

The China syndrome

Not everyone interested in English needs to give much thought to Chinese. This statement is so true that it borders on the banal, and a similarly true and banal statement might be: Many people involved with Chinese don't need to give much thought to English.

It appears, however, that things are changing, and fast, because of the sheer scale on which English is being used and learned in mainland China. Some people (including many Chinese) regard this development as a blessing that throws China open to the world. Some see it simply as a fact of life. But others (whether they are Chinese or not) see it as a major threat to China, to its language(s), and to its cultural traditions.

In our lead article, Jiang Yajun provides the background and detail on this development, and writes (by and large) on the positive side, whereas Niu Qiang and Martin Wolff are more concise and polemical, and strongly negative. My own piece on English as an Asian language, which comes after a report by Terence Pang on English in Hong Kong, was written for a UNESCO magazine in Asia, before I received either the Jiang or the Qiang & Wolff paper. And it reinforces both. My own fascination at what is happening in Asia is summed up in the following excerpt from that article:

[B]etween them, India and China apparently already account for at least half a billion users and learners of English, a total that (before seeking to bring in equally soft statistics from elsewhere in Asia) could make the continent, in demographic terms, the heaviest 'consumer' of English in the world – and even if this is not so at the time of writing, it is likely to become so in the not far distant future.

Globalization is an overworked term, and has a jargony MBA-ish ring to it, yet it fits both the processes to which it refers and many matters relating to language, notably including developments in China. But, although we devote three articles to the China syndrome in this issue, the rest of the world is not (yet) eclipsed. There are two welcome pieces from Africa (on Cameroon and Malawi), and one each on Greece, the United Arab Emirates, Euro-English, and idioms. There is also, to round off our reporting on the usage of September 11 and the war on terrorism, a photo-montage highlighting that grim short form, *9/11*.

Tom McArthur

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