
An understanding of 'China English' and the learning and use of the English language in China

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Some perspectives from an English educator

SINCE THE implementation of the policy of reform and opening up, and China's entry into the World Trade Organization (WTO), China has been gaining strength quickly in the international, political, and economic arena. Globalization has led to China taking part in various kinds of international cooperation and exchange. At the same time, globalization and the Internet have been providing a novel context in which to use English as an international language. Under such circumstances, the Chinese are using more English than ever before, and China English is being simultaneously localized and globalized. Like any other language, China English is a living entity or organism that is not only growing and progressing in the 'Information Age', but is also making a contribution that is enriching and developing world Englishes at large. Indeed, China English now plays a significant role in increasing international understanding and cooperation within the WTO and in the whole world.

Introduction

A language is a tool for communication. A language is the carrier of culture, and culture and language are interrelated. They cannot be separated. To put the matter in statistical terms, we may say that language, communication, and culture are dependent variables. A language is a living entity or organism. It lives and evolves within a nexus that involves time, space, and social relationships. Languages are dynamic; they develop, neologize, and accept

loans. As Foster (1968) has put it: 'English speakers... seem to believe in a species of linguistic free trade and argue that if a term of foreign origin is useful, it should be put to work forthwith regardless of its parentage.' And Chinese is certainly one of the languages that has supplied a considerable number of loans to English, as for example *feng shui*, *typhoon*, *mahjong*, and *Tai Chi*.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* online (2006) has a function that displays the date chart, year, and country relating to when a certain word came into being, and demonstrates that native speakers of English recognise both ancient forms of language and more recent foreign borrowings in terms of time, space, and social relationships. In the *OED* (2006), there

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are 3,561 word entries of Chinese origin, which suggests that many elements of China English have, as it were, melted into Standard English, in which its presence has long been accepted and acknowledged by linguists and lexicographers.

Indeed, *China English* is not only a variety of world English in its own right but also an interactive linguistic phenomenon and an act of language behaviour that is fulfilling a new two-way communicative role: 'Let the world know more about China, and let China know more about the world.'

China English and Standard English

China English finds its most energetic early expression in 1980, in the work of the late Guo Chuangui, a famous linguist and lexicographer (now deceased) most notably in his treatise *Issues of Translation from Chinese into English*. In it he states that 'no matter whether we are in old China or in new China, when we want to express ourselves in both spoken or written English, we all have something unique of China to express. For instance, imperial examinations, imperial academy, May Fourth Movement [...] and [the] four modernizations. These expressions don't belong to those of native speakers, and they should [therefore] be called China English.' This statement in effect confirmed the existence of the China English Phenomenon and asserted that the Chinese can use it for their own purposes, regardless of what native speakers of the language do. That is, he pointed out that distinctive Chinese usages in English are in their own right correct English expressions.

Li (1993) has claimed that 'China English takes standard English as its core, expressing unique things relating to the society and culture of China in different fields. The communication proceeds without the interference of its native language by various means such as transliteration, translation and semantic reproduction, possessing vocabulary, sentence patterns and discourse of China's features.'

In the *Wikipedia Encyclopedia Online* (2006), the definition for Standard English is [or, strictly, was at the time of consultation: *Ed*]: 'a general term for a form of written and spoken English that is considered the model for educated people. There are no set rules or vocabulary for 'standard English' because, unlike languages such as French or Dutch, English does

not have a governing body (see Académie française, Dutch Language Union) to establish usage. As a result, the concept of 'standard English' tends to be fluid. Various regional and national 'standards' exist.

For Bauer (1994), Standard English is the kind of English you are expected to have to speak if you want to find a job in broadcasting, the kind you must be able to use in the professions, the kind that teachers expect you to write in schools. This variety does not contain double negative (as *We haven't got no pets*), words like *done* and *seen* are exclusively past participles (not past tense forms), so that sentences such as *I done it yesterday* or *I seen her yesterday* are not part of the standard language. What such commentators as works of reference and language scholars assert makes it clear what Standard English is and is not, removing any sense of mystery that may have been accorded to it. Such pictures of Standard English are concrete and offer us a fairly clear idea about what Standard English is.

Jia and Xiang (1997) hold the view that 'China English is a variant of English which is beneficial for spreading the characteristics of Chinese culture,' while Luo (1998) has simply noted that 'China English is a variant of English accommodating features of Chinese Language.' These linguists' insights and its own *raison-d'être* justify the status and function of China English, with the result that Chinese people feel comfortable about expressing themselves in China English.

To summarize what has just been discussed, we can say that China English may be described under the seven headings:

- 1 It is a living entity or organism that grows in the global community, enriching and developing world Englishes.
- 2 Like any other language, it is interactive
- 3 It is a variety of English with Chinese characteristics and thoughts.
- 4 Holding Standard English as its core, China English can be used for communication without the interference of Chinese.
- 5 It is an effective and beneficial means of reflecting China's rich culture, traditions, and civilization.
- 6 It is a variant of Standard English, and is accepted and recognised by linguists and lexicographers.
- 7 It can be understood by native speakers of English and is significant in terms of how it

can be learned and how it can be used both nationally and internationally.

New developments in the lexicon of China English

A language is often perceived as a mirror for reflecting social life and events. Within a language, its lexicon acts as the most sensitive and active element: a window for observing change in society. Because of great changes in China and its increasing cooperation and exchange with the outside world, the lexicon of China English is constantly increasing. New developments in China English are mainly embodied in its lexicon; their influence has been mainly lexical, as can be seen from the many words borrowed into English from Chinese and listed in the *Oxford English Dictionary*. In today's China, the more recent or up-dated words are those closely related to reform and to opening up to the outside world, providing a vivid range of expressions. Such usages, as translated from Chinese into China English, include:

- opening up
- open-door policy
- fairly comfortable standard of living
- mutual respect and mutual benefit
- individual economy
- re-employment project
- special economic zone
- one country, two systems
- one China policy
- win-win
- floating [migrant] population
- construct clean politics
- microeconomic control system
- export-oriented economy
- north-south gap
- family contract responsibility system
- south-south cooperation
- green food
- market economy status
- welfare lottery
- two civilizations

This is, as it were, a China-owned lexicon which reflects today's China, and such expressions are uniquely appropriate with regard to what is happening in China. It is often impossible to find strict equivalents in the English of native speakers.

Learning and using English in China: the current situation

English is on the whole one of the well-taught

and well-researched subjects in China, and currently interest in the language is vast. English is a required test subject in the national entrance examinations for colleges and universities, notably to Ph.D. programmes. The Chinese learn and teach English in terms of its standard usage, teachers emphasizing accuracy, appropriateness, and fluency. The number of teachers of English in China is very large; most are well-trained English-major graduates; some are native speakers; and some have had the privilege of studying abroad and then come back home to serve.

China has a huge population of English learners and users: some 300 million people out of 1.3 billion are learning and using English in various ways, at different levels and in different settings (cf. Liu *et al* 2006). All the students in universities, colleges, and middle schools learn English and some primary schools also teach it. It is of course taught as a foreign language and its popularity is fulfilling the role of a foreign language in terms of which educators and employers alike consider graduates to be well-educated and qualified.

In some institutions of higher learning, one of the criteria to evaluate successful graduation relates to whether a student can pass CET4 (a national English proficiency test: College English Test Band 4). In non-English major undergraduate programmes, English is taught throughout the students' four-year courses of study. First and second year study focuses on College English (comprehensive English, or English at large) while the third and fourth years concentrate on ESP (English for specific purposes). English is also taught in master and Ph.D. programmes. As a new approach to intensify undergraduate education, the Ministry of Education (from 2004) has required institutions of higher education to offer bilingual specialty courses education accounting for from 5% to 10% of the total.

Since the restoration in 1977 of the system of national examinations for higher education, China has cultivated millions of university students. Graduates, working in all walks of life, are the major users of English at various levels. In addition to its use in academic environments, English is a language of mass media, the Internet, tourism, hotels and hospitality, publishing, IT, international trade, civil aviation, sports events, international conferences, and government organizations. As a result, an English with Chinese features – what we now

increasingly call *China English* – has inevitably entered the prime phase of its development.

Conclusion

At the same time as globalization and the Internet have been providing a new context for English as an international language, China English has entered a prime stage of development. Like any other language or language variety, China English is an interactive linguistic phenomenon. Having Standard English as its core, China English conforms to the rules of English grammar and can easily be used as a communicative tool. Its users can say what they need to say in a distinct variety of the language and make themselves understood by native speakers and others worldwide.

In addition, China English accommodates some characteristics of Chinese ways of thinking and some things that are unique to China. It is therefore a living entity or organism, it grows in both its homeland and the global community, and in the process enriches world Englishes and helps them develop. It is becoming an accepted and recognised variant of Standard English among linguists and lexicographers, which is of significance for both learning English and international communication.

Along with China's increasing cooperation and exchange with the outside world, a distinctive China English fulfils a practical need for the world to know more about China and for China to know more about the world. As such, it plays a significant role in communication at home and abroad, becoming more and more frequently used and accepted. Indeed, China English has been integrated into the

family of world Englishes, of which it is becoming a variety. ■

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