
Exploring pronunciation features of Yunnan English

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The pronunciation of Yunnan speakers of English provides an interesting context for investigating Chinese English

Introduction

The English language has gone through cycles of prominence and decline in China since it arrived on Chinese shores in 1637 for the purposes of trade (Adamson, 2002). Since then the language has evolved in China from the stage when it was regarded as a language spoken by ‘barbarians’ (Adamson, 2002) in the 1700s to the present day which sees an unprecedented surge of enthusiasm for the language. This significant change in the attitudes of the Chinese people towards English has accelerated since China’s open door policy gathered steam in the early 1990s. Conservative estimates place the number of people learning English in China at about 200 million. A recent estimate by Crystal (2008) suggests that the number of English speakers in China has, in fact, doubled, with the widespread enthusiasm for English generated by driving forces such as China’s entry into the World Trade Organisation (WTO), the hosting of the Beijing Olympic Games, international tourism, foreign investment, the development of Western China, and the China-ASEAN Free Trade Area (CAFTA) launched on January 1, 2010.

This has generated substantially growing interest in and research into English language teaching, English language policy and the sociolinguistics of English in China. Some researchers have used the terms ‘Chinglish’, ‘Chinese English’ or ‘China English’ to describe English in China. For purposes of the present study, the term ‘Chinese English’ will be used and henceforth referred to as ‘CE’. While the recognition of the existence of such a variety is still a moot point, what is noticeable is the paucity of research on the phonetic features of CE, as noted by Kirkpatrick (2007: 146). With regard to pronunciation, the few existing studies have focused only on the phonetic features

of speakers from a few provinces in Mainland China. While these studies have no doubt thrown new light on the pronunciation features of CE, they may not be robust enough to represent a general picture of CE, given especially the complex linguistic situation resulting from multi-ethnicity in Mainland China. In fact, little research has been done on features of English spoken in the multiethnic areas such as Yunnan where a great number of ethnic groups inhabit. In addition, the studies that have been done on English pronunciation have focused on English speakers of Han Chinese. The present study seeks to address this gap by conducting a small-scale investigation of the pronunciation features of CE as spoken in Yunnan (henceforth referred to as ‘Yunnan English’ or YE). Specifically, this paper will provide a detailed analysis of the English pronunciation of ten undergraduate speakers of different ethnic backgrounds from various parts of Yunnan, based on their recordings of a read passage. Comparison will be made between the results of these speakers and previous studies of pronunciation of other varieties of CE where applicable.

Ethnicity and language in Yunnan province

Located on China’s southwestern frontier, Yunnan is the eighth largest province of this country. It borders on Laos and Vietnam to the south and south-east, and Myanmar (Burma) to the west. The area of Yunnan is 152,100 square miles (394,000 square kilometres) (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2010) and the population is over 42.88 million according to the 2000 population census (ESCAP, n.d.).¹ One notable feature of the population in Yunnan lies in the great complexity of

its ethno-linguistic groups. The largest number of recognized Chinese ethnic groups, i.e. 25 out of 56, is found in this province, which approximately accounts for 33% of the population of Yunnan according to the 2000 population census (NBSC, 2000).² Among the ethnic population are such major groups as *Yi, Bai, Hani, Zhuang* and *Miao*. Among the other 66% of the population (NBSC, 2000) are the Han Chinese who are the descendants of the conquering armies and immigrants through the centuries, most notably during the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644) (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2010). The non-Han population of Yunnan, accounting for one third of its population, are

intermixed to the extent that not one county is inhabited by a single nationality. According to the NBSC (2000) statistics, the *Yi* nationality is the largest minority ethnic group in the province. This ethnic group mainly inhabits Central Yunnan, i.e. Chuxiong Yi Autonomous Prefecture. The second largest in the population are the *Bai*, who inhabit Dali Bai Autonomous Prefecture. Other major minority ethnic groups are *Hani, Zhuang, Dai, Miao, Hui* (Chinese Muslims), *Lisu, Lahu, Wa, Naxi*, among many others.

While each minority ethnic group has its own language, only a few have written forms (e.g. *Yi, Naxi* and *Hui*) whereas most have only spoken forms (e.g. *Bai*). The minority ethnic languages are largely mutually unintelligible. However, due to the nationwide promotion of *Putonghua* (or ‘Mandarin’) in China, most people in Yunnan, be they Han or other ethnic groups, speak dialects which belong to the Southwestern Mandarin Group (Li, 1985a, 1985b; Yan, 2006). Although communication is not a big issue among the Han and other ethnic groups with *Putonghua* as the medium, the way *Putonghua* is spoken varies from region to region and from one ethnic group to the next. In fact, the pronunciation of each individual ethnic group is characterized by their substrate languages, both in terms of vowels and consonants. This is also true of the Han Chinese from various regions, though similarity prevails. Figure 1 shows a map of Yunnan province and the main minority ethnic groups residing in the province.

Since the founding of the People’s Republic of China, great efforts have been made by the Chinese government, coupled with the increasing access to and availability of the internet and both TV and radio broadcast media, to promote *Putonghua* as a national lingua franca and considerable progress has been made. However, as Li (2006: 155) points out, ‘one perennial reality is that in the dialect areas, *Putonghua* has to compete with local dialects and often subdialects as well’. *Putonghua* is in fact not the most commonly used dialect in Yunnan. While it is true that *Putonghua* is a prerequisite for all teachers in the cities and most in the rural areas, it is not spoken in most of the governmental sectors or for daily communication. It is also rare to hear *Putonghua* spoken among local students in classroom, local people at parties and other activities such as shopping, travelling, etc. From the linguistic situation described above, it can be expected that there exist dialectal variations in Yunnan which may substantially affect the English pronunciation of learners from different linguistic backgrounds.



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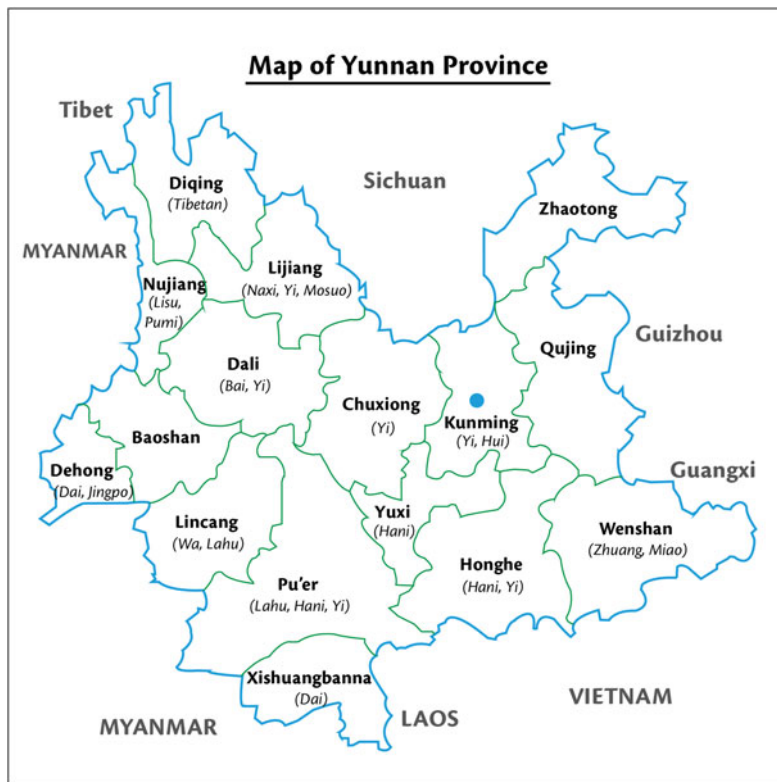


Figure 1. Map of Yunnan Province and its main minority ethnic groups³

The present study takes this factor into account and investigates pronunciation features of the five largest groups of speakers in Yunnan, i.e. *Han*, *Yi*, *Bai*, *Hani* and *Zhuang* nationalities.

Previous studies of CE

As there is a lack of empirical research on pronunciation features of YE, it is necessary to briefly review previous studies of other CE varieties which can cast some light on the present study and also serve as objects of comparison. Previous research on CE has in the main tended to focus on its lexis (e.g. Jiang, 2002; Kirkpatrick, 2007; Pride & Liu, 1988) and syntax (e.g. Kirkpatrick, 2007; Xu, 2000; Xu, 2008), but its pronunciation features have not received equal attention. In fact, to date, the only detailed and systematic empirical studies in this area are Hung (2002) and Deterding (2006b). Hung's (2002) study analyzed the speech of 93 first-year undergraduate non-English-major students at three universities in Beijing who are from 10 Chinese dialect groups, namely Beijing, Tianjin, Northeast, Northwest, Yue (Cantonese), Wu, Min

(Fukien), Kejia (Hakka), Gan (Jiangxi) and Xiang (Hunan). All students were recorded reading 100 words in citation forms (e.g. 'This is a worry'; 'This is a cord'). The phonetic features of Chinese English identified in the study were categorized under each Chinese dialect group.

Deterding (2006b) analyzed and described the pronunciation of 13 non-English-major undergraduates originally from nine Chinese provinces, namely Anhui, Henan, Hunan, Jilin, Jiangsu, Jiangxi, Liaoning, Shandong and Zhejiang. Each student was recorded reading a passage and participating in a short interview. He identifies some salient features of pronunciation which he argues 'may become established as part of a unique variety of English that is emerging in China' (Deterding, 2006b: 175). There are a few other studies of CE pronunciation features, which include Ho (2003), who videotaped and transcribed oral presentations of 39 PRC students who were studying in Singapore, Chang (1987), Pride and Liu (1988), Jiang (2002), and He and Li (2009) who provide some impressionistic descriptions of phonological features of Chinese English as a whole. Table 1

Table 1: A summary of pronunciation features of Chinese English from previous studies

SN	Consonants of Chinese English	Vowels of Chinese English
1	Voiceless/Voiced dental fricatives, e.g. /θ/ realized as /s/ and /ð/ as /z/	Extra final vowels: Schwa /ə/ insertion after the final plosive and before the next word
2	/h/ pronounced as [x]	Vowel reduction: Absence of reduced vowels
3	/ʒ/ pronounced as [ɹ]	Length of vowels: Shortening of diphthongs and long monophthongs
4	/l/ pronounced as [n]	Nasalization of vowels before final nasal consonants
5	/l/ vocalization	
6	/t/ pronounced as /l/	
7	Glide before initial /l/	
8	/v/ pronounced as /w/	

shows a summary of some of the most salient CE pronunciation features from these studies.

It can be seen from Table 1 that consonants may be more challenging for CE speakers. In the present study, we attempt to explore the pronunciation of YE and seek to investigate whether and how it differs from that of other varieties of CE. To achieve this end we conduct detailed analysis of consonants and vowels of YE.

Participants and data

Ten undergraduates volunteered to participate in the study. Participants consist of two speakers from each of the *Han*, *Yi*, *Bai*, *Hani* and *Zhuang* nationalities. They are all undergraduates from a university in Yunnan and have not resided outside

the province for an extended period of time (defined as at least three months). Table 2 shows the detailed information about these participants whose names are replaced by ‘Speaker ...’ to protect their identity.

Participants were recorded reading a short passage (henceforth referred to as ‘The Wolf Passage’) which is attached in Appendix I. Recordings were made in a quiet room using a high quality digital PCM recorder and saved on the computer in .wav format with the sampling rate of 10,000 Hz which is frequently used in phonetic research (Hayward, 2000: 68). The ‘Wolf Passage’ was selected because it contains sufficient examples of vowels and consonants as well as a good balance of phonological environments to measure the different sounds (Deterding, 2006a). The recordings of ‘The Wolf Passage’

Table 2: Detailed information about participants

Participant	Gender	Age	Ethnicity	Place of Origin
Speaker 1	Male	22	Han	Qujing
Speaker 2	Female	22	Han	Baoshan
Speaker 3	Male	22	Yi	Lijiang
Speaker 4	Female	23	Yi	Chuxiong
Speaker 5	Male	22	Bai	Dali
Speaker 6	Female	23	Bai	Dali
Speaker 7	Female	20	Hani	Simao
Speaker 8	Female	20	Hani	Yuxi
Speaker 9	Male	22	Zhuang	Wenshan
Speaker 10	Female	23	Zhuang	Wenshan

were then carefully analyzed using a detailed inventory of all vowels and consonants. The detailed pronunciation features were recorded in the inventory during analysis for which each recording was played five times.

The pronunciation features of YE

The following are some of the main features of the pronunciation of the ten speakers with different ethnic backgrounds, which will be discussed with examples from ‘The Wolf Passage’.

Consonants

1. Omission and vocalization of /l/

This is perhaps the most salient consonantal feature of YE. There are several instances of dark /l/ in ‘The Wolf Passage’. Nine out of ten speakers omit /l/ and pronounce *wolf* as /wɒf/ or /wɔːf/ or simply /ʊf/. Four of the speakers pronounce *full* as /fʊː/ while others pronounce it as /fuː/ or with /l/ in the word vocalized as /ə/ (/fʊə/). Most instances of l-vocalization occur in the word *fool*, which is pronounced by four speakers as /fʊə/. Other instances of /l/ omission and vocalization include *little* /lɪt, 'li:tə:/, *usual* /'juːjʊː/, *successful* /sək'sesfʊː/ and *told* /tɔʊd/. The word *fields* /feldz/ is one exception.
2. Omission of final /n/ and insertion of schwa before /n/

The word *afternoon* /ɑːftə'nuː/ is found to be the typical example for /n/ omission. This feature is also found in the word *soon* /suː/. Interestingly, three out of ten speakers are found to insert the schwa /ə/ before the final /n/ in the word *afternoon* /ɑːftə'nuːən/. This is probably because the schwa insertion makes the final /n/ easier to pronounce. One would think that he who inserts schwa before the final /n/ in *afternoon* may do the same in *soon*, as is the case for Speaker 1. However, this is not always predictable, because Speakers 7 and 9, who omit the final /n/ in *afternoon*, are instead found to pronounce *soon* as /suːən/.
3. /ʒ/ pronounced as /j/

Typically the fricative consonant /ʒ/ in the word *pleasure* is pronounced by six out of ten speakers as the approximant /j/. Another such instance is the word *usual* /'juːjʊː/. This feature is worthy of further investigation with more instances because, as with No. 2 above, this has not been reported by previous studies.

These two, among others that will be discussed later in the paper, could potentially be one of the key features of YE. Unfortunately, there are only two instances of the sound /ʒ/ in ‘The Wolf Passage’.

4. /θ/ pronounced as /s/

As reported in Deterding (2006b) and elsewhere, this feature is also one of the key features of CE. Here five speakers pronounce ‘th’ (/θ/) in *thought*, *third* and *threaten* as /s/. It is important to note that these five speakers are from *Han*, *Yi*, *Bai*, *Hani* and *Zhuang* respectively, which means the other speaker in each of these groups does not pronounce in this way, although both *Bai* speakers are from Dali and both *Zhuang* speakers are from Wenshan. This indicates that it may not be easy to generalize this feature either in terms of ethnicity or place of origin.
5. /ð/ pronounced as /z/

Four speakers pronounce almost all the instances of the voiced dental fricative /ð/ as /z/. Both *Hani* speakers (Speakers 7 & 8) pronounce the consonant in this way. This feature, however, is not found in the pronunciation of all the *Bai* and *Zhuang* speakers. This may mean that this feature is ethnicity-specific.
6. /ʃ/ pronounced as /ç/

Four speakers from four different ethnic groups are found to pronounce the consonant cluster ‘sh’ in the word *shepherd* as /ç/ which is similar to ‘ch’ in the word *ich* (I) in German. This feature was not reported in previous studies of CE.

Vowels

1. /ʌ/ pronounced as /a/

As the most salient vocalic feature of pronunciation of YE speakers, this most frequently occurs in words such as *duck* /dak/, *up* /ap/, *us* /as/, *come* /kam/ and *cousins* /'kəʊzɪnz/. This feature, however, needs further validation through acoustic measurement in the future study due to the fact that it is no easy task to differentiate aurally between these two sounds. This feature is found in the pronunciation of nine of ten speakers and may be considered as a wide-spread feature of YE.
2. Absence of reduced vowels

Deterding (2006b) also lists this feature as the second most salient for other varieties of CE, which may suggest that in terms of vowels YE is quite similar to those varieties. This occurs with most speakers in the unstressed sequence *con-*, e.g. *concern* /kɒn'sɜːn/ (or in some cases

ʌ /kɒnsən/) and *convinced* /kɒn'vɪnst/ (or in some cases /kɒnvɪnst/). This also occurs in words such as *a* /e/, *the* /zə/, *were* /we/, *of* /ɒf/ (medial) and *shepherd* /ʃepəd/.

3. /i:/, /ɪ/ and /e/

The features of these three vowels are hard to categorize because each of these vowels is pronounced at least in two different ways. The long vowel /i:/ is pronounced /e/ in *fields* /fɛldz/ (by two speakers) but /eɪ/ in *feast* /feɪst/ (by three speakers). The pronunciation of vowel /ɪ/, probably due to its complex nature, varies from word to word or even for the same word, e.g. *it* /jɪ:t/, *village/villagers* /'velɪdʒ, 'veɪlɪdʒ/ and *fist* /fɪ:st, feɪst, fɜ:st/. The vowel /e/, on the other hand, is realized in three different ways, namely /ɜ:/, /i:/ and /eɪ/, as in the words *however* /haʊ'ɜ:və/, *threaten* /'θri:tən, 'sri:tən/, *pleasure* /'pleɪjə/ and *successful* /sək'sɛɪsfəl/.

4. Extra final vowel or schwa (/ə/) insertion

Three types of schwa insert are found in the data. The first type occurs after the final plosive of a word that is followed by another word beginning with a plosive or other consonants or even a vowel, e.g. *next to* /'nekstə tu/, *used to* /'ju:zdə tu/ and *just escaped* /'dʒəstə 'ɪskɛpt/. The second type occurs between a consonant cluster within a word, e.g. *cried* /kə'rɪəd, kə'red/. The third type of schwa insertion is found before the nasal /n/ within a word, e.g. *afternoon* /ɑ:fɪ'nɜ:n/, *soon* /su:n/ and *cousins* /'kəʊzənz/.

5. Diphthongs

The most noticeable feature for diphthongs is the pronunciation of /eɪ/ as /aɪ/, /i:/ or /e/ in the words *raising* /'raɪzɪn/ (by five speakers) and *safety* /'si:ftɪ, 'seftɪ/. The sound /aɪ/ is pronounced by five speakers as /e/ in the words *while* /weɪ/, *tried* /tred/, *cried* /kə'red/ and *diet* /delt/. Two speakers are found to pronounce /ə/ as /ɛə/ in the word *fear* /fɛə/. One speaker pronounces the word *air* /ɛə/ as /ɜ:/.

Conclusion

This paper has outlined some of the most salient features of the pronunciation of Yunnan English speakers from eight different regions of Yunnan Province. The most salient consonantal feature, i.e. omission and vocalization of /l/ of YE, though not the most salient for CE, is found in the pronunciation of all speakers. The most salient vocalic feature of YE, i.e. /ʌ/ realized as /a/, seems to be widespread regardless of ethnicity and region.

Some features identified in previous studies, e.g. /r/ pronounced as /l/ and /v/ pronounced as /w/, which were identified in CE in previous research, are not found in the pronunciation of YE speakers. On the other hand, some features, particularly omission of final /n/, /ʒ/ realized as /j/, /ʃ/ realized as /ç/ and /ʌ/ realized as /a/, which are found in the pronunciation of YE speakers, were not reported in previous studies of the pronunciation of CE. These features may be the ones that constitute the pronunciation of YE.

The results indicate that while there exist some pronunciation features that are shared by YE and CE, there are some features which are more specific to YE than to CE. However, the present study does not indicate whether these features are more ethnicity-specific or more region-specific. Further research is needed to include more speakers from more ethnic groups in order to validate the results of the present study. It should be pointed out that the present study only focuses on the segmental aspect of the pronunciation of YE. To establish a more complete description of the pronunciation of YE, future research also needs to investigate the suprasegmental features, e.g. intonation, stress and rhythm, of this variety. It should be mentioned here that the first author of this paper has done some preliminary studies on the acoustics of Yunnan English in terms of vowels and rhythmic patterning (Ao, 2010) on a small set of pilot data and that the auditory analysis described in this paper will be validated by further acoustic analysis for his doctoral dissertation. Since China is the country with the largest population in the world, it is expected that linguistic variations exist at various levels, both geographically and ethnically. Therefore, in order to better understand Chinese English as a new variety, it may be necessary to conduct more features-based descriptions of the pronunciation of smaller varieties (as well as other features), from which a more general picture of CE may emerge. ■

Notes

1 ESCAP stands for United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific.

2 NBSC stands for National Bureau of Statistics of China.

3 Map drawn by first author based on information from the website of People's Government of Yunnan Province.

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Appendix I: The Wolf Passage

The Boy Who Cried Wolf

There was once a poor shepherd boy who used to watch his flocks in the fields next to a dark forest near the foot of a mountain. One hot afternoon, he thought up a good plan to get some company for himself and also have a little fun. Raising his fist in the air, he ran down to the village shouting 'Wolf, Wolf.' As soon as they heard him, the villagers all rushed from their homes, full of concern for his safety, and two of his cousins even stayed with him for a short while. This gave the boy so much pleasure that a few days later he tried exactly the same trick again, and once more he was successful. However, not long after, a wolf that had just escaped from the zoo was looking for a change from its usual diet of chicken and duck. So, overcoming its fear of being shot, it actually did come out from the forest and began to threaten the sheep. Racing down to the village, the boy of course cried out even louder than before. Unfortunately, as all the villagers were convinced that he was trying to fool them a third time, they told him, 'Go away and don't bother us again.' And so the wolf had a feast.