

# China English: Its Distinctive Features

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## Abstract

This paper attempts to expound that China English boasting its own distinctive features on the levels of phonology, words, sentences and discourse has been playing an irreplaceable role in intercultural activities, though still in its infancy and in the process of developing and perfecting itself, and it now makes every effort to move towards international self-assurance and gain its recognition in the English family.

**Keywords:** China English, Variety, English family, Distinctive features

## 1. Introduction

It is universally acknowledged that with the revolution of information technology, traditional boundaries of human society fall away. Our culture, politics, society and commerce are being involved into a large melting pot of humanity. So there is no monolingual country and it is the destiny of human beings to be confronted not by one language but by several, which naturally poses problems of communication. And such a dilemmatic situation in which commercial activities must be conducted among different nations and where multilingualism inevitably exists is a catalyst for the emergence of a global Lingua Franca. Esperanto invented by a Polish doctor Ludwig Zamenhof and then spread by people of good will has been proven to be a failure, while English once pollinated by British colonists and now expanded by media is likely to be the winner.

There is an attractive idea that a global Lingua Franca should be a uniform language, which to our disappointment is not true. A global language is a variegated language because the globalization of English has promoted the diversification of English, just as Okushima (1995, p.2) produced the word “glocal” (coined from “global” and “local”) to describe today’s English in the meaning of having openness and internationality and at the same time having local self-identity as well (Yano, 2001, p.124). In fact, English is on the way of developing into a global language, which demonstrates that English now is a multinational, multicultural, multiformal and multifunctional language. In other word, English is no longer an individual language but a language family where many English varieties were born and are developing and co-existing.

China English, as a member of English family, is a developing variety that constructs Chinese cultural identity. But there is much discussion today on whether China English is as acceptable as British and American English. As a matter of fact, China English boasting its own distinctive features on the levels of phonology, words, sentences and discourse has been playing an irreplaceable role in intercultural activities and it now makes every effort to move towards international self-assurance and gain its recognition.

## 2. China English —— a Standard Variety

In today’s world, the trend of English globalization is irreversible, which means it has an increasingly large amount of English-speaking population. Kachru (1985) divided them into three groups in the form of three concentric circles — the inner circle, where people speak English as native language; the outer circle, where people speak it as second language and the expanding circle, where people speak it as a foreign language. In that case, is it possible to attain a

single world standard of English to regular various uses of Englishes as first language, second language and foreign language?

What's more, one major consequence of globalization of English is the existence of several varieties of English (Bamgbose, 2001, p.360) which have international mutual intelligibility and national cultural specificity, since different nations with different historical backgrounds and geographic locations encounter different events and environments, at least different fauna and flora. So it is ridiculous to adopt the Anglo-American standard to govern other English varieties rooted in non-western cultures. The likely scenario is that each English variety establishes its own standard that guarantees international intelligibility and intra-national identity, which is the case of China English.

At the beginning, China English uses British or American English as its standard, which is now generally regarded as just two English varieties. And many countries have announced the "independence" of their Englishes and treat them as the equal varieties as British English and American English (Li & Yang, 2001, p.67). Therefore, it's time for China English to shift away from an exornormative model to a model based on China English. It is crucial to apply English to the present condition. Just as in the past, Chinese has used different models and standards provided from the Four Books, the eight-legged essay, the literary language (wenyan wen), the vernacular language (baihua wen) and currently adopts Putonghua as the national standard language (Kirkpatrick & Xu, 2002, p.276). And Chinese people with great joy have witnessed the change from literary language (wenyan) used by educated elite to vernacular language (baihua) used by general public and they are now with high expectation willing to see the shift from an exornormative model of English used by a minority of elite to a vernacular model, China English, used by the mass population. As the fittest variety, China English has every good reason to survive and even flourish both at home and abroad, since it has its own advantages on the level of phonology, lexicon, sentence and discourse, which not only enriches the connotation of World Englishes but also seeks a natural way to advertise China.

According to Li Shao-hua and Yang Xue-long (2001, p.67), the reason for any language to exist is its functional value and China English can meet every communicative purpose in the exchange between China and the world. From the early 19th century till now, China has been using English for almost two centuries. And now the localization and nativization of English in China makes English a necessary part of quite a number of Chinese people's daily life. According to an official survey, there were over 100 million Chinese who had learned English in various institutions by 1991. In addition, 1 million more were using English as a tool in their work. Twenty years later, this number has long been surpassed by now. Meanwhile, China now has 19 English-language newspapers and magazines, one English TV channel, CCTV-9, and one English radio service, China Radio International (Jiang Yajun, 2003, p.7). Therefore, we have no reason to ignore such a vigorous English variety, even though it is just a performance variety with no official status in China. Anyway, it is an effective communicational instrument.

It is predictable that the people who speak English as second and foreign language would far outnumber those native speakers. So Anglo-American socio-cultural framework alone is far from enough. Thus, China English, as a complementary cultural element, could serve a better role in Asian context than an exornormative native speaker variety.

### **3. Distinctive Features at the Level of Phonology**

When asked what goals they are pursuing, most of the Chinese English-learners would say they want to acquire the ability to speak standard English as the native speakers do. But actually there does not exist a single standard in spoken English, as Peter Roach put it, "the idea of a 'Standard Received Pronunciation' is a convenient fiction, not a scientific fact." (2000, p.188)

There does exist an RP (Received Pronunciation) which came into acceptance in the late 19th century but which is never generally received and just used by perhaps only 3 to 5 percent of the population of England. As a matter of fact, RP is just practiced by the most educated and cultivated learners. "It is a class rather than a regional dialect." (Baugh & Cable, 2001, p.309) Moreover, the spread of English to many parts of the world leaves us confused as for the standard of spoken English. Thus, it is obvious that the speech standard practiced in England should not be the sole authoritative norm set to judge other speeches of English varieties any longer. There ought to be multi-standards because "the growth of countries like the US and Canada and the political independence of countries that were once British colonies forces us to admit that the educated speech of these vast areas is just as 'standard' as that of London or Oxford." (Baugh & Cable, 2001, p.309) And each English variety has its own peculiarities in pronunciation. As long as they do not bear such differences in speech that would cause a change in meaning and by using them people from different nations can communicate with one another without restraint, they are acceptable and reasonable at least on the level of phonology, which is the case of China English.

There used to be an idea that we might have a single world standard to which all the English speakers, regardless of

geographical differences, social status, educational background, would try to conform, which is too ideal to be true. “What is perhaps more likely to happen is the development of a greater heterogeneity of Englishes. Internationally there will be a widely understood and used variety.” (Yan, 2002, p.285)

There is no universally practiced variety, including the speeches in tapes and of teachers, which used to be regarded as “standard”. In fact, they are just good examples worthy of following and imitating but are by no means the framework that English-learners should unconditionally confine themselves to. Tapes and teachers’ speech are far from being the only one that will meet the requirements in the future cross-cultural communications. Therefore, it is a wise choice for learners to expose themselves to different English varieties.

Different English varieties have their own suprasegmental features and their principal features lie in syllable, stress, tone and intonation, which will naturally express the speakers’ national identity. Take film as an example, only by hearing, most of the Chinese audience can find out whether it is an original Chinese film or a film dubbed from English or Japanese, even though all the film-dubbers are native Chinese. Why? Because the film-dubbers are not speaking Chinese as native people do. They did some changes deliberately in syllable, stress, tone and intonation when dubbing helps to produce a special flavor in line with the foreign atmosphere in film. In other words, they speak English Chinese or Japanese Chinese, which on the phonologic level reflects the foreign nation’s style and identity. It is the same case with Chinese film dubbed into English. In order to preserve the original Chinese flavor, the use of the sound patterns of China English seems to be a wise choice. By adopting a slow rate of speech and clearer patterns of articulation while avoiding some of the assimilations and elisions, Chinese films even dubbed into English can still be distinguished from the original English film. Natives of English can easily discern that it is from China even without taking a glimpse at the screen. Therefore, the sound pattern of China English has nothing to do with standard, it is just a question of appropriateness to the given situation. China English, a language phenomena with its capacity to voice ideas clearly and effectively, reveals its cultural style and national identity in a very natural manner, and therefore should be allowed to exist.

#### **4. Distinctive Features at the Level of Vocabulary**

We all know that languages can hardly survive in isolation but instead should always be in close contact with one another, owing to various factors, such as colonization, migration, trade, scientific or art exchanges, and the like. Where there is language contact, there are surely word borrowings. According to Hu Zhaoyun (2001, p.3), “nearly all human speeches have to some extent borrowed words from other speeches owing to language contact.” What’s more, languages live by these reciprocal borrowings that convey fresh ideas and new concepts characteristic of other cultures. Take English as an example, nearly 80 percent of its vocabulary comes from a wide range of sources, mainly Latin, French and Greek, but also Dutch, Arabic and Chinese. “No languages are sufficient unto themselves. Therefore, linguistic borrowing must be considered an inevitable necessity.” (Hu, 2001, p.85) And English language with its opening attitude enjoys and welcomes such linguistic borrowings, thus it becomes rich, vigorous and flexible and finally reaches the position of global language.

On the way to becoming a global *lingua franca*, English has borrowed a large amount of words from Chinese and some of them have become part and parcel of the English language. Early in the Qing dynasty, some transliterations, such as China, Chinese, Sino and silk were borrowed into English. Till now there are 65 words derived from “silk”, such as “silky”, “silkeness”, “silked”, “silken”, etc, which reflects the high level of silk culture of ancient China. With the capitalist revolution carried out by bourgeoisie in the 17th century England, the development of Sino-UK trade became more rapid. At the same time, some Chinese words concerning catering, commence, custom and local cultures were introduced into English. Chow mein, chopsticks, ginseng, kaolin, sampan, kowtow, etc are of this kind. From 1911 till now, China has undergone great changes — Chinese Revolution in 1911, the founding of PRC in 1949, Great Culture Revolution from 1966 to 1976 and the reform and opening up started from 1978, etc. In this period, many transliterations as well as loan translations concerning not only sports and culture but also politics were borrowed into English. Paper tiger, the big leap forward, four modernizations, special economic zone, one country, two systems can be forceful representations which enrich the English expressions to adequately illustrate Chinese things.

Lack of proper equivalents in native English may be an important factor of vocabulary borrowing. But nowadays what determines the borrowing is to some extent, the overall national strength, namely politics, economy, technology and military. Just as Hu Zhaoyun (2001, p.83) pointed out, “Loanwords may show a superiority of the nation from whose language they are borrowed”. Due to the successful launch of *Divine Vessel V*, “*taikonaut*”, a China English word came into use in western newspaper on an equal footing with “*cosmonaut*” and “*astronaut*”, which on the other hand shows to the world the leading role China plays in the space field.

In terms of the political influence, China English plays a very important role in safeguarding the national dignity and

sovereignty. For instance, in order to be strongly against Japan's possession of Island Diaoyu, we never translate the island into Senkakus. And it is a must to use the China English version when Nansha Islands and Xisha Islands are mentioned in world affairs.

### 5. Distinctive Features at the Level of Sentence

Different languages have different sentence structures that can achieve the same aesthetic result since beauty is not a quality but an effect and different languages have its own way to pursue beauty.

Due to different ways of thinking, English people attach more attention to hypotaxis and tend to use logical connectives in making a grammatical connection when there is more than one independent clause. There is scarcely any English sentence without a clause. On the contrary, Chinese prefer parataxis and they resort to reasoning for achieving logical coherence. To them, sometimes, the logical relation between two sentences is self-evident that can be sensed and comprehended, so connective-free sentences exist in Chinese.

For examples: One for all, all for one. One couple, one child. One country, two systems.

Instead of being stated, the relations between ideas are suggested and implied in China English where explicit connectives are not necessary. Sometimes, even subjects can also be omitted in China English, which makes the sentence more direct and concise.

For examples: Very glad to see you. Long time no see.

Sentences as listed above without subjects are quite typical in China English. Meanwhile, parallel structure characterized by conciseness, rhythm and symmetric beauty also wins the affection of Chinese people and makes itself at home in China English. For example:

Modesty helps one to go forward, whereas conceit makes one lag behind.

Toward the people, you are warmer than a charcoal fire,

Toward the enemy, you are sharper than a trenchant sword.

In order to achieve language eloquence, China English always uses repetition to reinforce ideas.

For example:

Let us soar at the greatest speed,

Let us soar with a spirit that knows no fear,

Let us, taking off from today, soar off towards tomorrow,

Let us make of every day a new starting point.

The inclination of using the words like "should", "must", "let", etc is considered another trait of China English. For example:

"Young Shao, let me give you a piece of advice. You should learn to be modest and prudent. One always loses by being proud and gains by being modest."

Such speech is a typical Chinese one. The speaker talks like a teacher giving a lecture or a pedant delivering a sermon.

After analyzing the features of China English at sentence level, we can see that the distinctive sentence structures benefit English in terms of various ways of delicate expression. They can become useful and valuable stylistic devices in English.

### 6. Distinctive Features at the Level of Text and Discourse

Text and discourse style of a language is largely determined by the world outlook, philosophical view, value system and thinking patterns which vary from nation to nation. And each culture has its dream of being known, understood and even appreciated by the whole world, so it is important and necessary to present its ideology and culture uniqueness through text and discourse which is the very mirror of the cultural conventions and traditions behind a language. As a cultural envoy, China English with its characteristics at the text and discourse level, plays an irreplaceable role in spreading and promoting Chinese culture to the world.

There are distinctive differences in the Chinese culture and western ways of viewing, thinking and expressing. Far from being direct and explicit, the Chinese prefer "a roundabout way of presenting the main ideas" (Hu, 1999, p.318). Usually by describing sceneries, they gradually show their feelings and unveil the themes. For example:

随着嘹亮的歌声，夜幕隐退了，黑暗过去了，太阳出来了，大地苏醒了，革命胜利了。

——《解放日报》：《最嘹亮的歌是东方红》

(With the resonant song, the curtain of night dropped, the dark disappeared, the sun rose, the earth came around, and our revolution was crowned with victory.)

As Engholm (cited in Hu, 1999, p.316) puts it, “Chinese communicate less directly and less explicitly. Having originated from agricultural village societies, they communicate in a manner conducive to what intercultural communication pundits call an implicit social environment... In such groups, much of what needs to be communicated can simply be implied rather than stated explicitly.”

Chinese writers in particular favor the implicit way to produce the aesthetic beauty since “beauty cannot be achieved without enough room for imagination and expectation.” In their eyes, if full moon can be compared to beautiful painting, the less full one is nothing but romantic poetry. They are “turning and turning around in a gyre” (Hu, 1999, p.316) while expressing their thoughts through a third party, such as sceneries, avoiding presenting their feeling straightly as it is.

For example:

燕子去了，有再来的时候；杨柳枯了，有再青的时候；桃花谢了，有再开的时候。但是，聪明的，你告诉我，我们的日子为什么一去不复返呢？——朱自清《匆匆》

(Swallows fly away, yet return; Willows wither, yet burgeon again; Peach-blossom fades, yet blooms afresh. But tell me, you who are wise, why do our departing days never return?)

This writing style not only reflects Chinese thinking pattern but also shows their state of mind as well as their values of beauty. It is usually believed that Confucianism has exerted a far-reaching influence on Chinese culture, so Chinese people prefer to be tranquility-lovers, scholarly and refined. They have their own business to devote to, but do it leisurely in a planned, orderly and unhurried way. They find delights and satisfaction from their quiet and tranquil life. They view real beauty as something that cannot be seen but only be sensed and acquired by a peaceful mind. After reading Chinese texts, the westerners are likely to have a better understanding of the oriental style of working and living, which presents them a fresh look at the same world and offers them a new perspective to the same thing. Therefore, China English produces an effective way for cross-cultural communication and comprehension, which will finally raise the level of human beings' perception.

## 7. Conclusion

It is useful for us to bear David Crystal's words in mind that it may take a militarily powerful nation to establish a language, but it takes an economically powerful one to maintain and expand it. (2001, p.7) As Chinese government gives priority to the development of economy, China is now experiencing an economic boom. With the entry into WTO and the host of Olympic Games in 2008 and World Expo in 2010, China is sure to have many opportunities to conduct cultural exchanges which under the help of China English will actually provide for the international friends the Chinese perspectives and insights, and thus will unveil an amazing oriental world concerning culture and ideology. As late Chinese paramount leader Deng Xiaoping said, the more national it is, the more international it will be. China English, backed by the robust national economy will sooner or later showcase its shining points and become an appealing variety worldwide.

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