable grounds for th be submitted directly to the Council in accordance with Rule 427(1 ement of business, notify the Council in writing of the date on whi olicity-holders’ interests, the council is also preparing a standard s of the SEHK and HKSCC. The Council is constituted as follows: m,” he said. However, the council is more optimistic. “Ever olicity. It is believed the council is under pressure from the co ds and other documents as the Council may demand. (2) In addition g Partnership except that the Council may disclose the information such persons appointed by the Council may from time to time inspect 02 to 407 both inclusive, the Council may increase the Financial Re or such longer period as the Council may specify, of the receipt o ter the end of a month as the Council may stipulate. (2) In submi the Securities Ordinance, the Council may, upon written application rt II forward the same to the Council members permitted to sit unde s in question. (2) If the Council notifies the Commission pursu ee will work closely with the Council of Advisors; set up a new I nformation or evidence to the Council or any Committee), no member nformation or evidence to the Council or any Committee) of Part II, tter is being referred to the Council or SEOCH in accordance with C or those Committees). 2. S nformation or evidence to the Council otherwise determines. (3) A tnership concerned unless the Council otherwise directs in writing, Business 428. (1) Unless the Council regarding the Member’s or Dea ion should be obtained by the Council shall as soon as practicable e. 7.2 The Secretary to the Council shall be final and conclusive al. 7.6 The decision of the Council shall deal with this matter a e Disciplinary Committee, the Council shall determine. SEHK (98 the relevant Committee or the Council shall deal with the matter as to the Council, whereupon the Council shall fix a date for the hear Clause 4.18.3 of Part II, the Council shall not be required to give final and conclusive and the Council shall think fit. (6) Every ch disciplinary action as the Council shall think fit or deal with or such other penalty as the Council shall think fit. A Member or e, disciplinary action as the Council shall think fit. A Member or . Mr Frankland said: “The Council supports the Bill in principl te to the satisfaction of the Council that he or it is able to comp cern had been raised to the council that mere exchanges of such d nless otherwise agreed by the Council the Monthly Reporting Stateme 1 In any case referred to the Council under Clause 4.18.1 of Part I er to avoid.” He said the council was urging flexibility becaus to attend any hearing in the Council whilst it is considering any tion to those members of the Council who have declared an interest nnovation and Technology. The Council will advise on all aspects of lity and, as a corollary, the Council will need to commit to clear

ered singular in the PUBC. When individuals need to be referred to, the term *the members of the Committee* was used and followed by the plural. This indicates that *committee*, *board* and *company* always denote the group rather than its individual members in

English in a business context in Hong Kong. Although it may seem unusual to native English speakers, since nouns in the Chinese language may have plural notions but not plural forms, there exist in the PUBC many plural forms that occur when writers seek to express the quan-

Kong Branch. The Bank is confident that the newly appointed mana  
 economic growth. Our Group is confident about the future of the mark  
 s making good Group remains confident in the progress  
 customer base, the Company is confident that the number of new cardho  
 23 June 1998. The Board is confident that the new leadership will  
 sound growth and the Group is confident that it is well positioned t  
 e you have. The Hong Kong community has always been ahead of its  
 to deny that the securities community has reached an implicit conse  
 private sector. The banking community has so far been strenuously o  
 The members of the Committee are Mr Vincent H C Cheng (Cha  
 the members of the Steering Committee have devoted a lot  
 hairman Michael Sharpe said board members were convinced the country ha  
 tralian Stock Exchange's nine board members are selected by a nomination

**Table 3**

Word	PUBC (1.2 mil.)
billings	15
lettings	2
restructurings	13
sackings	2
signings	4
tradings	4
understandings	9
workings	2
maturities	9

tity of a noun, either concrete or abstract. In Table 3, occurrences of “non-standard” plurals in the PUBC are shown. In all cases, such plurals do not occur in the British National Corpus (BNC) Sample (2 million words).

The PUBC contains few examples of plural forms of words from Latin. Where they occurred, there is no clear preference for the English or Latin plural pattern. Thus, the word *memorandum* has 60 singulars, 1 *memorandums* and 1 *memoranda*. The singular form of the word *formula* has an occurrence of 28. However, its plural forms are one Latinated *formulae* and two anglicized *formulas*. All the plural forms for the word *focus* were *focuses*, not *foci*. The words *census* and *stimulus* appear 5 and 19 times respectively without any plural.

**4 Gemini**

Double consonants cause difficulties for many users of English, in the stems of words like

**Table 4**

Geminated		Ungeminated	
channelled	3	channeled	3
budgetted	2	budgeted	4
benefitted	1	benefited	17
combatting	1	combating	1
equalled	1	equaled	0
focussed	7	focused	91
focussing	4	focusing	38
fulfillment	2	fulfilment	2
millennium	108	millenium	2
travelling	23	traveling	1
totalled	43	totaled	1
labelled	0	labeled	2
modelled	8	modeled	4
enrollment	7	enrolment	2

*accommodation* and *millennium*, and at the junction with suffixes, as in *medal(l)ist* and *travel(l)er*. In some cases, either appears to be used; in others, only one spelling appears to be acceptable. The rules are many and varied and difficult to generalize, and spellings tend to be learnt by rote in early language learning. Therefore geographical differences in learning practices may explain varieties that exist in the PUBC (Table 4).

**5 British spelling or American spelling**

‘Spelling is a good point at which to introduce a major factor in language variation, and that is

**Table 5**

BrE	Freq	AmE	Freq
analyse	44	analyze	7
authorise	177	authorize	139
authorisation	58	authorization	51
amortise	16	amortize	0
amortisation	24	amortization	1
behaviour	25	behavior	2
capitalisation	127	capitalization	33
capitalise	48	capitalize	10
categorise	6	categorize	2
centralise	18	centralize	5
endeavour	7	endeavor	1
programme	195	program	92
cheque	52	check	13
catalogue	12	catalog	0
favour	64	favor	6

the extent to which a feature in language use is “institutionalised” (Quirk & Stein, 1990:46). Data from the corpus support the view that two major English language varieties exist in the English used in Hong Kong, and it is perhaps not surprising to see that British English enjoys a degree of dominance (Table 5).

It may, however, be surprising how common American spelling appears to be in the PUBC, given that language policy in Hong Kong government, law, business and education often specifies that a British spelling model should be followed. The use of American spelling may result from the fact that a large number of professionals brought up or educated in the USA work in Hong Kong, and there are also many people who are not sure which conventions belong to which style. While Americans and Britons may use their respective spelling models fairly consistently, non-native speakers may tend to use mixed spelling models. However, it is important to recognise that in most respects British and American English spellings are very similar, and seldom lead to misunderstandings. American English is, however, becoming more common around the world due to the influence of American business, technology, popular culture and the like.

## 6 Apostrophes and stops

In English, apostrophes and stops serve a variety of purposes. In some words they have *ad hoc* or interim value; in others, they seem essential – in the absence of any other indicator. It is noticeable that in the PUBC, there is a much higher frequency of possessive use of apostrophes than in the British National Corpus sample. This may have something to do with non-native English users’ difficulties in using prepositional phrases (e.g., banks in Hong Kong), noun phrases (e.g., Hong Kong banks) and apostrophe ’s (e.g., Hong Kong’s banks) consistently (Table 6).

In her final report of *Langscape*, Peters reported a decline in using stops in abbreviated titles and common words. She found that ‘while the native-speaker group is letting go of the stops and apostrophes in various words and names, they continue to be endorsed in second-language users of English. ... but greater use of stops was most interestingly seen in the Asian group. They register greater majorities in favor of stops for almost every item, and indeed counter to the overall trend in cases such as “Sunset Blvd.,” “Dr.” and “Mrs.”’ (Peters, 2001: 15). However, this conclusion was based on questionnaire responses at the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, and may

**PUBC data: Stops or no stops**

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 Mr Dragon Wong's comment on Dr. Doom's sarcastic message is q  
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 them were Dr. T.K. Ann and Dr. Henry Fok, Vice Chairmen of  
 ciation are Mr John C C Chan, Dr. Ho Tim and Mr H K Lo. Mr John  
 H K Lo. Mr John C C Chan and Dr. Ho Tim, being eligible, offer  
 John C C Chan, Dr Y T Cheng, Dr. Ho Tim, Mr David T C Ho, Mr J  
 Stanley Ho as its chairman. Dr. Ho, who has spent the last fo

**Table 6**

Word	Freq. (PUBC)	Freq. BNC
Hong Kong's	738	5
Group's	484	63
Company's	479	44
Bank's	272	2
Government's	204	58
China's	181	16
Year's	123	92
People's	115	95
World's	114	48
Asia's	73	1
Yesterday's	69	17
Stock Exchange's	69	0

not represent current usage among the business community in Hong Kong. In fact, data from the PUBC reveal a rather different picture: nearly half of the 3,296 *Mrs* are without stops; of 241 *Ms*, only 42 are followed by stops; 40 out of 99 *Dr* have stops (Panel 5).

Based on the idea that more Americans observe conventional abbreviations than Britons, Peters suggests that 'writers of English there (in Hong Kong) are subject to both older British and newer American influences'. Our data, on the other hand, suggest that English used in Hong Kong still tends to follow British practice, old and new, in omitting stops. Other evidence can be found from the words *UK* (6/198), *USA* (6/36), *HK* (10/2,056) and *Dept* (5/12).

**7 Conclusion**

Project *Langscape* initiated a fascinating survey of international usage of English. It is clear that corpus evidence can best support such a study, for it is difficult for any individual to describe by intuition how a language is used and changes in real practice.

We would be the first to admit that a 1.2 million words corpus is rather limited. However, some general trends can be observed from the PUBC. Firstly, it appears that two major English language varieties co-exist in Hong Kong, with only slight domination by the British variety. This is perhaps surprising, given that language policy in Hong Kong actually stipulates that if there are two varieties of a word, the British form is to be preferred, and schools in Hong Kong still mostly use British English as the norm. We imagine that the entertainment industry is decisive in transmitting American terms and usage, and making them equally well-known in Hong Kong. With more and more people using worldwide English for business, politics and general communication, English has become a vast complex with numerous distinguishable varieties.

Whatever their strengths, and whatever their advantages may be over the use of questionnaires for self-assessment, language corpora can only describe the language. They do not make judgements about which forms are right and which are wrong, but can indicate where the preferences lie and suggest the direction in which elements of the language are moving. Contrastive corpora across the English-using world, as in the International Corpus of English (ICE) project, may yet be able to provide the

kind of information that would tell us where English at large and its many world communities are going over the next few decades. □

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### SNIPPETS 3

(From Joan Dunayer, *Animal Equality: Language and Liberation*, Ryce Publishing, Fairborn Court, Derwood, MD 20855-2227, USA: 0-9706475-5-7, hb \$25.00)

The concept of nonhuman rights completed my shift in worldview. No conscious being should be treated like an exploitable thing, Tom Regan argued in *The Case for Animal Rights*. He stressed the moral rights of individuals, nonhuman and human. Currently the law recognizes only human rights. Regan proposed changing nonhuman animals' legal status from property to person (rights-holder). Yes, I thought. Universally, humans exploit and kill other animals because legally they can. As history shows, humans readily take advantage of those with less power. Because they receive little moral consideration from humans and lack political power, nonhumans are especially vulnerable to concerted abuse.

Combining Regan's ideas with Singer's [Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation*, New York Review of Books, 1990], I concluded: Sentience entitles nonhuman animals to legal rights, which must protect them, as individuals, from speciesism. I left the psychology program, stopped eating flesh, and soon avoided all animal-derived food.

Having previously worked as a writer and editor, earned master's degrees in English education and English literature, and taught high school and college English, I returned to a focus on language and worked as a writer-editor, primarily on college English textbooks. Increasingly I noticed that standard English usage legitimizes, trivializes, and conceals speciesist injustice.

As a feminist, I knew that words can foster oppression or liberation, deception or truth. Sexist and speciesist language share certain features, I found – such as pronoun use, metaphors, and syntax that discount the experiences of those deemed inferior. In *The Sexual Politics of Meat* Carol Adams linked sexism and speciesism. She also cited evasive and speciesist language that serves the flesh industry. Her analysis prompted me to think more about connections between nonhuman and human oppression, and about the role of euphemism and definition in keeping nonhumans oppressed.

I began to write this book.