Using letter words in China

HONGYUAN WANG and YING YANG

A massive novel development

In *ET*58 (Apr 99), there appeared an article entitled 'English everywhere in China', in which Kang Jianxiu has not only cited many examples to show that English is extensively used in China, but also lists several reasons for using the language and predicts that the phenomenon is unstoppable. From the date of its publication to the present time, more than six years have passed. What has happened in China during those years concerning the use of English? Has Kang's predication been proved right? We have been following the phenomenon, and would like to discuss these questions.

Introduction: The general situation

For many years, Chinese has absorbed English through translation and transliteration, or a combination of both. Even as regards indirect borrowings (those which have been more or less fully 'Sinicized'), some Chinese linguists have occasionally warned people not to overuse them, in case they spoil the purity of the language (cf. Wei, 2003). Before the early 70s of the last century, English was seldom heard or seen in China, let alone accepted into Chinese books or dictionaries. But things have been quite different since the adoption of the 'open-door' policy in 1978. Kang stated in 1999 that English was being used everywhere in China; the same holds true today. One noticeable thing is that in the past six years, English letters, initialisms and acronyms have been used more often, and more extensively, than ever before.

Some instances will serve as an illustration. When we watch TV, we see not only *CCTV* and *MTV*, but also, among others, *BTV* (B: Beijing), *NTV* (N: Neimenggu), *CETV* (CE: China Eduation), *CQTV* (CQ: Chongqin), and *JLTV* (JL: Jilin). When we walk in the streets of any larger city, such roman-letter combinations as *KFC*, *KTV*, and *ATM*, and even *diànhuà* ('telephone') cannot escape our attention. When we are in the supermarket, we cannot avoid seeing such forms as *CD*, *DV*, *PC*, *VCD*, *DVD*, and *HB qiānbǐ* ('HB pencil'). When we read Chinese newspapers and magazines, such further abbreviations as *BBC*, *DIY*, *ICU*, *VIP*, *NBA*, *WTO*, *MBA*, and *APEC* often catch our eyes. Words like these frequently appear in headlines, in contents lists, and sometimes in the text of articles. For example, in the *China Youth Daily* (6 May 03), the acronym *SARS* (for 'Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome') appeared six times in both the title and content of one article, and in the issue of 19 July 03, *SARS* and *WHO* ('World Health Organization')

HONGYUAN WANG was born in 1956 and educated at Xi'an University of Foreign Languages, the People's Republic of China. He is currently a professor in the English Department of Yulin College, Shaanxi, China, teaching English lexicology and intensive reading. From 2001 to 2002 he was a government-sponsored visiting scholar at the School of Linguistics & Applied Language Studies, the University of Reading, England. He has been an EFL teacher for 24 years and has published a number of papers in China. His research interests are in English lexicology, translation and contrastive English/Chinese studies. Email <wanghongyuan 4@ yahoo.com>

YING YANG is currently an associate professor in the Foreign Languages Department of Tianjin University of Technology and Education, China, teaching linguistics, reading for postgraduates and lexicology. She has been an EFL teacher for 20 years and has published some papers in China. She was a government-sponsored visiting scholar at the School of Linguistics & Applied Language Studies, the University of Reading, UK. Her current interest areas are lexicology and intercultural communication.

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were selected as two of the ten most used words used in China in 2003.

An active reaction

In recent years, the frequent and extensive use of English letters, initialisms, and acronyms has greatly changed many Chinese linguists' minds. What Wang Junxi says in the preface to the *Modern Chinese Dictionary of New Words* (2003) accurately expresses their common view: 'Whether the words can exist or not is independent of man's will and cannot be controlled by linguists. When new words are liked and used by increasing numbers of people, they surely begin to have validity and should be given a proper place.'

Accordingly, linguists have started taking a positive view of the English direct borrowings that have appeared and become increasingly used in written and spoken Chinese, and no longer refuse them. They are treated as a kind of new word and given the special name *zìmǔcí* ('lettered word'). Two further facts help account for linguists' change in attitude in recent years:

1 Many newly-compiled or revised Chinese dictionaries have accepted a certain number of lettered words and the number of these tends to be increasing. Take the *Contemporary Chinese Dictionary* which is the most authoritative one for example. Its first edition (1979) accepted no more than five lettered words; its revised edition (1996) took in over forty and its fifth edition (2005) more than one hundred. What is more, as early as 2002, *A Useful Lettered-word Dictionary* compiled by Shen Mengying was published, with all the types of lettered words that exist in modern Chinese.
2 Many Chinese scholars have in recent years unanimously treated lettered words as a new topic in their books about Chinese vocabulary, lexicology or linguistics. Ge (2003), Song (2003), and Wei (2002) are among them. Fu (2005) has added the topic to the revised edition of his book *Modern Chinese Vocabulary* and regarded direct borrowing as another way in which Chinese absorbs English words (as for example compared with loan translation). In the first edition of his book (1985), when talking about how Chinese borrows English words, he only illustrated translation and transliteration. There was no mention of 'lettered words'.

The forms of lettered words

The majority of lettered words refer to the words that begin with Latin letters and a few with Greek letters, such as *α lìzǐ* 'alpha particle'; *β shèxiàn* 'beta ray'; *γ dāo* 'gamma knife'.

Lettered words can be divided into two types: *pure* lettered words and *semi*-lettered words. Pure lettered words are those which are written only in letters, such as *CD*, *MTV*, and *WTO*, whereas semi-lettered words are written in a hybrid of Chinese and English letters, such as *X guāng* ('X-ray') and *T xù* ('T shirt').

As far as the number of letters is concerned, lettered words can be classified into three groups: single-lettered words, as in *S* ('small': the size of clothes), *M* ('middle'), and *L* ('large'); two-lettered words, as in *XO*, *TV*, and *CD*; multi-lettered words as in *BBC*, *DIY*, *SOHO*, *TESOL*, and *NASDAQ*. Of the three groups, the second is the most popular.

Semi-lettered words take three forms: (1) with the letters in front, as with: *pH zhí* ('pH value'), *DINK jiātíng* ('DINK family': that is: 'Double Income No Kids'); (2) with the letters in middle, as with: *sān C gémìng* ('three C revolution': computer, control, communication); *sān K dǎng* ('three K party', referring to the Ku Klux Klan and its style); (3) with the letters at the end, as with *mínǐ CT* ('mini CT') and *wéishēngsù C* ('vitamin C').

Key reasons for using lettered words

There are at least three:

1 In China today, all the students in universities, colleges, middle schools and some primary schools learn English. That is to say, China is not only the country with the largest population in the world, but also has the greatest number of students learning English (cf. Dong Li, 1995). Obviously, it is the popularization of English that paves the way for the frequent and extensive use of lettered words. In other words, the use of lettered words is based on strengthened education in English nationwide.
2 As we noted earlier, lettered words are mainly English letters, acronyms and initialisms which are short and simple. The shortness and simplicity have led to their full use, for they can express long and compli-

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cated ideas more easily than pure Chinese. For example, many people like to use *WTO* ('World Trade Organization') and *GDP* ('Gross Domestic Product') to replace *guójìmàoyìzǔzhī* and *guómínshēngchǎnzǒngzhí* respectively. The advantage of lettered words over conventional Chinese is very obvious.

3 Sometimes certain lettered words are used as euphemisms for Chinese expressions, in order not to cause offence or embarrassment. For example, *WC* is often used instead of *cèsuǒ*, *HIV* instead of *àizībìngbìngdú* ('HIV virus'), and *ED* ('erectile dysfunction') instead of *yángwěi*.

Some features of lettered words

Some English words are used so frequently that either the first or the last letter can be treated as verbs in conversation. We often hear the Chinese sentences as follows:

1 *Wǒde Email dìzhǐzaìmíngpiàn shàng, yǒu shì E wǒ* ('My email address is in my name card. E me when problems crop up.'). Here, *E*, the first letter of *email*, serves as a verb.
2 *Nǐ O le měiyǒu?* ('Have you got the *O*?') Here *O* is the last letter of *CEO* ('Chief Executive Officer'), *CTO* ('Chief Technology Officer'), or *CIO* ('Chief Information Officer'), and is used as a verb meaning to succeed or to be promoted.
3 Some English letters are used to describe the shapes of some things. For example, *T tái* ('T-shaped platform'), *A zìqún* ('A-shaped skirt'), *V zìlǐng* ('V-shaped collar'), *O xíngtuǐ* ('O-shaped legs').
4 Some English letters that seem to have extended meanings are used to express certain complex ideas. In Chinese, *T xíngréncái* ('talented persons of the T type') not only have extensive lateral knowledge, but also profound specialized knowledge. *X xíngréncái* ('talented persons of the X type') are those who have specialized knowledge of cross-related subjects.
5 Some English initialisms have become productive in the creation of hybrid compound nouns, as for example:
   - *CBD* ('Central Business District'), as in *CBD huāyuán* ('CBD garden'), *CBD hòuyuàn* ('CBD backyard'), *CBD kètīng* ('CBD parlour'), *CBD wòshì* ('CBD bedroom').
   - *DNA* (deoxyribonucleic acid) as in *DNA diànnǎo* ('DNA computer'), *DNA duōjùméi* ('DNA polymerase'), *DNA fēnzǐliàn* ('DNA molecular chain'), *DNA zhǐwén* ('DNA finger print').
   - *IP*, as in *IP chuánzhēn* ('IP fax'), *IP dìzhǐ* ('IP address'), *IP diànhuà* ('IP telephone'), and *IP kǎ* ('IP card').
   - IT, as in *IT chǎnyè* ('IT industry'), *IT jiè* ('IT field'), *IT qǐyè* ('IT enterprise'), *IT shìchǎng* ('IT market').
   - Lettered words include abbreviations of Chinese expressions in *hànyǔ pīnyīn* (the Chinese phonetic alphabet, often called Pinyin for short in English), as in:
     GB for *guójiābiāozhǔn* ('national standard')
     RW for *ruónwò* ('soft berth')
     YZ for *yìnzuò* ('hard seat')
     HSK for *hànyǔshuǐpíngkāoshì* ('Chinese proficiency test ')
     PSC for *pǔtōnghuàshuǐpíngcèshì* ('standard Chinese proficiency test')
     RMB 'rénmínbì'(a name for the Chinese currency, more commonly known outside China as the yuan)
     WSK for *wàiyǔshuǐpíngkǎoshì*('foreign language proficiency test')

Conclusion

In recent years, because of the 'open-door' policy and the increasing role of English as a global language, increasing numbers of English words have been absorbed into Chinese by both direct and indirect borrowing. Lettered words are in particular indicative of their direct borrowing from English, are frequently used in Chinese, acknowledged by many Chinese linguists, and are accepted into various Chinese dictionaries. That is, they have to some extent been integrated into the language and become part of it. ■

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