English in China: some thoughts after the Beijing Olympics

EMILY TSZ YAN FONG

Institutional and learners' discourses about English and the implications for 'China English'

Introduction

China's politics and international relations with Western powers have historically determined the role and status of the English language in China (Adamson, 2004). Following the country's Open Door Policy in the 1970s, the entry into the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the Beijing Olympics, English, once considered a barbaric language, has been enjoying unprecedented popularity. The seven years leading up to the 2008 Beijing Olympics saw a series of foreign language campaigns in different sectors of Chinese society. The Beijing Olympics provided China with an opportunity to improve its world position and to 'reclaim' – and show the world – its glorious past. Since 2001, when China won the bid to host the Olympics in 2008, English learning campaigns have promoted both so-called 'standard' and 'authentic' English. The purpose of these campaigns was not only to ensure a successful Olympics, but also to equip the people with a tool essential for modernising and integrating China into the global community.

Previous studies have argued for the status of 'China English' alongside other localised English varieties (e.g. Wei & Fei, 2003; X. Hu 2004, 2005). Without official and popular recognition in the Chinese mainland itself, China English, however, lacks legitimation and recognition. In the context of the Beijing Olympics, this paper aims to discuss the initial findings of a major study on the Chinese government and overseas Chinese students' attitudes towards English; in particular, the ascribed roles and preferred varieties of English. In doing so, I analysed *Ren min ri bao* (hereafter the *People's Daily*), the Chinese-language national newspaper and mouthpiece of the Chinese government, and interviewed overseas mainland Chinese students at a university in Australia. Contrary to 'structural nativisation' of English (Bolton, 2008:9) that has taken place in other Asian and European countries, English seems to have been localised and appropriated to the social structure by the Chinese government with an attempt to preserve its 'standard' form. This paper also demonstrates the implications of the official and learners' views of English for the development of China English. The spread of English has led Graddol (2006:72) to predict that English will become a 'basic skill'. For China, as this article shows, English is a universal modern skill, a skill that is not associated with a particular country or nation.



EMILY TSZ YAN FONG is a PhD candidate in Linguistics at The Australian National University, Australia, where she completed a Master of Applied Linguistics with honours. She tutors international students and students with an indigenous background in Linguistics, and she is also a marker of an international English language proficiency test. Her research areas of interest include the globalisation of English in the Chinese context, language attitudes and the sociolinguistics of Hong Kong and China. Email: emily.fong@anu.edu.au

doi:10.1017/S0266078409000078

 © 2009 Cambridge University Press

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266078409000078 Published online by Cambridge University Press

English after entry into the WTO and leading up to the Olympics

With the Olympic Games, the status of English has reached a new peak especially among the wider Chinese public and in the education sector. In Beijing and across the country, a sustained government-initiated campaign was implemented to promote English, which received a lot of support from the general public. For example, the standardisation of road names and signs, and restaurant menus were part of the big campaign. Other English-learning social activities included the 'Foreign Language Week' and the 'Beijing Foreign Language Festival' held annually by the Beijing Foreign Language Committee from 2001. The festivals involved performances in English, and booths where people could register to learn English and to be language teaching volunteers. Different forms of English contests were held among families, students and localities such as English debating contests for college students and vocabulary contests for primary school students. Among the localities there was also a contest called 'Beijing Foreign Language Community of Excellence' where 18 out of 2,435 localities were awarded prizes by the regional and provincial government for their dedication to promoting and learning English (Beijing Foreign Language Committee, 2007). To boost the proficiency of English within the Chinese public, English learning materials were provided for free. Self-study courses, handbooks and manuals were also offered for police, restaurant staff and taxi drivers.

One way of understanding these English learning campaigns and social activities is in terms of the 'appropriating' of English into the social context of China (Pennycook, 2007). In Chinese culture, social and festival activities form an important part of life. Collective learning is a traditional mode of learning of the Chinese people and these English social activities are a manifestation of this aspect of Chinese social and cultural life (Cargill, 2006).

In the education sector at present, the role and status of English in China is higher than ever before as evidenced by its position as a crucial determinant for university entrance and procuring well-paid jobs (Adamson, 2004). To address the increasing demand for English raised by the prospects of winning the bid to host the 2008 Olympics and joining the WTO in 2001, guidelines named *Vigorously Promoting the Teaching of English in Primary Schools* were released in 2001, mandating that students in both urban and rural schools start learning English as a compulsory subject in the 3rd grade (Y. Hu, 2007). Prior to these guidelines, the majority of students did not learn English until the 7th grade. Alongside political classes such as Marxist Principles, English has been incorporated into China's basic quality education reform since the twenty-first century. In recent years, efforts have been made to introduce composite degrees and 'English + major' in place of pure English majors (Chang, 2006). The new models and curriculum encourage knowledge of other specialities to nurture all-round English majors. With the cooperation of overseas publishers such as Longman/Pearson, English textbooks have also been constantly updated and modified.

Given the enormous official support for English and the welcoming attitudes of the public as a result of the Beijing Olympics, this study is interested in how the government and public actually perceive the language.

Methodology

In order to examine the Chinese government's views of English, which I term in this article as a form of 'institutional discourse', the study began with an analysis of reports and articles in the *People's Daily* from 2000 to 2008 on pages other than people's forum and discussion. This study adopted the so-called Q methodology in investigating the attitudes of overseas mainland Chinese students, which I refer to as learners' discourses about English. Q methodology is a tool for studying and representing a range of opinions on a particular topic (Stephenson, 1953; Brown, 1980). It links qualitative and quantitative analyses and follows a rather standardised set of research procedures. For more information about the methodology, readers can refer to Stephenson's (1953) and Brown's (1980) work on the theoretical and statistical foundations of Q methodology, and Dryzek (1994) and Davis (1997) for applications of the method. The aim of adopting the method in this study was that not only could it reveal participants' opinions on a particular issue, but also the beliefs that helped shape those opinions. The major concern of Q methodology is not with how many people believe such-and-such, but why and how they believe what they do (Brown, 1980).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266078409000078 Published online by Cambridge University Press

This is the reason why the sample size of any Q methodology is fairly small with the ideal number between 30 and 60 participants. As this was an initial study, I interviewed 10 overseas students from Mainland China only.

The interviews with the participants consisted of two phases. In Phase 1, in a pattern of quasi-normal distribution, participants were asked to rate how strongly the statements about English taken from the *People's Daily* represent their viewpoints on a scale of –4 to +4, with 0 as neutral, and the results were then analysed with statistical software. Phase 2 comprised follow-up interviews and the questions asked were based around the results of the analysis of the *People's Daily*. Participants were also asked about the roles of Mandarin Chinese and English for China and themselves. Due to the scope of the paper, only the findings of Phase 2 are discussed in this paper.

Institutional and learners' discourses of English

Institutional discourses about English are more associated with the ascribed roles of English. When efforts were made to clear any signs of 'unauthentic' and 'nonstandard' English before the Olympics, the question that arose was 'what variety of English is preferred in China?' The following extracts' remarks from the *People's Daily* are indicative of official attitudes to this issue.

> 在会议间隙，记者有幸采访了柯林斯。他身着藏青色西装，一口地道美国英语清晰悦耳 (Xie, 2006).
>
> *During the break of the conference, the reporter had the honour to interview Collins. He was wearing a green suit and speaking very clear and euphonious authentic American English.*

> 走在班加罗尔市南郊的软件园区，如果不是频频告急的电力供应以及稍显怪异的英语口音来提醒，人们恐怕很难相信自己此时身处印度 (Chiang, 2006).
>
> *In the software company in South Bangalore, we can hardly believe we are in India without the common electricity failures and fairly strange English accent.*

These two excerpts and many others in the data indicate that American English is the most preferred variety. American English is praised many times as 'standard' and, as in the first remark, as clear and euphonious, while in the second quote, the Indian accent of English is described as 'strange'. The preference for 'standard' American English and negative perceptions about other varieties of English may be explained by the institutional roles of English in China today.

English as a universal modern skill

A predominant view portrayed in the *People's Daily* is that English is a universal modern skill. As some writers for the newspaper remarked:

> 公务员的现代化，并不主要是"会电脑"、"会英语"、"会开车"等仅仅局限于某些现代技能的掌握…公务员现代化的核心是思想意识、道德观念、价值尺度、思维方式、行为方式、感情方式、社会责任感和创新精神等综合素质的现代 (Yang, 2000).
>
> *Civil servants not only need to acquire modern skills such as computer literacy, English and driving skills, but moral and value beliefs, sense of social responsibility and creativity should also be the core qualities of modernisation.*

> 一位英语很好的女士，却没有找到合适的工作，田光哲建议她去学厨师，因为"英语加厨师"的能力结构，正是社会急需的(Jiang & Ding, 2004).
>
> *A lady with very good English could not find a job. Mr Tian suggested that she learn to be a chef because the **combination of skills** (my emphasis) of "English plus Cooking" is exactly what society needs.*

> 为适应日益增多的涉外案件审理工作，北京法院系统十日举办了第一期法官英语培训班，以培养懂法律、通英语的实用型高素质审案人才(Lou & Wu, 2000).
>
> *To accommodate to the increasing number of cases involving Westerners, the Court in Beijing implemented the first cycle of English training for judges on the 10th of the month which trains practical and high-quality talents who are good at law and English.*

Since the mid-nineteenth century, modernisation has been the top priority of China's policy direction (including the modernisation of the Chinese language), which embarked on the long journey of the standardisation of Mandarin (Chen, 1999). Articles and statements reporting on the efforts made to modernise the education system, communist party and civil service through incorporating English into training, such as the above examples, constitute a large portion of the *People's Daily* data. They illustrate that English is treated as a universal modern skill. As shown in the first remark, English is always placed on a par with

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266078409000078 Published online by Cambridge University Press

driving and computer literacy skills, and along with the suggestion that the learning of English should be combined with other 'practical' skills. From all this, it appears that English, in such institutional discourse, is seen as a universal modern skill associated with no particular culture and as an international language belonging to the world community. To a certain extent, the cultural baggage of 'standard' American (and British) English has been bypassed in the institutional discourse since English is not seen as belonging to the British or Americans any more:

> 时至今日，可以使英国人骄傲的可能就剩他们的英语了。
>
> 英语当年依靠英国人自己、今天借助美国人的实力和影响而成为当今世界最为通用的语言。…从某种意义讲，英语已经不仅是英国人的，也是全人类的共同财富和主要的交流手段 (Lin, 2002).
>
> *Up until today, what can make English people proud is their English only. English was first spread by the English people themselves. By means of the influence and power of Americans, it has become the most common language of the globe today. … In a sense, English not only belongs to the English people, but it is also the asset and primary means of communication of all humans.*

This view of English raises an interesting issue. While English is not seen as owned by either Americans or British but as a global asset, there is yet a preference for American English. What is the implication of this insistence on American accent amidst the view that it is not attached to a particular cultural group? Among the Chinese public, there have been debates and concerns about Chinese language and culture being undermined by English. The language was also perceived to embody values that were culturally and politically threatening to Chinese (Adamson, 2004). Portraying American (and British) English as universal could therefore be a means by which learning 'standard' English is made more accessible and acceptable to the public. Yet this will certainly require further research and it would be interesting to explore whether the 'cultural content' is completely bypassed in the promotion of American English to the public and the public responses to this.

For the overseas Chinese student participants, English is also a skill for modernisation. As one of my interviewees put it: '*[English] plays an important role in modernisation which is originally from the Western world*' (Male, 18–22, 5 months[1]). All of the participants expressed their preference for 'standard' American English, as another explains: '*British and American economy is good and Chinese people think they are better than Chinese, that's why they value English more than Chinese. I prefer American and British English to China English and learnt primarily American accent of English*' (Female, 23, 5 months).

Perceptions of China English

In contrast to 'standard' English, some participants hold the following opinions on China English:

> *China English is just a joke. It is only used when people make fun and tell jokes* (Male, 21, 5 months).
>
> *it [China English] would not be understood by foreigners* (Male, 20–25, 5 months).

The majority of the participants also shared the view that English was primarily a tool for international communication:

> *because most of the countries in the world are English-speaking countries, if we want to be understood by people in other countries, we need to know English for international communication* (Male, 23, 5 months).
>
> *many people can speak English and many countries are English-speaking for example Japan* (Female, 25–30, 6 months).
>
> *English is most widely used, a lingua franca for non-English speaking countries, we can communicate with much more people even if we don't know each others' mother language* (Female, 22, 5 months).

Although English is viewed as universal in institutional discourse, some participants did express their interest in Western culture as a reason for learning English. This appears to be a mismatch between the institutional and learners' discourses of English which, however, is not addressed in this article.

A tool to let the world know about China

Apart from being a universal modern skill, English is also a tool to let the world know about China in both the institutional and learners' discourses. One article from the *People's Daily* remarks that

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266078409000078 Published online by Cambridge University Press

其实，我们狂热的不是英语本身。中华民族百年期盼，奥运终于来到华夏古都。热情的人们渴望敞开心扉，释放激情，向世界诠释五千年的东方文明，用微笑迎接八方宾朋。这才是"热源"所在 (Jiang, 2008).

In fact, we are not enthusiastic about the English language itself. Chinese have been longing to host the Olympics for a hundred years and this time the dream has finally come true. People (Chinese) wish to open up their hearts to welcome and show the world the 5000 years of Chinese civilisation. This is what we are really enthusiastic about.

Despite the neutral role ascribed to English as a universal modern skill, this role of English as a tool to let the world know about China is a somewhat nationalistic one. The evolution of Chinese history, culture and civilisation was presented to the world in the Opening Ceremony of the Olympic Games in Beijing. The ceremony itself highlighted the four great inventions of gunpowder, compass, paper and printing, and the traditional Chinese value of harmony introduced to the world the greatness and rise of the country (Shuang, Wang & Gao, 9 August, 2008:1). Not only is English a tool to know about the world for China, as Orton (2007) illustrates, it is also a desire for China to show its glorious past and intention for harmonious international relations to the international community. To achieve this aim the universal tongue, i.e. 'standard' English, is the best vehicle.

Three out of the ten participants pointed out the role of English as a tool to let the world know about China. One participant, for example, asserted that:

It [English] is definitely useful no matter for whom…we need to introduce Chinese to the West by learning English. English is useful for everyone to introduce China's greatness to the West… just like some of the great inventions in China. Western people think they invented them but actually China had invented them a few centuries earlier (Female, 25, 2 years and 6 months).

Interesting enough, this participant's comment on the four great inventions of ancient China was made before the Opening Ceremony. The reclamation of China's international status appears to be a common goal of the government and the public. One participant seemed concerned about Westerners' false perceptions of China and said: *'Westerners still have some misunderstandings about China. We need to learn English to tell them about China.'* (Female, 23, 3 years and 5 months).

Both the institutional and learners' discourses about English, as the study has shown, describe English as a universal skill for modernisation and international communication, as well as a tool to let the world know about China. 'Standard' American (and to a lesser extent, British) English is the preferred variety to learn and use as, on the one hand, it is the best vehicle to learn modernisation; and on the other hand, it is not regarded as associated with a particular culture. The list of the ascribed roles of English in China as examined in this paper is definitely not conclusive. Future research not only needs to explore students' views in Mainland China, but also overseas Chinese students' attitudes in depth as this group is increasing in number, and many more overseas students return to China after graduation.

Implications for China English

This paper has presented an initial study on the attitudinal stances of the Chinese government and overseas Chinese students towards English, including how they perceived 'standard' English and China English. The institutional and learners' support given for 'standard' American English might present challenges to the integration of China English into the English curriculum in China and its widespread use; and as we can see, the ascribed role of English as a universal skill, which seems to bear no difference to computer literacy, driving and other so-called 'modern skills', can explain the preference for 'standard' American English.

In the advocacy of China English of some scholars, two issues stand out. One relates to the concept and definitions of China English, and the other to the notions of 'native speaker' and 'standard language' within the localised context of China. Mandarin Chinese, the 'standard' language of China, is not a native language of many Chinese. Despite tremendous governmental effort towards promoting Mandarin as the lingua franca across the country since the mid-nineteenth century, Mandarin is still not yet widely spoken in many dialect areas (Li, 2006). As one of the interview participants who was originally from Fujian indicated, *'I can't say I speak [Mandarin] Chinese very well and know well about Chinese culture. I am still learning'* (Female, 24, 5 months).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266078409000078 Published online by Cambridge University Press

This comment somewhat illustrates that the native-speaker status of Mandarin Chinese (or 'Putonghua') in China is still a fundamental question. Although some norms and patterns of China English have been identified in the literature (e.g. X. Hu, 2004), which characteristics of Chinese culture, vocabulary, sentences and discourse might most appropriately be seen as contributing to the variety of China English is an issue for careful consideration.

The growing status of Mandarin in recent years is associated with the rise of China as a world power. Mandarin Chinese is being learnt as a foreign language by increasing numbers of learners and, with the help of the Chinese government, Confucius Institutes have been set up in many countries around the world including the US, UK, Australia and Asia. X. Hu (2004) maintains that China English is more useful than other varieties for business and cultural exchange with China. However, the growing global status of Mandarin may counteract the need for China English in the international arena. ■

Note

1 This information, as it also appears in other quotations, represents the participants' gender, age (range) and length of stay in Australia at the time of the interviews.

References

Adamson, B. 2004. *China's English: A History of English in Chinese Education*. Hong Kong: University Press.

Beijing Foreign Language Committee. 2007. '第六届北京市民外语游园会主题活动 一览' (The 6th Beijingers' Foreign Language Festival activities). October 29, 2007. Online at <http://www.bjenglish.net.cn/park/events/2007-10/29463.html>

Bolton, K. 2008. 'English in Asia, Asian Englishes, and the issue of proficiency.' *English Today*, 24(2), 3–12.

Brown, S. 1980. *Political Subjectivity: Applications of Q Methodology in Political Science*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Cargill, M. 2006. 'Teaching English as a Foreign Language in China: Reflections on the Relevance of Identity Issues.' *TESOL in Context*, 16, special edition, 164–173.

Chang, J. Y. 2006. 'Globalization and English in Chinese higher education.' *World Englishes*, 25(3–4), 513–525.

Chen, P. 1999. *Modern Chinese: History and Sociolinguistics*. Cambridge: University Press.

Chiang, J. F. 2006. '软件领军 科技腾飞.' (Pioneer of software and technological advancement). August 25, 2006. *Ren min ri bao*. Ren min ri bao database.

Davis, T. 1997. 'Patterns of identity: Basques and the Basque Nation.' *Nationalism & Ethnic Politics*, 3(1), 61–88.

Dryzek, J. 1994. 'Australian Discourses of Democracy.' *Australian Journal of Political Science*, 29, 221–239.

Graddol, D. 2006. *English Next*. Plymouth: British Council.

Hu X. Q. 2004. 'Why China English should stand alongside British, American, and the other world Englishes.' *English Today*, 20(2), 26–31.

—. 2005. 'China English, at home and in the world.' *English Today*, 21(3), 27–38.

Hu, Y. Y. 2007. 'China's foreign language policy on primary English education: What's behind it?' *Language Policy*, 6, 359–376.

Jiang, C. F. 2008. '语言交流的力量' (The power of language communication). August 7, 2008. *Ren min ri bao*. Ren min ri bao database.

Jiang, R. & Ding, D. 2004. '既感性、又理性；既热情、又成熟。这样的评价，不仅适用于职业指导师这个职业，也像是对他个人素质的评价——田光哲：我是"职业医生"（人物·新职业系列（1））' (emotional but sophisticated; passionate but mature. This comment not only applies to career consultants, but it is also an evaluation of his personal quality – Mr Tian: 'I am a "career doctor"' (People. New career forum (1)). November 8, 2004. *Ren min ri bao*. Ren min ri bao database.

Li, D. C. S. 2006. 'Chinese as a lingua franca in Greater China.' *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, 26, 149–176.

Lin, Y. 2002. '英国人与英语.' (English people and English). October 11, 2002. *Ren min ri bao*. Ren min ri bao database.

Lou, J. Y. & Wu, Q. H. 2000. '简讯.' (News). April 13, 2000. *Ren min ri bao*. Ren min ri bao database.

Orton, J. 2007. '"Just a Tool?" The identity of English in the textbooks of Chinese secondary schools.' *Journal of Chinese Sociolinguistics*, 3(2), 76–94.

Pennycook, A. 2007. *Global Englishes and Transcultural Flows*. New York: Routledge.

Shuang, S. P., Wang, C. & Gao, P. 2008. '第二十九届奥林匹克运动会在北京隆重开幕.' (The 29th Olympic Games have begun in Beijing). August 9, 2008. *Ren in ri bao*. Ren min ri bao database, 1–2.

Stephenson, W. 1953. *The Study of Behavior: Q Technique and Its Methodology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Wei, Y. & Fei, J. 2003. 'Using English in China.' *English Today*, 19(4), 42–47.

Xie, X. 2006. '欢迎中国加盟癌症基因组计划——访美国国家人类基因组研究所 所长柯林斯.' (Welcoming China to join the Cancer DNA research group – interviewing Director Collins of National Human Genome Research in the U.S.A.). October 25, 2006. *Ren min ri bao*. Ren min ri bao database.

Yang, C. M. 2000. '诗词·船票与素质 ——《雨帆集》读后.' (Poetry, ferry ticket and quality – after reading "Rain and Sail"). April 8, 2000. *Ren min ri bao*. Ren min ri bao database.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266078409000078 Published online by Cambridge University Press