On a sunny Saturday 4 November, a group of scholars from various tertiary institutions in Hong Kong and other parts of Asia gathered to discuss issues of Englishization in a symposium co-organized by Shaw College and the Comparative Literature Research Programme.

What is Englishization? What has it to do with us in Asia? Questions as such were raised about the theme of the symposium, but things turned out to be exciting on the day the symposium was held. Professor Kwok-kan Tam, the organizer and Director of the Comparative Literature Research Programme at CUHK, was pleased to see a big turn up in the audience because Englishization is a social phenomenon that affects the life of so many people. At nine o’clock, the Shaw College Lecture Theatre was already packed with participants who included academics, government language officers, alumni, students, and teachers from secondary schools.

What is Englishization?

Englishization is a term generally used to describe the transformation which takes place in non-English cultures and languages as a result of exposure to the English language. In literary writings as well as in daily conversation, English phrases and words are adopted and used in new ways which deviate from their meanings in the original language, resulting in the increasing hybridization of languages. Englishization has become one of the major forces that shape the language and culture of the present and future world.

Englishization and Culture

The symposium began with presentations by Kosaku Yoshino (Sophia University) and Andy Kirkpatrick (Hong Kong Institute of Education), both of which explored Englishization as a new imaginary that has transformed social relations and the production of knowledge in Asia. In the next presentation, Agnes Lam (University of Hong Kong) argued that English has become an Asian language, especially for intercultural poetic expression in India, Singapore and Hong Kong. On the topic of Englishization in popular culture, Andrew Moody (University of Macau) demonstrated how the population change in Japan has produced a new generation of J-pop lovers. Using slides and videos as illustrations, he showed the creative use of English in Japanese pop songs. The paper jointly presented by Phil Benson and Alice Chik (Hong Kong Institute of Education) focused on the use of English in Canto pop as a marker of new identity. Using the theatre as an example of hybrid culture, Mike Ingham (Lingnan University) discussed the role of English in the culturally pluralistic arts environment of Hong Kong.

Language and Identity

On the relation between language and identity, there were three presentations dealing with different aspects of speakers’ attitude. Wee Lian Hee (Hong Kong Baptist University) discussed how English has been successfully nativized in Singapore, while Xu Zhichang (Hong Kong Institute of Education) showed data that demonstrated a significant change in Chinese political leaders’ use of address terms in recent years as a result of Englishization and Westernization. On the matter of identity, Liu Yan and Guo Yingtao (Guangdong University of Foreign Studies) concluded in their presentation that the number of English learners is growing in China, but there is little evidence to prove that students’ core values have been changed. That is to say, English is a medium for international communication in China, but it has not Englishized students’ identity.

The symposium proved to be different from other academic conferences in that all presentations turned out to be lively performances and demonstrations of the creative use of English in Asian arts, TV, film, popular culture, and literary writings. The most exciting part of the symposium lay in the dialogue and debates between speakers and the audiences on issues of politics, identity and attitude behind language use. After the symposium, many participants said that they did not expect so much fun in academic discourse and they enjoyed it.

Editor’s note: Prof. Kwok-kan Tam is Professor in the Department of English. He is a Trustee and Fellow, and a long-time supporter of Shaw College. He will leave CUHK and join another University. The editorial committee thanks him for his contribution to this issue and wishes him all the best in his new position.