

# China English and its Linguistic Features

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## Abstract

*China English is an English variety used by the native-Chinese people for communication under the specific language environment. China English is quite different from Chinglish which is misused by Chinese people. The present paper tries to make a status confirmation of China English and gives an overview and manifestations of it from the aspects of definition, history and linguistic factors, and finds that China English has the Chinese features unavoidably influenced by both the Chinese language and the way of Chinese thinking and that it possesses the linguistic features shown at the levels of phonology, lexis, syntax and discourse. The paper holds that China English is the combination of Chinese culture and the English language.*

**Key words:** World Englishes; China English; linguistic features of China English

## Introduction

English, as an international language, has become a multinational, multicultural and multifunctional language. The appearance of the concept of “Englishes” reflects the reality that English is no longer what it used to be. When we speak of English, we do not limit it to British English and American English nor to a wider range of Canadian English, Australian English, New Zealand English, etc. Instead, we are more aware of the existence of the African Englishes, Asian Englishes, or the third World Englishes, among which Singapore English, Indian English have become familiar to us because of the increasing international exchanges. What’s more, the wider spread of English in countries like China, Japan and others that originally took English simply as a foreign language but now see it as an international language has pushed forward the nativization of English used in these countries.

China English, resulting from the combination of Chinese culture and the English language, was first presented by Ge Chuangui in 1980. He used the term to refer to the distinctive vocabulary carrying unique Chinese culture in Chinese-English translation, but he did not suggest China English as a variety of English. Since then, this term has aroused great interest of many scholars in China. Wang Rongpei (1991: 1-8) pointed out, “provided that English is widely used in a non-native area with certain characteristic of indigenization, whatever its function might be, it can be regarded as an English variety. There are no reasons to deny the fact that China English is an objective language phenomenon in China.” Chinese speakers or learners’ appropriate communication in English has become one of the more heated topics for a lot of the Chinese scholars of English teaching, translation, linguistics and cross-cultural communication. On the whole, the popularity of English has pushed forward the nativization of English in China.

This paper aims to analyze the making of China English, give a general review of studies on China English and discuss the linguistic features of China English. All this will enhance cultural exchanges and facilitate intercultural communication.

## The Making of China English

Generally speaking, there are two major contexts that determine the making of China English: intranational context and international context.

## Internationalization of English

The world we live in is shrinking to a global village with the fantastic spurt of the modern science and technology. People all over the world are more mobile than ever before and more likely to travel into cultures different from their own. Thus the various cultures of the world are more accessible than ever before. Under such circumstances English is playing an increasingly important role in achieving international and intercultural communications, which in turn has enriched English itself and accelerated its internationalization.

English is internationalized. According to the statistics by Kachru (1988: 5), the total users of English are conservatively figured 350 million natives plus 400 million non-natives and an optimistic number is 2 billion. "Great Britain now makes up only a small portion of the English-speaking totaling... Any map of 'world-English' today, even without being either exhaustive or minutely detailed, would have to include the forms of the language as spoken in many areas of east, west, and south Africa, in India, Ceylon, and United States possessions or spheres or presence in the Pacific..." (ibid) It is indeed very difficult to reach a consensus as to the exact number of the actual users of English in the world, but we cannot deny that English has been spoken and used by an increasing number of non-native people and served more functions in international communication. Kachru (1988: 3) has observed this trend of English by calling it "the shift of the linguistic center". "The periphery shift not only entails the development of new varieties in the Outer Circle, but also results in the transfusion of linguistic innovations from the Outer Circle in the Inner Circle." (ibid) The Internationalization of English actually means it has become a world language, or an international language in a real sense.

## Nativization of English and Englishes in Asia

A non-native English situation is basically an innovative situation involving certain well-known processes of nativization. (Bamgbose, 1998:1) English has become international in character, it cannot be bound to any culture. That is, any culture can use English as its vehicle of communication (Smith, 1983: 9). Kachru (1982: 5) points out "once English was adopted in a region, whether for science, technology, literature, prestige, elitism, or 'modernization', it went through a reincarnation process, which is unique to another culture." In other words, "we simply cannot internationalize English without having it accommodated to the cultures and needs of people who are supposed to use it for their own purposes." (Nobuyuki Honna, 2001: 341)

Development of English in most parts of Asia was due to contact with native English-speakers through colonialism. Many Asian countries of "the outer circle" and "the expanding circle" were former colonies or semi-colonies of countries of "the Inner Circle", typically USA, UK and Canada, etc. The English language was first introduced to these Asian countries, like India, Singapore, and Pakistan, as the medium of instruction in a western system of education, and was adopted as the official language by some governments for easy communication between the rulers and the ruled. According to Sun Li (1989: 17), the English used in these countries was once regarded as Creole, but today they are accepted as English varieties. The facts should be connected with the rise of the third world countries as the independent political powers and the deepening awareness of national independence. "In much of Asia, English is no longer a colonial import. Throughout the region, English is the language of education, culture, business and, above all, regional cooperation. English speaking Asians claim English as their own language. Filipino poet Gemino Abad once said, 'The English language is now ours. We have colonized it, too.' This is not a political statement. This is simply a descriptive remark concerning the current state of the English language in this part of the world." Similarly, Jin Huikang (2001: 13) also believes that the development of Asian Englishes was promoted by the increasing awareness of Asian value or Asian culture and language, which is not only necessary for some Asian countries that used to be the British colonies to develop their own economy and gain independence in politics but also necessary for the Asian peoples to regain their ethnical esteem and identification. Actually China English is one of many other Asian Englishes whose development reflects the tendency to recognize Asian values and to maintain their national esteem.

# An Overview of China English

## Historical Studies

Ge Chuangui (1980) is the first scholar who adopts the term "China English". He suggests that much attention should be drawn to distinguish China English and Chinglish. He holds that the English language originally is the language of English people. Other peoples who use English should follow the idiomatic and conventional ways of the English people. However, each nation has its specific culture. China English is to express Chinese phenomena and ideas. Wang Rongpei (1991), in his article *The Objective Existence of China English*, gives that the definition of China English should include the following three aspects:

China English is used by Chinese people in Chinese native land.

China English should have the Standard English as its core.

China English has its unique features.

Li Wenzhong (1993: 19) challenges Wang Rongpei's definition of China English as follow:

1) The use of China English is not restricted to Chinese native land. Many English words from Chinese have entered English by means of transliteration and loan translation, for example, *tea*, *kowtow*, *Great Leap Forward*, etc. All these English words or phrase are used in China or abroad. China English is mainly for the international use, and its nativization does not mean that it must be used in the land of China.

2) The wording of "Standard English" seems questionable. Considering the fact that neither British English nor American English is regarded as the "Standard English", but just as a variety of English, so-called "Standard English" ceases to exist and should be replaced by "Normative English" which complies with the general rules of the English language and can be accepted and understood by English-speaking peoples.

So he thinks that China English is an English variety that has Normative English as its core, expresses the social and cultural matters specific in China, frees from Chinese interference or influence, enters the English language by means of transliteration, loan translation, semantic regeneration and reflects Chinese features at the aspects of lexis, syntax and discourse. (ibid)

Xie Zhijun (1995: 7-11) disagrees with Li Wenzhong's definition of China English. He argues that Chinese interference should be taken into account in the study of China English. The Chinese interference factually exists in the linguistic levels --- lexis, syntax and discourse when Chinese people use English to convey both Chinese and foreign things. He makes his illustration of China English in the following way:

China English is an interference variety used by Chinese people in cross-cultural communication; the interference is caused by the Chinese language itself, the way of Chinese thinking and the Chinese culture existing in every aspect of China English. China English is based on the normative English and can enter world Englishes. The frequency of using China English and its communication effect are related to Chinese users' English proficiency. (ibid)

Jiang Yajun (1995) has the views similar to Xie Zhijun's. However, he thinks that the aspects shown in China English should include phonology, in addition to the lexis and syntax; he indicates that the phonological characteristic of China English is a mixture of British English sound and American English one, and it as well as comes from the conservative pronunciation of English dictionaries. He defines China English as "English with Chinese characteristics." He (1995a: 51-53) generalizes China English in the way as follows: a near-native yet Chinese accent; words basic only to Chinese due to its history, environment and politics; dead or old fashioned forms or pronunciations resulting from Chinese approaches to language learning; a linguistic mixture of British and American English in both spoken and written forms.

Jia Guanjie and Xiang Mingfa (1990) put forward their definition of China English: China English, with Normative English as its core, having the unavoidable Chinese features, used by native Chinese speakers, is an English variety that is helpful to spread Chinese culture.

However, the concern about China English has come into a brand-new phase since the beginning of the twenty-first century. The scholars no longer focus their attention of the study on whether there exists China English or not. They have begun their study mainly on the phenomena of society, culture, history, and even politics conceived in China English. Many of them carry on the study from the perspectives of cross-cultural communication, pragmatics, semantics, sociolinguistics. The main representative figures among them are Jiang Yajun, Du Runqing (2001, 2003); Jin Huikang (2001, 2002); Wang Rongpei (2003). Meanwhile, the study on China English has also aroused the increasing attention in the international academic world. Many scholars and linguists have begun to write articles and books to expand their views on China English. A number of articles have been published in the world authoritative magazine "World Englishes", which is committed to the study of different Englishes across the world.

All the above researches show that China English is a cultural and linguistic regeneration of English in Chinese culture. Then, what is China English? The scholars focus on the following points on "China English":

The first concerns the scope of China English, that is, whether it has a restrict use in native Chinese land. Modern sociolinguists divide English varieties into two kinds--- international and intranational in terms of their purpose and function. (Sun Li, 1989) This division clearly indicates that any English variety can be used beyond its native land and enter international use. China English is mainly an international variety.

The second is whether China English has the interference from Chinese. Most scholars think one's English inevitably has Chinese features once he or she has acquired Chinese and formed the way of Chinese thinking. Accordingly, the Chinese features of China English are unavoidably caused by the intrinsic thinking model specific to Chinese people and culture. (Jiang Xiaohong, 2001) China English does not exist without Chinese interference. When one's English proficiency is improved, one's Chinese interference may be less, but it can never disappear completely.

The third is on the scope of the features of China English, that is, whether China English has the features at the level of phonology. Theoretically, since China English is an English variety, its features should be shown at all the linguistic levels: phonology, lexis, syntax and discourse. (Jiang Yajun, 1995) In practice, Chinese always have the Chinese talk when speaking English.

Based on the studies, the author of this paper defines China English as follow:

China English, with Normative English as its core, is an English variety used by Chinese people; it has the Chinese features unavoidably influenced by both the Chinese language and the way of Chinese thinking; it possesses the linguistics characteristics shown at the levels of phonology, lexis, syntax and discourse.

### **Chinglish and China English**

Li Wenzhong (1993) thinks Chinglish is deformed English and is caused by the interference of Chinese language which does not follow the universal rules of the native English language, culture and custom. It is not accepted by the native English-speaking people. Its composition and use are unstable and limited; it can cause obstruction to foreign communication and culture exchange. Most sentences of Chinglish are produced by misunderstanding semantic or logic relation, and some are even arranged in Chinese structures. The following are typical examples about Chinglish:

My stomach is hungry. (= I'm hungry.)

His age is very young. (= He is very young.)

His brain is clever. (= He is clever.)

All the sentences above are organized in Chinese structures and are publicly thought of as non-normative English.

So Chinglish is mainly caused by language learners' mother tongue interference; it is caused not only by linguistic interference, but more importantly, by the interference of the language learners' home culture and the thought patterns peculiar to the home culture. Chinglish is somewhat a pidgin, or an interlanguage. Judged by the general rules of English, Chinglish is foreign, ill-formed.

However, China English is an English, a member of the big family of World Englishes or, more exactly, a number of the 'expanding circle,' to use Kachru's term (1988), but with Chinese features.

# The Linguistic Features of China English

The identifiable characteristics of China English exist in all the linguistic levels: phonology, lexicon, syntax and discourse.

## At the Phonological Level

The nativization of English in China appears to be most obvious at the phonological level. The phonological features of language are reflected in two aspects, segmental phoneme and supersegmental phoneme. So far, most phonological studies on Chinese influence on English are mainly limited to the aspect of segmental phoneme, and the locality in this aspect is classified by some scholars as Chinglish, for the reason that mistakes in segmental phoneme can be mostly overcome. (Du Ruiqing and Jiang Yajun, 2001:39)

Jiang Yajun (1995a: 52-53) observes the following sound variation as the features for many Chinese people to speak English in both aspects:

Chinese learners sometimes add a final /ə/ to the words ending with consonants.

2) They have trouble distinguishing the short vowels from the corresponding long ones and often prolong the short vowels and make them the corresponding long ones, e.g. both "ship" and "sheep" are pronounced as /ʃ i:p/. This is because the long and short contrast is not a distinctive feature and makes no difference in meaning in Putonghua (the standard Chinese pronunciation).

3) The voiced /ð/ and the voiceless /θ / are usually pronounced as the voiced /z/ and the voiceless /s/ respectively.

4) In some areas in China, people do not distinguish between /l/ and /n/, the lateral and alveolar nasal. In their dialects, these two sounds are not two phonemes, but allophones of one phoneme. The transfer of this feature to their English creates confusion between word pairs like "night" and "light".

5) Chinese people also speak in a way that seems over-precise to people in southern England, who do not give value to short vowels but reduce them to the universal schwa /ə/. They tend to ignore what linguists call "graduation" and have no "weak forms" of words such as "as", "of", "for", "and", "will", etc. For example, they employ the same /fɔ :/ or /fɔ :ɪ/ in "What is it for" and "This is for you".

6) Chinese students tend to ignore the linguistic phenomenon described as "shifting stress". In English, a number of words, especially compounds, may have a shift in stress when they are used before nouns. But Chinese students always use the stress used when the word is said by itself. For example, in "The soldiers are Chinese in the Chinese army", they do not shift the position of primary stress in "Chinese army".

Loreto Todd and Ian Hancock (1986) points out that the sound variation of China English is caused by Chinese dialects and the pronunciation of foreign teachers from different countries.

At present, the study of the phonology system of China English is still in the first stage. More research on its phonology system is expected to be done so as to establish the system of phonological features of China English. (Du Ruiqing and Jiang Yajun, 2001)

## At the Lexical Level

The lexical features of China English are more noticeable than those shown at other levels and become the proof of the existence of China English in many issued articles concerning the study of China English. Kachru (1982) has pointed out that a part of the lexicon is nativized in two ways. On one hand, native items are used in localized registers and styles in order to contextualize the language. On the other hand, English lexical items may acquire extended or restricted semantic markers. During the process of the nativization of English in China, the former is called "cultural words", the latter, "semantic shift". There is a great difference between Chinese and English culture, many a time we can't find equivalent English expressions to convey peculiar things in Chinese culture. Under this situation, people will employ different translation strategies, to interpret Chinese words or phrases into English.



Words and phrases in China English are the main manifestations of the nativization of English in China. The Chinese words and phrases get into English through the following ways:

### **Transliteration**

Many Pinyin words have directly entered English because of linguistic relativity and intranslatability of the applied language. Transliterated expressions in Pinyin can be considered a most conspicuous feature of China English with the technique of literal translation and the strategies of foreignizing translation.

Early in the 1800s, some words with Chinese unique features entered the English language. At that time, lots of Chinese personal names and geographical names were translated into English according to the phonetic system called Wade System, a system of Romanization of Chinese, widely used in representing Chinese words and names in English, e.g. Peking (Beijing), Taipei (Taipei). And also there were some transliterations from Guangdong dialects and Southern Fujian dialects, such as tea (茶), chow mei (炒面), cheongsam (旗袍). A system using the Latin alphabet, called Pinyin, has been developed in China since 1950s and is the official standard for transliteration of Chinese language in the People's Republic of China now. Quite a lot of words and phrases in China English are directly transliterated from Chinese Pinyin. There are some examples as follows: xiu cai (秀才), pipa (琵琶), erhu (二胡), gongfu (功夫), wushu (武术), jiaozi (饺子), kowtow (叩头), yuan (元), doufu (豆腐), qipao (旗袍), quyi (曲艺), etc.

### **Loan translations**

When there are no transliterated borrowings, or hybridization, loan translations will be adopted. Many Chinese words and expressions have been translated into English by borrowing English words and phrases directly. There are two major forms of loan translations. One form of loan translation is compound words. Some examples of this type are loan + English, like *Canton ginger* (Canton is a transliteration, and ginger is a native word), *teacup* (from Chinese word chabei), etc. Other examples of this kind of loan translation are English calque, like *red bean* (from Chinese compound word *chidou*; chi=red, dou=bean), *beancurd* (from Chinese compound word doufu), etc.

The second form of loan translations refers to English phrases translated from Chinese phrases literally. All these English phrases have the peculiar features of Chinese culture that can't be found in English culture, e.g. barefoot doctor, The Great Leap, paper tiger, spring rolls, The Cultural Revolution, Chinese herbal medicine, vegetable basket project, iron rice bowl, etc.

When discussing Chinese words and expressions, we should mention those idioms that carry unique Chinese culture. Chinese idioms are a rich resource of the expression of typical China English. In general, there are two kinds of translation: one is free translation and the other literal translation. In translating Chinese idioms into English, which kind of translation should be used depends on the specific cases. For some Chinese idioms, there are English equivalents, such as "as timid as a rabbit" for the Chinese expression "dan xiao ru shu (胆小如鼠)", "an ass in a lion's skin" for "hu jia hu wei (狐假虎威)" and "as poor as a church mouse" for "yi pin ru xi (一贫如洗)". However, most Chinese idioms have no English equivalents. In this case, the measure of loan translations or semantic shift can be adopted to translate Chinese idioms. China English created by the way of loan translations or semantic shift can better retain the features and the detailed content of splendid Chinese civilizations. For instance, "hua she tian zu (画蛇添足)" is proposed to be translated into "to draw a snake and add feet to it". The English version of "ren shan ren hai (人山人海)" is "people mountains and people seas". Similarly, we can translate "yi jian shuang diao (一箭双雕)" into "one arrow, two hawks".

With the fast increasing of publicity and exchange with the outside world, China has been greatly affecting the world in many fields. In this case, more and more Chinese words and phrases expressing peculiar things in Chinese culture have been translated into English and become loanwords of English. They greatly enrich English vocabulary. In *Webster's New International Dictionary of the English Language* (1934), there are more than 100 Chinese borrowing words except the proper nouns. The number of Chinese borrowings collected in English standard dictionaries and other reference books is no less than 997 by the mid-1970's (Cannon, 1988). However, in the recent years, there is a dramatic increase in the number of Chinese borrowing words. *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary of Chinese Proper Names and Terms* collects 30,000 Chinese borrowed words (1994). Many words and

expressions have been coined to express Chinese typical culture and society. The English language enriches itself by absorbing Chinese borrowed words.

## At the Syntactic Level

China English at the syntactic level bears the influence from the way of Chinese thinking and Chinese sentence structures. The differences between the way of thinking in English and that in Chinese are clearly manifested in their language linear (Jia Delin, 1990: 12-16). And he has proved the acceptability of China English under the situation of nativization of English in China.

The English thinking sequence reflecting actual elements is:

the subject of action → the action of subject → the object of action → the various marks of action

the English linear sequence: subject → predicate → object → various adverbials

e.g. John had a good dinner yesterday.

And the Chinese thinking sequence reflecting actual elements is:

the subject of action → the mark of action → the action of subject → the object of action

or: the mark of action → the subject of action → the action of subject → the object of action

the Chinese linear sequence: subject → adverbial → predicate → object

or: adverbial → subject → predicate → object

e.g. Yesterday John had a good dinner.

John yesterday had a good dinner.

2) According to the way of thinking in English, the object of action in English often has long post modifiers placed at the back of a sentence in order to avoid their heaviness and length, thus creating a linear chain with a small head and a big body. Chinese, on the contrary, firstly introduces other elements, and then provides the central information element, a formation of a sentence pattern with a big head and a small body.

e.g. It is uncertain whether he would join the army.

CE: Whether he would join the army is uncertain.

There is no use crying over spilt milk.

CE: Crying over spilt milk is no use.

3) The illustration of the cause and result about a thing in Chinese is in the reverse direction to that in English. In general, the result in English is firstly given and then the cause, which is opposite to Chinese word order.

e.g. He didn't go to work yesterday because he was ill.

CE: Because he was ill, he didn't go to work yesterday.

4) In English, there are many English sentences with pronoun "it" as empty subjects, but this kind of pronoun does not exist in Chinese.

e.g. It struck twelve o'clock just now.

CE: The clock struck twelve o'clock just now.

Who is it?

CE: Who are you?

The positions of interrogatives are sometimes different in English and Chinese.

e.g. When do you think he will come?

CE: Do you think when he will come?

I don't believe he will come.

CE: I believe he will not come.

The main difference at the syntactic level between English and Chinese is that English is a language of hypotaxis while Chinese is a language of parataxis. "Hypotaxis" means that sentences are organized by the grammatical relations; "parataxis" refers to that the sentences are structured by the logic relations. Therefore, English sentences are well knitted, and Chinese ones are terse and lucid.

### At the Discoursal Level

The study of the discoursal features of China English is a controversial issue. Sun Li (1989) points out that there are marked contrasts among English varieties. However, little research work has been done in this field, for which Sun Li thinks there are two major reasons: 1) It is very difficult to observe the general rules of various varieties. 2) The difficulty of the discoursal analysis of English varieties indicates its difficulty as a whole in the field of linguistics. In addition, there is also the controversy whether discoursal patterns exist in China English, that is, whether the features of China English at the discoursal level should be regarded as part of Chinglish or China English.

Although the discoursal features of a language are so intricate and difficult to analyze and describe, Chinese scholars have never ceased in their attempt to explore China English in this aspect. We may take a brief look at contrastive studies of English and Chinese at the discoursal level and see how China English operates as a combination of Chinese culture and the English language.

Xie Zhijun (1995) holds that China English should have its own discoursal patterns and styles. He conducts a research in the rhetorical patterns and gives an illustration of the differences between English and Chinese rhetorical patterns. His study confirms the hypothesis of cultural thought patterns initially proposed by Robert, B. Kaplan as early as in 1966. According to Kaplan (1966: 1-12), the rhetorical pattern in English expositions is a linear type, while the rhetorical pattern in Chinese expositions is of spiral.

Wang Moxi and Li Jin (1993: 64), in their studies, conclude that Chinese students are least likely to use the general-specific pattern which is also linear in nature and the dominant mode of thinking of Chinese students is "problem-solution" patterns with a "hidden" feature.

Yang Yuchen and Wen Zaorong (1994: 41-42) conclude that Chinese students have formed a unique style in English writing which is represented by using word-for-word translation of Chinese syntactic structures, excessive use of adverbials at the beginning of a sentence, using a comma to connect two sentences. Therefore, they consider it necessary to compare English with Chinese in the teaching of English writing in all aspects, including comparisons of discoursal patterns, which is related to the formation of China English.

Chen Hanlin (1996: 46) makes a study of such authoritative publications as *Beijing Weekly*, *China Today* and he indicates that the improper use of articles and prepositions exists in these publications; he also points out that Chinese people are inclined to use "big" and very "formal" words.

Zhang Wenxia (2002: 101-105) describes and analyses the paper correctors' evaluation on the textual paragraph and confirms that the discoursal features of China English are caused by Chinese influence.

From the studies conducted by the researchers mentioned above, we can make a tentative list of the phenomena at the discoursal level in English writing by Chinese students: "out-of-focus" organization of a paper, flowery and exaggerating expressions, allusions, heavy use of traditional idioms, the use of big words and lack of proper documentation. All this is somewhere between Chinese English and China English, the demarcation line of which is yet to be cut in future studies

## Conclusion

The real sense of an international language means that English is no longer "Anglo-American-oriented", nor does it belong to those native English-speaking countries. It is a language for both native and non-native users. China English results from the combination of Chinese culture and the English language. Its existence meets the needs of our times. It not only reflects the internationalization and nativization of English in the world but also the recognition of Asian values or cultures, which has created an international context for the development of China English.



The present paper, on the basis of the theories of world English varieties and Asian Englishes, makes a status confirmation of China English, the nativization of English in China. It also makes a description and analysis on the linguistic features of China English. The present study of China English is still in the first stage. There must be much work to be done in this field. The author hopes that this study will lead to further researches in this academic area. It is desired to have a systematic study on the definition and linguistic features of China English, especially the features at the phonological and discorsal levels.

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