
Digital age, digital English

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A response to the articles on e-mail by Li Lan and Li Yongyan in *ET64* (Oct 00)

THIS ARTICLE discusses what has been happening to e-mail English and what might yet happen as a consequence to off-line English. The paper first examines the effect on the use of English in the electronic medium. It then talks about the influence of e-mail English on the off-line use of English, and closes with a description of the interface between English and Chinese in e-mails.

Li Yongyan (hereafter Li Y) focuses on the discursive aspect of e-mail messages in her article. She mainly talks about styles and coherence in e-mail writing. In contrast, Li Lan (hereafter Li L) primarily describes the linguistic aspect of e-mail English. Her article discusses both the conversational style of, and innovations and distinctive usages in, e-mail English. Both also describe English-Chinese code-mixing in their articles, as well as the emergence of novel linguistic features in e-mail English, such as the omission of the sentence subject.

The numbered examples in this article, unless indicated otherwise, are all from my own corpus of English e-mails. They are from three sources: (1) e-mails posted on the listserv of the Chinese Students and Scholars Union at a Midwestern American university; (2) e-mail correspondences between teaching assistants of Chinese and their students at the same university; (3) personal e-mails. In these examples, all original errors, typographical as well as grammatical, are retained. The names of specific e-mail writers are not provided.

Language and medium

The novel usages in English discussed by Li Y and Li L are very common in unofficial e-mail

discourse, even though they generally do not occur in formal e-mail writing. The emergence of such usages has also been documented by such other researchers as Collot and Belmore (1996) and Gains (1998). In terms of the relationship between the electronic medium and the use of English, however, although Li Y does mention the impact on the latter from the former, neither of these two authors explores this issue further in detail.

It is obvious how differently people use language when they communicate through different media (or modes). As Baron (1984) points out, different modalities of communication produce markedly different sorts of language behavior. For instance, when people send a fax, they will normally use only content words and omit function words. In contrast, when they talk over the phone, they will tend to produce all the words, even though function words regularly get de-emphasized in their conversation.

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When discussing the effect on the way people communicate from the electronic mode, Sproull and Kiesler (1986) note that, to some degree, the e-mail system restricts the transmission of certain information, which, nevertheless, can be communicated through other modes. These constraints, in turn, make it necessary for people to explore the use of new features in e-mail English – both linguistic and paralinguistic. For example, as Li Y (2000) observes, word-processing in the e-mail system is not as convenient as that in Microsoft Word, in which a person can use either the bold or the italic font for emphasis. As a result, capitalization becomes a common practice to achieve the same end:

- 1 You **MUST** turn in your homework on time.
- 2 He can finish eating **ALL** these apples in three minutes.

For the same purpose, another widespread practice in e-mail writing is to put the emphasized elements between asterisks. The examples are in 3–4.

- 3 Remember, **nobody** can get the appointment without his consent.
- 4 This class is full of **weird** people.

As Li L notes, “the speed, efficiency, privacy and relaxation have made email a dialogue device: people ‘talk’ by email”. This is a valid statement: electronic communication is still not as fast as spoken communication. In order to “talk” via e-mail, interlocutors must do so by tapping keys on the computer keyboard. This makes e-mail communication much slower than people would like it to be. Because of this, e-mail writers start using abbreviations, omitting subject pronouns and auxiliaries, and decapitalizing the initial letters in sentences or proper nouns. Examples are:

- 5 IMHO (‘in my humble opinion’), this is totally irrelevant.
- 6 Not sure what you mean.
- 7 can I be in the same group as angela?

Generally speaking, with the help of the context, the new usages in e-mail English are not likely to cause confusion or miscomprehension to e-mail readers, even though people need to get used to them. Such usage helps to save both the time and energy of e-mail composers. Most important of all, it helps make electronic communication more effective.

Unlike spoken communication, electronic

discourse is weak in social context cues (Sproull & Kiesler, 1986). In other words, since e-mail writers do not communicate with their interlocutors face to face, they cannot take advantage of non-linguistic cues such as facial expressions, intonations, or gestures. Sproull and Kiesler suggest that when social context cues are weak, people do not have enough resources to create their own emotional states or to figure out the emotional states of their conversational partners. This makes it difficult for the verbal interaction to be carried out in a smooth and comfortable manner. To compensate for this disadvantage, people create and employ linguistic and non-linguistic usages in e-mail writing, such as abbreviations and emoticons. Examples:

8 Emergent features	Meaning
LOL	laughing out loud
(* ^ o ^ *)	great happiness
:-S	confused and embarrassed
> _ <	disappointed

(McArthur, 2000:40)

Zilic (1999) suggests that the use of emoticons in e-mails makes it relatively easy for people to fake their feelings. In face-to-face communication, indicators of emotions, such as facial expressions, are mostly displayed subconsciously. People generally do not think about their emotions before they are manifested. Therefore, their feelings may not be really successfully faked, especially to keen observers. In contrast, in e-mail writing, people have the chance to think about the emotion before they communicate it. This makes the expression of emotion a possibly conscious and pre-meditated behavior. People can then easily control the display of their feelings. Consequently, they may exploit emoticons to hide their genuine feelings, such as hurt, when they think that, for one reason or another, it is inappropriate to have such emotions known.

In a word, the use of the computer as a medium of communication not only affects the form of the English language (that is, *how* people communicate), but also the content of communication (that is, *what* people communicate). But is the medium solely responsible for the emergent features in electronic communication?

As Li L hints, a person’s English level is likely to influence his (or her) styles of e-mail writing. E-mails from my own data corpus also

indicate that Chinese students tend not to use the surfacing English usage in e-mail writing, while American students do. This has at least one implication. That is, although computers as a medium of communication play a major role in the creation and use of new features in e-mail English, they are not the only determining factor. Other factors, such as user innovations motivated by social psychological considerations, must also be taken into account. Such social psychological factors are briefly discussed as follows.

Novelty, entertainment and/or humor

The creation and use of new features in e-mail discourse, in particular netronyms and emoticons, can be motivated by the wish to be creative, entertaining, and/or humorous. For instance, for clichés like “See you later”, it may be no fun to use them over and over again. Consequently, “CUL8r” comes forth, which brings with it a touch of originality, amusement, and humor. Such an effect from the use of emoticons is more striking. For many people, the sight of some emoticons, such as ☺, never fails to amuse.

Seeking prestige and marking identity

Computers currently represent modernity, high technology, and many other desirable things. Consequently, knowing something about computers is, to a certain degree, a prestigious thing. One effective way to demonstrate knowledge of something is to use the linguistic expressions that belong to that domain. As a result, those who know something about computers and the Internet create and use register-specific English expressions in their e-mails, for example, “FAQ” (“frequently asked questions”), to indicate that they belong to this fortunate and prestigious group. Hale (1996:13) puts these groups of people under various rubrics such as “elites”.

Electronic communication and language change

Although Li L recognizes that the use of English, especially in personal e-mails written by young native speakers of English, is full of rule-breaking and creativity, yet she concludes that “email style may not therefore directly challenge Standard English, but seems likely to extend it in a variety of ways” (55). According

to my understanding, “extend” implies change, although the scale of change may not be dramatic, and indeed, early in 1984, Baron pointed out that it is possible to anticipate certain changes in both spoken and written English due to influence from the usage of English in electronic communication.

At least five factors help to support the proposal that electronic language is exerting its influence on the off-line use of English, which might ultimately lead to language change.

1 The possibility of cross-modality influence

The mode of e-mail writing is different from that of either speech or traditional off-line writing. If cross-modality influence is possible, then it is probable that e-mail English will transcend the bounds of electronic communication and affect both spoken and written English. Evidence shows that cross-modality influence is a reality. Many instances of English usage clearly show that speech and writing have been influencing each other. In terms of speech affecting writing, there is, for example, written use of contractions like “haven’t”. Concerning writing influencing speech, there is, for example, professorial talk like the sentence “But it is now widely recognized that we must make a distinction between the formal objects licensed by a grammar – structures – and feature descriptions, which are used to impose constraints on these structures”. Then, there is no reason not to expect that new usages in e-mail English will go beyond the electronic mode and influence the use of both spoken and written English.

2 The prestigious status of e-mail English

The e-mail system was and still is predominantly used in institutional and corporate environments, such as universities and big companies. In this sense alone, it more or less represents new technology and modernity. Because of this, e-mailing is, to a certain extent, a prestigious form of communication. As a result, the variety of English used in e-mailing seems to be connected with high social prestige.

The emergence of such a prestigious variety of English has significant sociolinguistic implications. As Chambers puts it, “variability in language often indicates instability” (1995:185). More importantly, variationist sociolinguists hold that variants with high social prestige,

overt or covert, are most likely to be the future norm of usage. Within this framework, it is not unreasonable to expect some of the emergent usages in e-mail English to influence or even replace those in speech and traditional writing.

3 Dynamic and original use of English by young writers

It can be more or less assumed that evolving usage mostly occurs in the e-mail written by young people. Generally speaking, the language of young people is dynamic, vivid, and rich in creativity: most people can hardly deny that e-mail expressions like “f2f” (‘face-to-face’) are more forceful, colorful, and original than their equivalents in full spelling. Such a dynamic variety of English is contagious, and it is no surprise that young people lead in language change: “The young are usually in the vanguard of most [language] changes” (Wardhaugh, 1998:202). On this basis, it seems possible for change to occur when the vigorous use of English in informal e-mail writing by young people spreads to formal writing and to other groups of population.

4 Reduction of redundant information

One direction of language evolution is toward ease of production and comprehension. For this reason, redundant elements in a language system tend to be reduced and eliminated, as with the decapitalization of the initial letter in a sentence. Since there already exists another means of representing the information that a new sentence starts – the use of punctuation – it does not seem to make a big difference whether capitalization is kept or not, at least from the perspective of the reader. This fits in well with the need for ease of production. Meanwhile, it does not make comprehension any harder.

5 High frequency of e-mail writing

Nowadays computer networking is available on most college campuses in the US. And the e-mail system is easily accessible to most college students. In this situation, many students check and/or write their emails with relatively high frequency. According to my survey, on average a student at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign checks and/or writes his/her email 2.33 times a day. And the average time one spends on email reading and/or writing is about 20.78 minutes a day. With such a fre-

quency in email writing and/or reading, it may be plausible to expect the transfer of email English features to the off-line use of English.

It is not possible to accurately foresee the future evolution of the English language. Even so, these five factors suggest that it is probable for e-mail English to influence both spoken and off-line written English. When such influence reaches more and more people, language change will take place. Of course, in the beginning the new usage in e-mail English is more likely to exert its impact on the informal than on the formal use of English. And it is hard, if not impossible, to argue that the formal use of English may never be affected. This boils down to a matter of attitude. When the attitude towards the emergent features in e-mail English changes, these features will likely be used in formal writing as well.

Indeed, evidence of the influence on the off-line use of English from e-mail English is already available. In the United States at least, some people have started to use expressions like “BTW (‘by the way’)” in their speech. Anecdotally, some kids mistake “101” as “laughing out loud”, whose e-mail version, as mentioned above, is “LOL”.

English-Chinese code-mixing by speakers of Chinese

Both Li L and Li Y discuss code-mixing in their articles on e-mails. And both point out that code-mixing occurs, on the one hand, as a result of the writer’s creative use of English and, on the other, out of communicative necessity. In Li L’s own words, “non-native English speakers – in the present discussion Chinese – use a strategy of code-mixing for two purposes: adding color to the message and/or filling the language gap” (29).

This observation was basically confirmed by my survey on the use of code-mixing by the Chinese students at a Midwestern American university. In addition, this survey indicated that the reason for these students to code-mix is more to fill the language gap than to add coloring to English. Out of the thirty participants of the survey, twenty-four said that they sometimes code-mix in their e-mails. When asked why they code-mix, a majority of the twenty-four students, 83%, said that it was because they did not know the exact English expression for a certain idea. Only 17% mentioned certain social psychological motivations behind their

code-mixing, such as to be humorous, and/or to show their identity of being Chinese.

The examples of English-Chinese code-mixing that follows (9–16) use Pinyin, the Chinese phonetic alphabet, which is italicized here for ease of reading. It is interesting to note that most people indicate the tones of the Chinese elements with the appropriate numbers, although some do not. The position of the tone marker also varies from person to person. Most people put it immediately after the vowel(s), while some put it between the two symbols that represent one diphthong if there is one, as in 10 and 17.

- 9 Fresh crab and fish in Sunshine Shop (*SanXian Dian*)
10 Can we go to *Dong1ha3iyu2cun1* ('Mandarin Wok') to eat?

These examples of the use of code-mixing indicate that, in the United States, proper names for those facilities owned by Chinese Americans are usually referred to both in English and Chinese. This practice presumably has nothing to do with filling the language gap. Rather, it may be primarily motivated by the effort to make oneself understood clearly, given the fact that some people may not be familiar with the name of the facilities either in English or in Chinese.

As is also clear from examples 11–14, many mixed Chinese elements are nouns or noun phrases. Most of these expressions either refer to something that is characteristic of the Chinese culture, for example, "*dan4chao3fan4*" (in 12), or something that is primarily used in a specialized field, for example, "*jiao(3) mo(2) yan(2)*" (in 11). In either case, an average Chinese student most probably does not know the exact English expression for such a concept. Furthermore, with such terms as "*dan4chao3fan4*", which means "rice fried with eggs", there may not be an equivalent conventionalized English expression. Under these circumstances, the Chinese students will have to use Chinese to fill the language gap.

- 11 Who knows what medicine cures *jiao(3) mo(2) yan(2)* ('keratitis')?
12 OK. I'll go home and eat *dan4chao3fan4* ('rice fried with eggs')
13 Hi, I have not yet received your *deng1 mi2* ('lantern riddles'). Please give those to me today by 3pm.
14 If we have many students show up, we'll *wei4 ta1 men cheng2 fan4 cheng2 cai4* ('fill

their bowls with rice and dishes'). Then, all TAs should line up from *zhou1* (the historical Zhou) dynasty to *min2 guo2 chu1 nian2* ('the beginning of the Republic of China').

As is shown by the code-mixing in example 14, the major component of the predicate of a clause can be switched into Chinese, although such mixing is relatively rare in my corpus. The Chinese function word "*wei4*", which roughly means "for", is also used here, even though such occurrence is also very rare. In this way, the major part of the clause "*we'll wei4 ta1 men cheng2 fan4 cheng2 cai4*" is Chinese. This can be explained by either assuming that these students need Chinese to fill their language gap, or by assuming that since for some students' Chinese is still more comfortable to use than English, they are sometimes just too lazy to use English.

The code-mixing in examples 15–16 shows that Chinese idioms or proverbs are also likely to be expressed in Chinese when Chinese students write e-mails in English. It is possible that part of the reason for such a language behavior is to fill language gap. But it is more likely that the original Chinese expressions are used because, compared with the English translations, they are more exact, vivid, rhythmic, and rich in connotation.

- 15 Tonight is THE night. Don't forget to remind your students about our party. *feng1 yu3 wu2 zu3* ('stopped by neither wind nor rain')!!!
16 Your're really *tong2sou3wu2qi1* ('not cheating the young and the old').

In the e-mails written to their students, the teaching assistants of the Chinese language also frequently used code-mixing. However, in this case the primary reason for code-mixing is pedagogical. In other words, the teaching assistants used Chinese in order to give their students a chance to review the expressions that have been taught (Note: the English translations in parentheses are my additions). So, some of the regularities discussed above may not apply here in specimens 17–19.

- 17 In terms of accuracy, I think *ni3 ha3o* ('hello') would be best.
18 I think *ni3 de xin1* ('your new') topic *hen3 you3 yi4si* ('very interesting').
19 If *ni3 you3 wen4ti1* ('you have problems'), *qing3* ('please') email *wo3* ('me').

English/Chinese hybridization in e-mails:

Some further examples:

- 20 I am thinking about hosting a Chinese New Year Meal – not party, no *pi2 jiu3* ('beer').
- 21 We will ask people to *lai2* ('come') to our place.
- 22 It is better to ask "qing3 wen4 nin2 shi4 shei2 ('please tell me who you are')." "
- 23 Did you see the movie *wuo4hu3cang2long2* ('Crouching tiger, hidden dragon')?
- 24 Chinese Culture Center of the CCNAA Office has arranged 15 sets of *zhong1 guo2 chuan2 tong3 fu2 shi4* ('traditional Chinese costumes') for us.
- 25 I'll go to each one of your classes next Monday, advertising for the *yuan2 xiao1 wan3 hui4* ('party celebrating the Lantern Festival').
- 26 *Hong2 bao1* ('a small red parcel with money in it') will be given to students who answer *deng1 mi2* ('lantern riddles') correctly.
- 27 Shall I need to take *XUE(3) DI(4) XUIE(1)* ('shoes worn in snow') and

- LIANG(2) XIE(2)* ('sandals') here?
- 28 Party performers (any performance is good, such as: dance, guitar, singing, or *Xiang(4) Sheng(1)* ('comic dialogues'), etc)
 - 29 *Lao shi* ('Teacher'), I received this email all 3 times.
 - 30 *Ni3 Hao3* ('Hello') Eric!
 - 31 I have ordered *dan4 ta3, mian4 bao1, and yin3 liao4* in Chang's Oriental.

Abbreviation and loss of capital letters:

Some further examples:

- 32 *pls* ('please') don't feel bad about it.
- 33 just *lmk* ('let me know') what day is good for you guys.
- 34 I'll *c u* ('see you') tomorrow!
- 35 He often *CC* exciting stuff to me.
- 36 The topic is going to be how come fashion in certain areas of asia is so different from that that of america.
- 37 sorry about sending this to your email account but *im* having problems.
- 38 I'll post my opinions *asap* ('as soon as possible')

Also according to my observation, Chinese students are more likely to mix their English with Chinese when they talk than when they write their e-mails. One possible reason may be that for many of them, switching from the English to the Chinese writing system is more inconvenient, ideally involving the use of numbers to mark tones, than shifting from the English to the Chinese sound system.

More examples representing the emergent usages in English, the majority of which involve Chinese-English code-mixing, are provided in the accompanying box.

Conclusion

The use of computers as a medium of communication has provided us with an opportunity to further study the relationship between technology and the evolution of language at large, and the effect of medium on language use in specific circumstances. With the ever-increasing use of e-mail, the emergent usage of e-mail English may well spread to and influence both

spoken and traditional written English, which might ultimately result in wider change in the language. English-Chinese code-mixing is commonplace in English e-mails written by the Chinese, the motivation for which is usually either to fill the language gap or to add color to the writing. ■

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SNIPPETS 1

ELP is at 'and

(From Max de Lotbinière, 'Take pride in your languages – no matter how faltering', in the 'Learning English' section of *The Guardian Weekly*, Mar 01)

As France speeds up its drive to increase the number of languages being learnt in schools, the Council of Europe is putting the finishing touches on its new initiative to give language learners a single standard by which to measure their linguistic accomplishments, and to give them the confidence to use their languages to move around Europe.

The European Language Portfolio (ELP), which is being launched to coincide with the European Year of Languages, is designed to break down language barriers and to encourage holders to feel proud of their language skills, no matter how faltering.

The Council of Europe has developed a blueprint for the document, which it wants national governments to reproduce and distribute in primary and secondary schools as well as to adult learners. The Portfolio consists of a 'Language Passport', where holders fill in their competences based on a six-level, common framework – a 'Language Biography' for keeping a personal record of language learning, and a 'Dossier' for storing samples of work and certificates.

According to Robin Davis, from the British ELT provider Bell International, who has helped to develop a Europe-wide Portfolio designed for adult learners, the Portfolio will help individuals to build up a more comprehensive view of their learning than offered by exams alone.

Elite exodus

(From Jamal Mahjoub, 'Letter from Bamako [Mali]', in the *Times Literary Supplement*, 23 Mar 01)

One of the most serious problems facing Africa's development is the exodus of its best resource, its most talented people. Many of the writers who attended the festival live, of course, in France, and there was some rather heated discussion about what this means in terms of the literature. Is a writer less African because he or she lives in Europe? Is literature more valid because it is written in Africa? This is an old discussion, and it will no doubt continue, but there is a serious consideration that was illustrated by a visit I made to a local *lycée*. Being the only Anglophone writer present, I was asked to address an English class. This was a private school, and the students were the sons and daughters of Mali's middle-class elite. To begin with, they were surprisingly rowdy. The teachers' pleas for calm were greeted with cheers that would not have been out of place at a basketball game. When they settled down, however, the questions were both sincere and well thought out. The disruptive element was replaced by a vociferous commitment to learning and displayed a strong creative urge. But many of those young people are learning English precisely because they want to leave Mali and try their luck in the world outside.