Towards the acceptability of China English at home and abroad

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Is a vast new variety of the language emerging?

AS THE LEARNING of English becomes a hot issue in China, linguists there and elsewhere have become interested in 'China English' – a relatively new concept. However, whether English as used in China has yet acquired the status of a distinct new variety of the language remains an open question. This paper reviews the acceptability of such an English, both at home and abroad, which has the potential (it is argued) to be accepted as a standard variety.

Introduction

There has for some time been is a consensus throughout the world that the term *English* has a plural. Following Kachru's 1985 theory of three concentric circles, many scholars (cf. Bolton 2000; Yano 2001; Rubdy 2001) from different parts of the world have begun to think about the relative position of their own English. Because of their efforts, several 'new' Englishes have gained acceptance in both the 'Inner' and 'Outer' Circles – notably, for example, Indian English and Singapore English. However, Englishes in the 'Expanding' Circle – such as China English and Japanese English – are still by and large unacceptable as distinct forms in their own right.

This paper seeks to set out the factors, both external and internal, that influence the acceptability of a China English, and also to search for some enlightenment regarding the further development of such an English.

China English and Chinglish

In China, the study of China English is still in its initial phase. However, the growing discussion, including publications on this issue, means that for many scholars and teachers it is not a new term or concept. For example, Li Wenzhong (1993:19) gave the definition of China English as 'based on Standard English without interference of speakers' native language, and… adapted to express characteristics of Chinese culture in terms of phonetic translation, borrowing and meaning reproduction.' However, the term *China English* is sometimes confused with both *Chinese English* and *Chinglish*, and, according to Hu Xiaoqiong (2004:27–28), there is no clear distinction between the terms; rather, they are at the two ends of a continuum.

At one end, *China English* is seen as an incorrect form of English. The words are ungrammatically strung together, with often inappropriate lexis and probably only a partially comprehensible pronunciation. At the other end, it is as good a communicative tool as Standard English (as the term is generally understood). The pronunciation is close enough to 'native' varieties of English not to pose much of a problem; there may however be some syntactic and

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grammatical differences attributable to the influence of Chinese, and the lexis may occasionally differ, reflecting cultural differences.

The continuum issue raised by Hu Xiaoqiong brings up another question: At what point should an utterance be located on the continuum? What is China English, properly so called, and what is Chinglish? Several years ago people throughout the world might have straightforwardly taken British English or American English as their model, but recently the situation has changed. Many scholars now argue that (educated) Englishes from the Inner Circle are no longer the only standard. In this sense, whether changes or creations in a non-native English are accepted neologisms or errors remains an unsettled question.

Internal factors influencing the acceptability of a new English variety

According to Bamgbose (1998:3–5), five major internal factors determine the status of a neologism: demography, geography, codification, authority and acceptability.

1 The demographic factor

This factor is concerned with number of speakers. In China, there are over 250 million learners of English, a figure which outnumbers the entire population of the USA. Nevertheless, China English is (for most people) still outside the circle of Standard English, and this may conflict with Bamgbose's set of demographic criteria. Why cannot China English be accepted even though it has the largest number of people who can speak English? Bamgbose answered the question by raising the three levels of competence: basilectal, mesolectal, and acrolectal. Somebody's non-native English may be well known or popular as a basilect or a mesolect, but it is not necessarily accepted as an acrolect.

For non-native English, only when it occurs at the acrolectal level can it be accepted as a standard form of the language. Already, however, a large amount of China English vocabulary is accepted as acrolectal, as with *kowtow*, *tofu*, and *kung fu*, but these do not (yet) guarantee a green light for China English as one of the world's Standard Englishes.

2 The geographical factor

This factor relates in particular to the spread of neologisms: 'The greater the geographical spread of an innovation, … the higher is its acceptance as a standard form' (Bamgbose 1998:3). English is used in China as a foreign language. On the one hand, Chinese learners use it mostly in international communication, in terms of which English is the world's lingua franca. On the other hand, however, English appears rarely in intranational communication. This is one of the major reasons why it is so difficult for China English to stand in the Standard English circle. At present, the main form of English intranational communication in China is classroom interactions, most of which tend to be regarded as an incorrect form of English: that is, learners' interlanguage.

3 The codification factor

Codification is 'putting the innovation into a written form in a grammar, a lexical or pronouncing dictionary, course books or any other type of reference manual' (Bamgbose 1998:4). Before any innovation is codified, it has to undergo several 'steps of diffusion': that is, an awareness of the innovation; favourable attitudes toward it; proficiency in the use of the innovation; and actual use. And indeed, in terms of codification, China English is not ready for it.

Although there is now an increasing literature describing the features of China English, Chinese learners are not prepared to give it a favourable reception. Two studies conducted by Hu Xiaoqiong (2004, 2005) reveal that none of the students interviewed accepted China English as a Standard English, while 51.6% of the teachers interviewed thought that China English *could* be a Standard English. A majority of the students favour both American English and British English. To codify China English systematically, Chinese scholars and teachers should do more follow-up research to raise Chinese learners' awareness of China English.

4 The authoritative factor

This factor is 'the actual use or approval of an innovation' (Bamgbose 1998:4) by influential leaders such as writers and teachers and institutions such as the media and publishing houses. The authoritative factor, together with the codification factor, has a great influence on the status of a non-native English variety.

In China, there are over twenty English-language magazines and newspapers and one

TABLE 1 Subject profile

Nationality	Male	Female	Total	Percentage
American	4	6	10	47.62
Korean-American	2	1	3	14.29
British	3	0	3	9.52
Canadian	1	1	2	9.52
New Zealander	2	0	2	9.52
German	1	0	1	4.76
Total			21	100

English TV channel – CCTV 9. Such magazines and newspapers have become the major written resources of a China English database for current research. There are also numerous examples of the use of China English in the most well-known national English newspaper, *The China Daily*, although no clear approval of the systematic or exclusive use of a China English has been declared.

The current situation is that China English has been in use for many years, but this state of affairs has not been given the recognition appropriate to it. Attitudes towards China English are like what Wang Zhixin (1996) proposed in an article: linguistic Englishness and cultural Chineseness.

5 The acceptability factor

Acceptability is the ultimate step for a neologism. Once accepted, it will be codified and used naturally. This and the four preceding factors are inter-interrelated: If an innovation is used by *both* a majority of users *and* influential authorities it will be codified in dictionaries and grammar books, and will then probably and naturally be accepted.

Judging from these five factors, China English has not yet been fully accepted by Chinese learners. Users of English in China do not use China English consciously, and in any case most learners currently prefer American English and British English as their models. China English has not been either codified or systematically used by any authorities, and American English and British English are, unsurprisingly, still the major norms for English education in China.

In other words, China English is still at the first phase suggested by Kachru (1992, in Kirkpatrick & Xu 2002): that is, at the phase of 'non-recognition' of the local variety.

The following part of this paper attempts to find out the attitudes towards China English outside the country. A survey was carried out to investigate the attitude of people from the Inner and Outer Circles (the majority being from Inner Circle countries) regarding whether or not they accept China English as a new variety, and to what extent they accept China English neologisms.

External attitudes towards China English – a questionnaire

1 Method

In order to ascertain other English speakers' attitudes towards China English, over 50 questionnaires were distributed to teachers from Three Gorges University, Yanbian University of Science and Technology, and an English training institute in Tianjin, as well as to business people from a joint venture in Shenzhen. Of the 30 questionnaires returned 9 were rejected as incomplete and 21 were used for the analysis. The profile of the subjects is shown in Table 1. Three of the subjects who are Korean-American were separated from the USA category, as their mother tongue is Korean: they are not 'monolingual native speakers' (cf. Jenkins 2000 in Butcher 2005). Their use of English is more like people from the Outer Circle.

Results and analysis

Q1 Have you heard of *Chinglish* and *China English*? Do you think there are any differences between them?

The results show that nearly half of the subjects have heard of Chinese English/Chinglish. Of twenty-one subjects, only four have heard of both of the terms. About one third think

TABLE 2 Have you heard of *Chinglish* and *China English*? Do you think there are any differences between them?

Questions	Answers	Number	Percentage
Have you heard of China English *and* Chinese English (Chinglish)*?*	Never heard of them	3	14.29
	I've heard of *Chinglish* but not *China English*	9	42.86
	I have heard of both of them.	4	19.05
	No answer[1]	5	23.81
Do you think there are any differences between them?	They are the same/similar	7	33.33
	There are some differences between them	9	42.86
	Only make comments on Chinglish.	3	14.29
	No answer	2	9.52

[[1] Five of the subjects did not answer the question whether they have heard of 'China English' and 'Chinglish', but they made a distinction between the two terms.]

TABLE 3 When you communicate with Chinese people, what is likely to make your conversation hard to continue? (You may have more than one choice.)

Answers	Number	Percentage
Their poor pronunciation	12	35.29
The cliché or wrong words they use	3	8.82
Poor grammar	2	5.88
Their different style/way of talking	1	2.94
Their poor translation of those unique things in Chinese culture	6	17.65
Others	10	29.41

there is no difference between the two terms, while 42.86% think there are differences. However, their understanding of the terms varies, although they all agreed that 'Chinese English/Chinglish' is an incorrect kind of English, while they do not have a similar idea regarding 'China English', as over half of them had never heard of it.

Q 2 When you communicate with Chinese people, what usually makes your conversation hard to continue?

Here the poor pronunciation of Chinese people occupies first place and grammar matters least. Two respondents, however, think that the reason is the combination of all the factors mentioned. Pronunciation matters so much because in verbal communication it is usually the first and most obvious hindrance. In addi-

tion, Chinese people's poor capacity to translate those things unique to Chinese culture is a major problem. However, when there is no counterpart in another language, this problem is inevitable and can happen in any international communication. Other answers included: lack of vocabulary; poor listening ability; lack of knowledge of English; poor communicative skills; nervousness; and fear of making mistakes.

Q 3 To what extent do you think the following sentences make you feel awkward, especially those parts in italics?

Of the eleven sentences in the fourth question, there are only two sentences whose mean is below 3. Despite the so-called 'linguistic errors', those elements in the sentences do not make the subjects feel awkward. The result

shows that it is the message and not the language itself that matters. The letter combination *WC* is rarely used nowadays in the Inner Circle, whereas it is used everywhere in China, and now the word is almost fully accepted by English speakers who have been to China. Here we boldly say that *WC* may become (or remain) a distinctive element in China English. A similar example is *dumpling*, which in origin means a kind of English food: a ball of flour mixed with fat and water cooked, served with meat. That is definitely not what is understood by the Chinese term *jiaozi*, and by now every foreigner in China knows what we mean when we mention *dumplings*. This is therefore already a distinctive word of China English, although we feel that the Chinese word *jiaozi* is preferable.

Q4 Can you guess the meanings of the following Chinese sayings?

We can see from Table 5 that idioms and proverbs are the most difficult for the subjects to understand. Of the six sayings, only two are understandable to most of the subjects. However, even English native speakers might not understand idioms from another culture. This indicates that in international communication, some culture-loaded sayings may cause communication failure and should be avoided.

Q5 Do you think there will be a new variety called China English, like Australian English or Indian English? Would you accept it?

The results reveal a relatively favourable attitude to China English. Although nearly one third do not accept it as a Standard English, over half do or would accept it. 14.29% of the

TABLE 4 To what extent do you think the following sentences make you feel awkward, especially those parts in italics? 1 extremely awkward → 5 not awkward at all

Sentences	Mean
The *head office* is in Taipei.	4.6
Is this seat *empty*?	3.95
This is the key *of* my room.	3.2
Our Chinese students are *diligent*.	4.38
Let's *play* together.	3.57
I'm a *public servant*.	4.24
Today is hot.	4.05
Don't forget to *carry* your things.	2.52
Thank You For *Patronizing*.	2.86
WC is on the second floor.	3.29
Do you like *dumplings*?	4.62

subjects will accept China English as a new variety but do not think it can be a teaching norm. The results are a great encouragement to Chinese linguists and scholars. The possibility of China English becoming a Standard English is increasing as the discussion of World Englishes develops.

5 Discussion

5.1 China English should and will certainly stand alongside other World Englishes

Melvia A. Hasman (2000 in AL-Dabbach 2005) says English is 'a vehicle that is used globally and will lead to more opportunities. It belongs to whoever uses it for whatever purpose or

TABLE 5 Can you guess the meanings of the following Chinese sayings?

Sayings	Answers		
	Correct	Close	Incorrect/ I don't know
A bosom friend afar brings distance near.	16	4	1
In heaven let us be two birds flying ever together, and on earth two trees with branches interlocked forever.	13	4	4
The mountains are high, and the emperor is far away.	6	3	12
It takes more than one cold day for the river to freeze over.	9	4	8
The water in the well need not interfere with river water.	3	7	11
The dye extracted from the indigo is bluer than the plant.	2	2	17

Answers	Number	Total	Percentage
Accept			
I will (probably) accept it.	8		
I will accept it when I am in China.	2		
I won't accept it now:			
(It needs to be very widespread in use in China in order for me to accept it.)	1	11	52.38
Ambiguity in answer			
(There should be a general way that all people who speak E. should know.)	1	1	4.76
Accept it as a new English variety but not a teaching norm			
(I would accept that all people adapted to their own ways of expression, but I would discourage people from allowing it to become the norm for the E. in China.)	3	3	14.29
No, I don't think so.	6	6	28.57

TABLE 6 Do you think there will be a new variety called China English (like Australian English, or Indian English)? Will you accept it?

need.' English now is no longer the 'property' (Widdowson 1994 in AL-Dabbach 2005) of only one country; it is a language which belongs to the whole world. The results of the study show that China English has potential to become one of the accepted Standard Englishes in the world. However, the follow-up studies and research should be carried out before it is accepted by English users at home and abroad. Hong Kong English, which is now recognized by more and more linguists as a new English variety, due to the constant efforts of scholars like Bolton (2000) and Evans (2000), is a model for China English to follow. Bolton (2000) points out that Hong Kong English has already met Butler's (1997 in Kirkpatrick & Xu 2002) five criteria for the existence of a native variety of English. A number of studies on Hong Kong English phonology, vocabulary and syntax have been conducted (cf. Hung 2000, Benson 1994 in Bolton 2000, Ho 2000). It is clear that both Hong Kong and Mainland China have a long history of contact with English that dates back to the seventeenth century. Bolton also gives examples of English literature in Hong Kong such as the poetry of Lam (1997 in Bolton 2000) and Leung (1992, 1997 in Bolton 2000) as well as an English literary journal, *Dim Sum*. For the criteria of reference, Bolton, Gisborne and Hung (Bolton 2000) started compiling a database of around one million Hong Kong English words as part of ICE (the International Corpus of English). Similarly, widespread use of China English, works of linguistic description and codification, and English literature are needed before China English is accepted.

English teachers (both native and non-native teachers) in China should have sound qualifications

English users in China are not 'genetic' native speakers (Kachru 2000), and English is not the official language in China. The major way for Chinese to acquire English is through education. Teachers therefore play an essential role in the development of China English. As the concept of World Englishes penetrates into ordinary people's lives, questions like 'What kind of English should teachers teach?' and 'Should teachers correct students' "mistakes"?' are already under discussion. We argue that the three characteristics that Alatis (2005:31–32) has suggested a TESOL teacher should have may give some hints for solving the problem; namely, *linguistic sophistication*, *pedagogical soundness*, and *cultural sensitivity*. Here we use the three terms for the basis of our discussions.

By *linguistic sophistication*, Alatis means that a teacher with some knowledge of the learners' mother tongue or other foreign languages would understand the learning process better. It is good therefore if English teachers are familiar with both English and Chinese. Non-native teachers in this sense have more advantages than native teachers in China. Most native teachers of English know very little about Chinese language and culture. Teachers without adequate knowledge of the learners' mother tongue cannot really understand why

learners make certain mistakes, while teachers who have some knowledge of the learners' first language may have a more flexible and tolerant attitude towards learners' errors. English teachers, we would argue, should have a good knowledge not only of Chinese and Standard English but also some knowledge of World Englishes. They should provide students with a comprehensive picture while giving them freedom to choose which English they prefer.

Pedagogical soundness includes a sound general education, academic specialization, and professional education (Alatis 2005:32). What English teachers (native and non-native) in China lack is academic specialization and professional education. An English native speaker could be a respected English teacher in a university in China with only a Bachelor's degree in a non-language subject. Most of them have no teaching experience or academic qualification in language teaching. Chinese teachers may be more professional when it comes to teaching, but their major problem is a lack of academic knowledge. It is a good sign that the Ministry of Education is going to enact a policy advocating that a university teacher should have a Ph.D. We expect that the implementation of the policy will change the current situation within a few years.

Alatis (2005:32) argues that 'the purpose of teaching English is never about homogenizing all of society'. The attitude of teachers towards teaching culture should be 'additive', not 'replacive'. As globalization proceeds, everyone has opportunities to communicate with other peoples. The objectives of English teaching should be to enable students 'to switch codes instinctively and to communicate in the most appropriate language or dialect, in a manner most conducive to producing the greatest amount of cooperation and the least amount of resistance'.

In China, the cultures taught in the classroom are usually cultures of the Inner Circle, while China's own culture(s) of the Outer and Expanding Circles are neglected. This lack of balance leads to learners being unable to talk about their own culture in English. What is more depressing is that in 1995 graduate students in a famous university in Shanghai even failed a Chinese exam (cf. Jiang 2003). We strongly recommend that Chinese culture be integrated into English teaching. Since English native speakers are such a small proportion of the people with whom we communicate, why should we learn their culture exclusively and ignore our own five-thousand year culture and other great cultures?

Should we employ the terms *native speaker* and *non-native speaker* or *monolingual English speaker* and *bilingual English speaker*?

Tracing the origin of the word *native*, we find that it was once associated with slavery, colonialism, and apartheid, and during the last four centuries it has often been used with connotations of 'uncivilized', 'offensive' (cf. Butcher 2005). Interestingly, however, from 1859 to 1862 the scholar George P. Marsh used *native* in several of his works to trumpet the superiority and triumph of the English language. Terms like *native English* (65) and *native tongue* (77) reveal his pride in being a *native speaker* (cf. Butcher 2005:19). Some linguists, however, have now begun to question the authority of 'native speakers'. Jenkins (2000:9, in Butcher 2005:20) advocates the equal position of English speakers in pronunciation teaching and suggests using *monolingual English speaker* instead of *native speaker*, and *bilingual English speaker* instead of *non-native speaker*. Clearly, the two new terms, without any indication of superiority of *native speakers* or inferiority of *non-native speakers*, are more neutral and easier to accept. The term *native speaker* is however used by Chinese with evident admiration for English native speaker*s*.

There once was a caricature of two American beggars in an English newspaper in China. One of the beggars says, 'Let's go to China to teach English.' In China, any English native speaker can be an authority on English, regardless of what kind of English he/she speaks, from whatever part of the earth. Singapore, with only 4.3 million people, has gained its own reputation by speaking Singapore English, whereas China, with the largest group of English learners in the world, has no confidence in its own China English. It is certainly not a compliment if you tell a Chinese student that his or her English sounds like China English. Chinese students hesitate to speak English because their English is 'poor'; while an American postgraduate says that the greatest disadvantage of most American postgraduates is that they are not bilingual like Chinese postgraduates.

Chinese students have not realized how many benefits they can get from their mother tongue and how many advantages they have in being bilingual. Rather than complaining

about not being born in the USA or Britain, they should be full of gratitude that they can see the world from more than one angle and better appreciate one more culture than monolingual English speakers do.

Conclusion

There is a Chinese saying that everything is difficult at the start. Although China English is still at its infant stage and faces challenges and doubts from inside and outside, we believe that it will develop in its own way and progressively mature. One of the subjects wrote in his questionnaire, 'I come from the UK and many people in the UK do not recognize American English as an acceptable form of English, because of the many "spelling mistakes" and "grammar mistakes". Indeed, many people in the UK find it easier to accept Australian and Indian English (etc.) because they are closer to English English.'

However, despite British rejection, American English has become the most popular form in China and elsewhere. New English varieties are not threats but complement the existing varieties. The English poet Rudyard Kipling (1865–1936), who spent many years in the East, made the well-known remark: 'East is East and west is West and *never* the twain shall meet'. If he were alive now, he would probably change his mind. When Chinese children rush into McDonald's on weekends, when Americans order food in China Town, when Chinese teenagers make a fuss of their friends' Nike shoes, designers in London and Paris are integrating Chinese traditional design in their new collections of dresses; when Chinese are paying extra money for 'genuine' imported products, Americans and Canadians have already found 'Made in China' everywhere in their supermarkets. By mentioning only these examples, we are sure that Kipling would have made a one-letter change to his statement: 'East is East and west is West and *ever* the twain shall meet.'* ∎

*From an unpublished paper by Peter Kelly.

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