

Tohoku University, Faculty of Arts and Letters
14 October 2025

**Un/anticipated itineraries:
Rethinking mobilities, contact, and the evolution of Asian Englishes**
Lisa Lim
VinUniversity

Abstract

In this lecture, I foreground several mobilities that are significant for our study of emergent varieties of English in Asia, with particular attention not to the usual suspects – the English-speaking settlers and administrators, and the immediate local communities and languages – but rather to itineraries which are often unanticipated. These, I suggest, need to be appreciated for their significance in the contact dynamics that ensued, and the corresponding impact on the evolution of Asian Englishes (also see Ansaldo & Lim 2020; Lim 2022a, b).

My first contemplation comprises minority communities which came into being as a consequence of historical migration (Lim 2016a), focusing on the Peranakans (also known as Straits-born Chinese or Babas), descendants of early southern Chinese seafaring traders to the Malay archipelago who married local women, and settled in the Southeast Asian region in the 17th/18th centuries. I examine the community with regard to their spatio-social mobility (Kaufmann, Bergman and Joye 2004), in how they maximised their potential on (i) access to different forms and degrees of mobility, (ii) competence to recognise and make use of access, and (iii) appropriation of particular choices (Lim 2020). Attention to such communities and their languages, though apparently on the periphery, is in fact crucial for fuller and more rigorous accounts of the linguistic features observed in the emerging variety of English in an ecology, in this case, Singapore English (Lim 2009, 2011, 2016b).

My second contemplation involves an examination of ‘cultural words’ (after Hoogervorst 2018) which have assumed a prominent position in Asian imaginaries and languages. Just as material artefacts provide insights into population movements, so too do intangible ones. Examining the evolution of lexical artefacts such as *congee*, *godown*, *joss*, *shroff*, I illustrate how charting the routes of their transmission affords us a more nuanced consideration of the contact amongst populations and languages across the networks of the Indian Ocean and South China Sea beyond the usual identification of conventional colonisers and indigenous populations (Lim 2022b), which are equally as critical in the formation of Asian Englishes. Such close study of lexical transmission also offers, at the methodological level, an approach to reconstructing sociolinguistic trajectories.

Finally, I consider the domain of computer-mediated communication as a vital platform – in particular in non-English-dominant communities – for intense language contact and consequent rapid language change, as well as as a crucial channel for spread to other, more everyday domains (Lim 2015). Using Hong Kong as illustration of such a sociolinguistics of globalisation, I show how diverse mobilities – encompassed within contemporary (return) migration, communication technology, art, and politics – come together to prompt, and even catalyse, the evolution of a variety such as Hong Kong English (Lim 2015, 2022b).

Giving more than a superficial glance to the unanticipated – the communities beyond the British settlers and administrators, the populations on the edges of the mainstream majorities, the domains and platforms of the digital world – affords us rich and invaluable revelations to further our scholarship in language contact.

References

- Ansaldo, Umberto & Lisa Lim. 2020. Language contact in the Asian region. In Evangelia Adamou & Yaron Matras, eds. *Routledge Handbook of Language Contact*. London/ New York: Routledge.
- Hoogervorst, Tom. 2018. Sailors, tailors, cook, and crooks: On loanwords and neglected lives in Indian Ocean ports. *Itinerario* 42(3): 516-548.
- Kaufmann, V., M.M. Bergmann & D. Joye, 2004. Motility: Mobility as capital. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 28(4): 745–756.
- Lim, Lisa. 2009. Revisiting English prosody: (Some) New Englishes as tone languages? *The Typology of Asian Englishes*, Special Issue, *English World-Wide* 30(2). 218-239.

- Lim, Lisa. 2011. Tone in Singlish: Substrate features from Sinitic and Malay. In Claire Lefebvre, ed. *Creoles, Their Substrates and Language Typology*. (Typological Studies in Language 95.) Amsterdam/ Philadelphia: John Benjamins. 271-287.
- Lim, Lisa. 2015. Catalysts for change: On the evolution of contact varieties in the multilingual knowledge economy. Ms. The University of Hong Kong.
- Lim, Lisa. 2016a. The art of losing: From *java* and *patois* to post-vernacular vitality –Repositioning the periphery in global Asian ecologies. In Martin Pütz & Luna Filipović, eds. *Endangered Languages and Languages in Danger: Issues of Ecology, Policy and Documentation*. (IMPACT Studies in Language and Society.) Amsterdam/ Philadelphia: John Benjamins. 283-312. <https://doi.org/10.1075/impact.42.12lim>
- Lim, Lisa. 2016b. Multilingual mediators: The role of the Peranakans in the contact dynamics of Singapore. In Li Wei, ed. *Multilingualism in the Chinese Diaspora World-Wide*. (Routledge Critical Studies in Multilingualism.) New York/ Abingdon: Routledge. 216-233.
- Lim, Lisa. 2020. Im/Mobilities. In Umberto Ansaldi & Miriam Meyerhoff, eds. *Routledge Handbook of Pidgin and Creole Languages*. London/ New York: Routledge. 335-<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003107224>
- Lim, Lisa. 2022a. Agents and artefacts: Sociolinguistic itineraries and language contact and evolution in Monsoon Asia. 1st Winter School on Migration Linguistics. Theme: Migration Linguistics: Principles and Processes. Migration Linguistics Unit, Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, organised in collaboration with the International Organization for Migration, Tokyo. 9-11 February 2022.
- Lim, Lisa. 2022b. What it is like in words: Sociolinguistic itineraries and afterlives in global Asias. In Jerry Won Lee, ed. *The Sociolinguistics of Global Asias*. Routledge. 52-67.

Bio

Lisa Lim is the Director of Engagement and Development of the UNESCO Chair in Environmental Leadership, Cultural Heritage, and Biodiversity, at VinUniversity, Hanoi. She previously held professoriate positions in Singapore, Amsterdam, Hong Kong, Sydney, and Perth. Her interests centre around New – especially Asian – Englishes in multilingual ecologies; issues of language shift, endangerment, and postvernacular vitality in minority and endangered language communities; and the sociolinguistics of globalisation, with attention to migration and mobility, computer-mediated communication, and urban linguistic diversity, and their impact on contact dynamics. Publications include *Languages in Contact* (with Umberto Ansaldi, CUP, 2016). She has been the *Language Matters* columnist for Hong Kong's South China Morning Post since 2016, and is a consultant to the Oxford English Dictionary for Singapore English and Hong Kong English. She is co-founding president (with Ariane Borlongan) of the International Association for Migration Linguistics.