Identification and causes of lexical variation in Chinese Business English

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Lexical variation can be found when English is used as an international working language by businesspeople from China and Hong Kong

Introduction

English is a global language used by millions of people in very different contexts, such as academia, science, technology, business, mass media, entertainment, etc. The number of non-native speakers of English outnumbers native speakers, as a high number of multinational companies use English as a lingua franca. Electronic communication has also led to an increase in the use of English as an international language. People from different social backgrounds communicate using this lingua franca, and the language may be evolving faster than before.

Furthermore, new digital written genres such as email are vehicles with which English is being spread across the world, especially in the globalised business world. This virtual context offers its participants the opportunity to experiment with the language, changing traditional linguistic conventions, writing in a more immediate and faster way, using a more direct style, and giving priority to instant communication over grammatical correctness (Carrió Pastor & Muñiz Calderón, 2013). International business discourse, as with any type of discourse, is culturally situated and therefore dependent on the context in which it is used: three elements – discourse, culture and context – play a key role in the communication process (Bargiela-Chiapinni, 2004: 31–4). The culture of the speaker is a fact that needs to be taken into account when interpreting meaning in a business context, in order to understand the speaker's real aim. This is especially important when speakers have different cultural conventions and may use different pragmatic strategies.

Bolton (2003: 228) has pointed out that the current situation of the English language is due to the increase of commercial opportunities in West countries and, therefore, a renewed interest has

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appeared in learning foreign languages, especially English. As China has emerged as an economic giant and has established business relationships worldwide, the use of English for business has become essential. Several researchers, such as Jiang (2002), Jenkins (2003), Bolton (2003) and Crystal (2008), have observed that the largest English-learning population in the world is in China. As a consequence of this, some features of Chinese English have been identified and analysed by scholars such as Jiang (1995), Jia & Xiang (1997), Jiang & Du (2003), Wei & Fei (2003), Hung (2005) and Deterding (2006), with focus on phonology, lexis, syntax and discourse pragmatics. However, we believe there has not yet been sufficient research on discourse pragmatics and the effectiveness of cross-cultural communication with regard to writing in English in a business context, as Rivers (2008) and He & Li (2009) have also pointed out. Nowadays, more and more people are communicating with people from other cultures, and so there is a need for research which considers the cross-cultural aspects of this in depth (Zhu, 2000: 181).

Synchronic variation is a key focus of this study. Some researchers such as Yli-Jokipii & Jorgensen (2004), Hinkel (2009), Schleef (2009), Carrió Pastor & Muñiz Calderón (2013) and Carrió Pastor (2013) have focused their studies from this perspective. The main aim of these analyses is to describe, through contrastive rhetoric, differences in discourse patterns arising from intercultural communication. In this study, we set out to identify variation related to the linguistic transfer of structures inherited from the mother tongue or the culture of the writer. Our focus is on business English because, although it is a specific field with some internationally established linguistic patterns, we suspect that cultural or mother tongue influences may give rise to variation in the way international writers communicate.

Some researchers, such as Louhiala-Salminen (1996), Okamura & Shaw (2000), Pinto dos Santos (2002), Nickerson (2005), Flowerdew & Wan (2010), Muñiz Calderón & Carrió Pastor (2007), Bremmer (2008) and Carrió Pastor & Muñiz Calderón (2010) have already paid specific attention to business interaction and the rhetorical features used in business letters. More specifically, the language used in business emails has been studied by Barson, Frommer & Schwartz (1993), Warshauer (1995), Giménez (2000, 2006) and Biesenbach-Lucas (2005). In this study, we do not only study the use of language by a group of speakers, but we rather contrast the use of the English language by employees of a Spanish exporting company from China and Hong Kong and the way they communicate via email with their counterparts around the world.

The main objectives of this study are: first, to identify and compare instances of lexical variation in business discourse in English produced by writers from China and Hong Kong; second, to determine the causes of lexical variation in both groups; and, finally, to consider whether the use of some lexical items is caused by the influence of the mother tongue.

Two research questions arise from this study:

a. What are the most common types of variation produced by Chinese writers of English?
b. Does lexical variation change when English is used as a second language or as a foreign language?

Methodology

The corpus used in this study was composed of sixty emails written by Chinese business workers. Thirty were written by English speakers from different cities of China (henceforth, the Chinese writers) and thirty by English speakers from Hong Kong (the Hong Kong writers). The Chinese writers speak English as a foreign language. In contrast, the Hong Kong writers speak English as part of a bilingual community, as the city is a former British colony and English still plays a vital role from the social, administrative and cultural points of view. The emails were all written over a period of two years, from 2008 to 2010, by the employees of a Spanish exporting company.

The most usual communication channel in the company is email, which allows communication to be almost instantaneous. The majority of the emails in the corpus were sent or received by the Sales Department. The use of English was compulsory, even between workers with the same mother tongue, so that other members of the company could check the emails.

The linguistic proficiency in English of the writers was that of an independent user of English: an upper-intermediate level. As the writers always had to communicate regarding business matters in English, it was essential for them to be able to communicate in English properly.

Once the corpus was compiled, a contrastive study of the two groups was carried out. We did not compare our findings with emails written by native English speakers, as our main aim was to observe synchronic variation of English when

Table 1: Frequency of variation in business e-mails from China and Hong Kong

Lexical variation items	Percentage of Chinese writers	Frequency per 1,000 words	Percentage of Hong Kong writers	Frequency per 1,000 words
Abbreviations	34.5	7.61	65.8	12.20
Given name invention	27.6	6.09	0.0	0.0
Polite style	11.5	2.53	13.7	2.54
Commanding style	11.5	2.53	19.2	3.55
Adaptation from L1 to L2	10.3	2.28	0.0	0.0
Calques	4.6	1.01	1.3	0.25

used as a second language. It was possible to count some of the lexical features of interest using *WordSmith Tools* 5.0, but other features had to be counted manually, as some of the lexical items under study could only be analysed in context. Although initially other lexical features were identified, particularly significant results were obtained for some of the lexical features initially included: calques, adaptation from L1 to L2, the invention of a given or first name, abbreviations, a polite style, and a commanding style. The occurrences and percentages of the findings are detailed, analysed and discussed in the following section, providing examples of the context of the occurrences to illustrate the analysis.

Results

The sixty emails were composed of a total of 7,873 words. After the analysis of the corpus, some variations in the use of English were found, i.e. Chinese and Hong Kong writers use English in a different way from Standard English. Table 1 displays the frequencies found in both sets of emails. The first column shows the categories of lexical items that were observed as showing variation. The second and fourth columns show the proportion of each email sub-corpus in which the particular forms of variation were found. The third and fifth columns illustrate the relative frequency of these features per 1,000 words.

We can observe that workers from China and Hong Kong demonstrate a liking for the use of abbreviations (appearing in almost 35% and 66% of texts respectively) when they communicate: this reflects an informal style that is not very common in business English in general, but which is typical of the genre we have selected, emails. Some abbreviations are used repeatedly in the messages, and, while the writers want to be polite and use politeness markers for this purpose, nevertheless they include abbreviations which provide an informal style to their message.

Focusing on the analysis of the sub-corpus of Chinese writers, we noticed that most of the variations found concern the use of abbreviations and the invention of a given name. Nevertheless, we observe that the abbreviations used are not the standard ones used in business British or American English. As can be seen in [ChE1], they are more typical of those of a text or even a WhatsApp message.

[ChE1]: Abbreviations: *'Pls find out and …'; 'Pls advise yr fty exact address, tks'; Your G2 rsult samples'; 'FYI. I contact Dr Linus Siu'; 'B. Rgds'.*

Also, Chinese writers tend to use a western name in order to facilitate pronunciation for the interlocutor, as can be observed in [ChE2]:

[ChE2]: Given name invention: *'Cason', 'Florence', 'Maggy', 'Hope'.*

Table 1 also shows that both groups of writers used a similar percentage of polite style and commanding expressions to communicate. This polite and commanding style is typical of Oriental cultures; nevertheless, the commanding style is also typical of business communication, as it is used to convince the reader by being concise and using short sentences. The communication observed in this analysis is effective, although Chinese

businessmen introduce variation into the way they communicate in English, adapting the Standard style of English to their social and cultural conventions. They do not communicate in Standard English, but use variant forms in order to achieve their objective, prepare a business deal or inform the reader. Linguistic correctness is not important for the Chinese writers: they prefer simply to communicate and be understood. Communication sometimes even takes place in a commanding style, in order to convince the reader of the merits of a particular option. An example of this commanding rather than persuasive style of discourse can be seen in example [ChE3]:

[ChE3]: Commanding style: *'Ok, we have tried everything now. I think its time to get some one here R., you are already in China, come to Ningbo and sort this out'. 'The best is Leigh staying till next week. Then I do not need to re-schedule my meeting for cactus China laundries. That meeting has been confirmed with Ming/Samsara on this week Friday'.*

In the sub-corpus of Chinese writers, the number of occurrences of the polite style was relatively low: an example can be seen in [ChE4]. It was found that *kindly* was used repeatedly in order to express politeness, a feature which will be discussed further below:

[ChE4]: *'Kindly note that the shipping company'.*

We also observe that the Chinese writers tend to use more content words; they do not place importance on the use of stylistic devices and use calques and mother tongue patterns when expressing themselves in English. Calques were the least frequent category found in the sub-corpus. We believe that the variations found are caused by the influence of the mother tongue and the need to communicate messages quickly in a business context. Some examples of these variations can be observed in [ChE5] and [ChE6]:

[ChE5]: Calques: *'No need to make it worry'; 'so I hope for your more favorite price'.*

[ChE6]: Adaptation L1 to L2: *'Don't leave this argument between you and me'; 'Chinese culture is when they ask you for Orange, and you only has landscape, they don't care, whether you buy the seed from other country, as long as your landscape can have orange for them, which same as what they want'.*

Turning now to the emails written by the Hong Kong writers, the most frequent type of variation found in this sub-corpus involved their preference for the use of abbreviations, as can be seen in [HKE1]. One of the reasons for this variation could be that they are very confident in the language they use, believing that their readers can understand the abbreviations; another reason may be the style of the emails themselves, which can be very short and concise:

[HKE1]: Abbreviations: *'B. Rgds'; 'can u'; 'takes for Smpls & bulk'.*

The second most common type of variation found in the corpus is the use of the commanding style; the Hong Kong writers use this style more frequently than Chinese writers when communicating. We believe that this may be due to the influence of their cultural background, as Chinese is a concise language. [HKE2] provides some examples:

[HKE2]: Commanding style: *'It is good chance for us. It match with my plan to develop Northern China Market as I told you last month'. 'FYI. I contact Dr Linus Siu, he is Group General Manager, just under Dr. Harry Li and Tommy is far away from him. I knew him since 1992, he is the one to pre-approve any investment for the TAL Group'. 'Just want to know do they bring up any questions on G2. Since Ronald told me Harry has bought up some questions, which waiting answer from you. And that he did not know what is it. That's why I ask you'.*

It can be seen that calques are infrequent in this sub-corpus, something which may be due to the fact that Hong Kong was a colony of Great Britain and that English is spoken there as a second language, so the difference between the two languages may be clearer for them (and not so clear for Chinese writers) and they do not need to refer to their mother tongue to express their ideas.

It should be noted here that no occurrences are found of adaptation from the mother tongue to English, which is not unexpected given the fact that the writers live in an almost bilingual context. Also, no occurrences are found of inventions of the given name, with writers preferring to use their own name. The reason may be that the Hong Kong writers are proud of their names and do not feel the need to use a given name from an Western culture, as they have lived immersed in the two cultures and think there is no need to adapt to a foreign one.

Finally, there are some examples found in the corpus that we would like to highlight as they consist of examples of lexical variation which are quite unusual

in English. They involve the use of certain words that have been used in a situation to emphasize what they say. The first of these is the use of *kindly* without semantic meaning, expressing politeness or 'please'. It is used in a repetitive way when included in the sentence, and when used twice in a sentence, the second *kindly* loses its semantic implications, as can be seen in [ChE7]. It is used repetitively as a hedge by Chinese writers of English:

[ChE7]: Repetitive use of *kindly* as *please* in e-mails from China: *'Kindly note that the shipping company kindly; Kindly do the needful kindly by today; Kindly consider if you will kindly include*; *kindly advise the kindly contact'*.

The second aspect to highlight is that in most of the emails the Chinese writers make reference to facts of the Chinese culture that may not be understood by the reader, as can be seen in the following example. The reader cannot fully understand the intention of the writer, as the Chinese writers do not take into account that they are communicating in a cross-cultural setting:

[ChE8]: Use of references to Chinese culture: '*Chinese culture is when they ask you for Orange, and you only has landscape, they don't care, whether you buy the seed from other country, as long as your landscape can have orange for them, which same as what they want'*.

The third and last type of variation to be described in detail is the fact that Hong Kong writers avoid the use of some lexical items because they want to be more concise and to make communication briefer, as can be seen in example [HKE4]. The effect of this is that they create ungrammatical sentences, but with the intention of being concise:

[HKE4]: Use of ungrammatical variations in e-mails from Hong Kong (conciseness): *'It match with my plan to develop Northern China Market as I told you last month'. 'That meeting been confirmed with Ming/Samsara on this week Friday'. 'All off-shore factories under his supervision, therefore, I contact him'*.

The frequencies and examples of the types of variation included in this section may be caused by cultural, genre or stylistic influences, as commented upon above. It is important to note the differences between the frequencies of the occurrences found in the two sub-corpora. Figure 1 shows the comparison of the lexical items considered in this research.

The Hong Kong writers produce less variation from Standard than the Chinese writers, if we exclude the case of abbreviations; we believe that
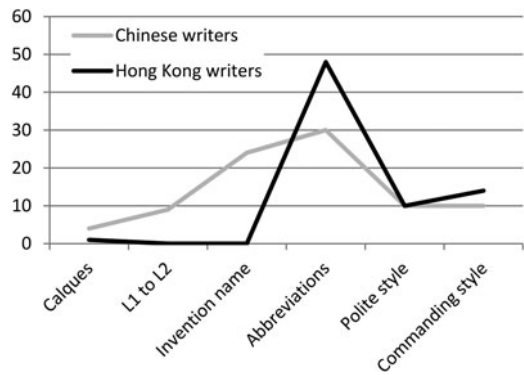

Figure 1. Comparison of the occurrences of the lexical features analysed.

the fact that the Chinese writers learnt English as a foreign language leads to the greater variation seen in their use of English. In Hong Kong, English and Chinese are the official languages as defined in the Basic Law of Hong Kong; thus, English is considered a second language and this is a factor in the lower percentage of occurrences of divergence from Standard observed in the Hong Kong sub-corpus. Hong Kong business deals and government bodies tend to use English to communicate, and Hong Kong writers are used to using Standard English to communicate.

Conclusions

The results displayed in Table 1 and Figure 1 demonstrate that variation exists in the English language used by writers from China and Hong Kong. Even in a genre such as business English, writers tend to modify the language. We observe that Chinese writers used more non-Standard English than do Hong Kong writers, as for the latter English is an official language and is used as a second language. Furthermore, business English tends to be more informal when used by Chinese writers, transmitting the linguistic and cultural identity of the author.

In the Chinese writer sub-corpus, it is suggested that much of the variation found is caused by mother-tongue and cultural influence: the writers' intention is to be polite, they use a commanding style, and they invent a given name, but also the genre influences their writing, as can be seen in their use of abbreviations. In the sub-corpus of the Hong Kong writers, the types of variation are caused by the genre they are immersed in, e.g. in the use of abbreviations and the commanding style.

Although variation is detected in the analysis of our corpus, we also see that communication is fluent among the workers of the company. The emails

sent in response to those of the Chinese workers were checked, and we observed that communication was effective: the receivers had understood the message even when the variation in communication was culture-based.

While this study only included sixty emails, we are conscious that a compilation of a larger corpus could be useful for the identification of further types of variation, such as modality, syntactic and morphological aspects of language. In future studies, our aim is to analyse further aspects of variation in the use of English in order to determine whether there are real differences between when English is used as a foreign language and as a second language. ■

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