English as a Chinese language

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Some observations on the possible indigenization of English in mainland China

IT SEEMS likely that Tom McArthur is the first scholar to talk about English as 'a Chinese language'. In the editor's note to 'Reading, writing, listening, and thinking in English' (*ET*70, 18:2), he wrote:

> In one of the lectures I gave during that visit [to Xiamen University, Fujian, China] I talked – carefully – about English becoming a 'Chinese language', in the sense of a 'language of China', like Mongol or Uighur, but one that might become for many Chinese a 'second first language', much as it is in several of the countries of northwestern Europe. The response then and later was lively and varied, and I got the impression that matters were moving even faster in the direction I was discussing than I had thought.

To many outsiders, China is an enigma, culturally, socially, historically, linguistically and ideologically. That is why Windsor (2002:15) says, 'China was more complex than I had anticipated' when describing his visit to the country's English schools and why McArthur talked 'carefully' in the Chinese university, only to find the response to his topic 'was lively and varied'. If McArthur had come across (and, of course, understood) the following (translated) report about a summer camp in a Chinese newspaper, he would have adopted a somewhat different attitude in making his speech.

> The children were visiting Shanghai on July 26, neither for climbing up the Oriental Pear, the highest television tower in Asia, not for visiting the sightseeing tunnel running across the Yangtze River or the well-known night view of the Bund, but for making known their ideal under the television tower. 'No English, no future,' they shouted together enthusiastically in English. — *Huashang Bao*, 30 Jul 02.

His visit made McArthur believe that 'matters were moving even faster in the direction' he discussed. As a Chinese English teacher, I am afraid they are moving even faster than what McArthur had in mind.

The craze for English in China

China boasts the largest English-learning population in the world. 'It seems there are more people learning to speak English in China than there are English speakers in the whole of the United States' (Taylor 2002).

Over 200 million children, about 20% of the total in the world, are learning English in schools, and about 13 million young people at university. The Chinese government has decided to offer English as a compulsory course nationwide from the third year at primary school. While schools in rural areas are trying to find qualified English teachers, those in large cities like Beijing and Shanghai have begun to do so as soon as the children start school at the age of six. Shanghai was the first city to do first-year English in the country and, at the same time, the learning hours in the city's schools were doubled from the present 1,000 to 2,000. Some key schools in Guangzhou province are doing something different: courses such as math, physics and chemistry are to be given in

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English, and Oral English is to be added to the high school graduation course list.

The English craze is even sweeping Chinese kindergartens, and so-called 'bilingual kindergartens', in which kids are learning to speak English and Putonghua, the standard form of Chinese, have become the first choice of many younger Chinese parents. In the city of Shenzhen, a three-year-old boy was taught an English song with the words 'Mummy, Mummy, I love you and Daddy, Daddy, I love you'.

> The bright kid figured that there was someone missing in the song: his grandma, or *nainai*, who takes care of him when his parents aren't around. So he never forgets to add: '*Nainai, nainai*, I love you.' When his mother translated the song into Chinese, his *nainai* was moved to tears.
>
> — Huang Naili, *Shenzhen Daily Online*, 2001.

Shenzhen is not the one and only. Other cities are introducing English into kindergartens. Malaysian DAP (Democratic Action Party) national chairman Lim Kit Siang (2002) found that 'In fact, English is almost a compulsory subject in Beijing's kindergartens as a growing number of parents want their children better equipped for the future'.

College and university students are struggling with the College English Test (CET), a national test sponsored by the Higher Education Department of the Ministry of Education of China and aimed at measuring the English proficiency of college non-English majors. Since its inception in 1987, the test has been becoming increasingly popular. While only 100,000 candidates sat for the test in the first year, the academic year of 2002 alone saw more than six million testees in the 32 provinces and autonomous regions in the country (Yang Huizhong, 2002:1). CET certificates (CET-4, CET-6 and CET-SET, CET-Spoken English Test certificates) are now a must for more and more employers. Schools in Shanghai and other big cities require the CET-4 certificate among others (one for computer skills and one for Putonghua) in contracting new teachers, whatever the course they are going to teach.

The Ministry of Education has asked those Chinese universities under its direct administration to use popular foreign (mainly English) textbooks and to conduct lectures in English and, at the same time, to encourage Chinese professors to compile teaching materials in English (source: *People's Daily Online*). The Ministry expects 5–10% of the university courses to be taught in English within the next three years. Tsinhua University offers 50 courses in English, at present covering areas of the English language, information technology, biology, finance and law, and 500 foreign textbooks will be used among the 1,440 courses available at the university. Peking University, another top ten universities, and other institutions are trying to do the same.

Educated employees are not looking on with folded arms. If they are expecting a higher professional title, which is not only a sign of achievement but also means better pay, they have to prepare for a national foreign language test (mainly English). Failing in this test, even a Nobel Prize winner will be rejected for promotion to professor, senior researcher, chief physician, or even class-I teacher in a school. Testees sit for the test in their own cities, and more than 50,000 candidates in Beijing and 30,000 in Shanghai took it in 2002.

Chinese governments at all levels have realized the importance of the language for their modernization drive and are trying to persuade the people to learn it. The authorities in Beijing started a campaign called *Beijing Speaks English* long before the city won the bid to host the 2008 Olympic Games. The *Beijing Speaks English* organizing committee estimates that about 2.42 million people in Beijing can communicate in English with foreigners, and they hope that by 2008 the number will have risen to 4 million, to be ready for the Olympics (Taylor 2002).

Policemen, taxi drivers, and even elderly matrons involved in community services are expected to be able to help in English when the time comes for the Olympics, and English materials such as *English for Policemen*, *English for Citizens* and *Taxi Driver's English* are available in bookstores. Shanghai has been doing the same since the 2001 Shanghai APEC meeting, which used English as its working language, and is continuing to do so because the city has started to prepare for the 2010 World Fair, for the first time hosted by a developing country. Guangzhou, the capital of south China's Guangdong province, requires all of its civil servants born after 1960 to pass an English test to make sure that they are able to communicate in English by the year 2004 (*CIR Online*).

There is no shortage of ways for people to learn English in Chinese cities. In addition to these 'formal' English learners, millions of oth-

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ers are involved in the craze in various private training classes for TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language), GRE (Graduate Record Examination), GMAT (Graduate Management Admission Test), and IELTS (International English Language Test System), or for other purposes outside schools and universities, creating a fast-growing new ELT industry in the country.

The ELT industry in China

As in many countries in the world, English language teaching is becoming a booming industry in China. There are more than 3,000 ELT schools across the country and 'the figures have doubled or even tripled in just a year' (Dai Limin & Du Juan, 2002). The two who have really made it are the New Oriental School, based in Beijing, and the language entrepreneur Li Yang, known throughout Asia for his 'Crazy English' approach.

The Beijing New Oriental School was founded in October 1993 with a total faculty of four and about two dozen English learners. It has since grown into the largest and most popular English training center in the country and has branches in more than ten cities in China and one in Toronto, Canada. It claims to be 'the place where Chinese learns [sic] English' on its web site. The school had a total of 250,000 students in 2001 (Dai Limin & Du Juan, 2002). More than 70% of all mainland Chinese students studying in the United States are reported to have taken courses at New Oriental (Jakes, 2000:73). According to the statistics in its website, 35 learners got a full mark and 902 scored over 2100 in GRE in 2001, while seven passed TOEFL with full marks and 377 surpassed 630. The annual income of the school is believed to be 200 million RMB *yuan* (nearly US$25 million). When Yu Ming Hong, the president of the school and a former English instructor at Peking University, was making a speech at Harvard, a post on the Net said:

> (<http://hcs.harvard.edu/~hcssa/events/seminars/seminar_yuminhong.html>)
> Probably everyone who ever studied in Beijing knows Yu Min Hong, and probably everyone who has taken GRE/TOFEL [sic] has heard of Yu even if he/she has never been to Yu's school in Beijing. Here comes a chance to approach this legendary figure in person!

Li Yang is another legendary figure who has been made enormously rich and influential by the nationwide English craze. What is different with Li is that he does not TEACH English; he YELLs in English at his followers, who normally fill stadiums that hold thousands of people. 'Companies pay him $50,000 to shout at their employees in English' (Fitzgerald 2002). Li said in an interview with Phoenix TV of Hong Kong that he got 300,000 *yuan* of ticket income per lecture. Millions of tapes and books of his 'Crazy English' have been sold.

Li's story is fascinating because he himself was not a very good student and had serious problems concentrating in the classroom, especially during English lessons. Then he became 'crazy' and got up early in the morning and began to shout English phrases and sentences in a local park. His way worked and he found himself at the top of his English class. He began to believe that what worked for him would work for other Chinese and he started 'Crazy English'. What followed was fame and fortune.

To date, Li Yang has lectured to over 20 million people in China, Japan and the Republic of Korea. Over 100 members of the media from 30 countries, including Canada, the US and Australia, have interviewed him, and the Japanese TV station NHK has made a live broadcast of his 'Crazy English'. A documentary film has also been shot about this latter-day legend (Zhang Ni, 2002).

Li's teaching principles are: 'Speak as clearly as possible, speak as fast as possible, and speak as loudly as possible'. Li believes that his method of teaching and learning makes Chinese learners more confident because Oriental students are normally shy and quiet in class. His 'Crazy English' has been commercially successful, but '[n]o formal analysis or assessment has been conducted so far and we are not sure if this 'Crazy English' can really raise the standard of English among Chinese learners' (Lai, 2001:34). Li is considered more a guru than an English teacher in English teaching circles in China. Yang Limin, an English professor at Peking University, says:

> Hundreds or thousands of people shouting together may help overcome the sense of fear. It may help learners speak several phrases so as to give them a specious sense of fulfillment and achievement. But to dare to speak [English] does not mean to speak nonsense. Imitation without awareness of grammar does not guarantee an understanding of linguistic rules although it may help learners speak several sentences. — Yang Limin, 2001:1.

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Lai says much the same:

> From observation and short interviews, there seemed to be evidence to show that learners have become more confident, more motivated and are sure of their learning. In this respect, the programme can be considered successful. However, if we take a closer look at the content, we may find that while Li can help learners to gain some confidence, he may have pointed them in the wrong direction. If learners follow his advice, we may have millions of Chinese speaking English very fast in a very loud voice to foreigners, which is undesirable from the communicative point of view.
>
> – Lai, 2001:34.

Fitzgerald (2002) considers Li's success as a harmful side effect of the English craze in China:

> In such a huge and rapidly growing market for language learning, it's not surprising then that teachers with techniques that might be regarded as 'unreliable' in more 'developed' countries can be extraordinarily successful.

Chinese attitudes towards English

Chinese people are embracing English with the same enthusiasm as other peoples elsewhere. Governments are encouraging their citizens to learn English, parents are persuading, even forcing, their children to speak it and college students are doing English at the expense of their majors. Even in academic circles, 'Fluency in English covers up all defects and deficiencies and you may as well do without initiatives and achievements. You are kept away if you are not efficient in English' (Ruan Wei 2002:134). This is not surprising in a developing country, where economic growth is considered more important than environmental protection and values are judged more in financial than cultural terms.

However, some scholars have seen the dark side of the spread of English in China. Professor Du of the Chinese University of Hong Kong recently 'warned of the negative effects if English were to become the common language of the academic world [in China]':

> Du has joined others in saying that 'globalization' is a form of Western domination. If we follow these trends blindly and put too much emphasis on English in this country, it could take up a lot of people's time and energy, decrease confidence in the Chinese language, and block the development and popularization of Chinese culture, he said.
>
> In 1995, this topic came up at a famous university in Shanghai when graduate students failed a Chinese exam. That set off alarm bells and set people to thinking there was urgent need to improve students' ability in their own language (Oct. 10, 2002, *21st Century*).

Ruan Wei (2002) complains that teaching in English and writing in English in the 'English circle' in China has resulted in a 'class' who are not able to write acceptable Chinese. He suggests that the 'English class' at the university and (post-)graduate level develop an awareness of the mother language and culture before taking up their research in the English language, culture and literature. Li Rui (2000) says that the internationalization of English is making Chinese a dialect. Wang Ning (2000) believes Chinese people have no other choice but to learn and teach English since it is becoming a tool of international communication, although it brings with it things we do not need.

English as a Chinese language

The large English-learning population and the rapidly developing ELT industry in China tell us that English is indeed becoming a Chinese language. Hasman (2002: 110) predicts that in the 21st century '[u]niversities using English as the medium of instruction will expand and rapidly create a generation of middle-class professionals. Economic development will only increase the middle class, a group that is more likely to learn and use English in jobs.' This is just the case as China becomes more involved in international affairs and more Chinese work for international companies. The Chinese variety of English will become more and more distinctive as an independent member of the family of world Englishes.

As a matter of fact, some people believe there is already something called Chinese or Sinicized English, or China English as some Chinese scholars prefer. The term 'China English' was first used by Ge Chuangui (1980: 91–92) in an article about Chinese–English translation, to replace the pejorative *Chinglish*.

> Every country is unique to some extent. In China, for example, we have China-specific things to express when we speak or write in English, such as *Four Books* (Si Shu), *eight-legged essay* (baguwen), *May Fourth Movement* (Wusi Yundong), *xiucai* (xiucai), *Mr. Science* (sai xiansheng), *baihua* (baihua), *ideological*

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remoulding (sixiang gaizao), and *four modernizations* (sige xiandaihua). All these translated terms are words of China English rather than Chinese English or Chinglish.

More than ten years later, Wang Rongpei (1991:19) tried to prove that 'China English is an objective reality' and defined it, for the first time, as 'English used by Chinese in China with the standard English as its norm as well as Chinese flavors'. Li Wenzhong (1993: 19–20) revised Wang Rongpei's definition, saying that China English is 'not necessarily used in China' and 'there exists no such thing called *Standard English*'. He re-defines China English as follows:

> China English has normative English as its core but with Chinese characteristics in lexicon, syntax and discourse, and it is employed to express China-specific things through means of transliteration, borrowing and semantic regeneration but without interference from the Chinese language.

Recent years have seen more and more articles discussing the linguistic (Du Ruiqing & Jiang Yajun 2001; Wang Weibo & Ma Dong 2002; Yang Narang & Yan Hong 2002), pragmatic (Jin Huikang 2001), sociolinguistic (Lin Qiong 2001) and intercultural (Jiang Xiaohong 2001) aspects of China English and issues concerned with translation (Yan Xiaohua & Liu Xiangqing 2002; Jin Huikang 2002), writing teaching (Zhang Wenxia 2002) and syllabus design (Yan Yilun 2001).

China now has 19 English-language newspapers and magazines, one English TV channel, CCTV-9, and one English radio service, China Radio International (Guo Ke & Zhou Hong 2001). The English language used in these Chinese media needs to be described to display the Chinese-ness of China English in fields of lexicon, syntactic pattern and discourse. Moving in this direction, Guo Ke & Zhou Hong (2001) analyze 35 news reports from *China Daily*, the largest official English-language newspaper in China, from 1981 (when it was first launched) to 1999. Among their findings are:

- 'All the layouts of the headlines in *China Daily* are [in] uniform British style – with only the first letter of the first word in the headlines capitalized, while the rest of the words are just in low-case.'
- '[*C*]*hina Daily* frequently adopts the most traditional and effective story structure – inverted pyramid style, with 22 stories, or 62.9% of the total, simply employing the inverted pyramid style as is shown in Table 9, even though many English newspapers in English-speaking countries may not so frequently turn to the inverted pyramid style…'
- 'According to professor Dardenne, normally a news story employing an inverted pyramid style starts with a summary lead. However, the frequent use of quotation lead and main-fact lead is a bit surprising to the two writers.'
- 'Of course, as if it is a reflection of the Chinese news story style, pyramid style and the mixture of pyramid and inverted pyramid are also used in *China Daily*, respectively comprising 22.9 and 14.2 of the total.'

Oral discourse of China English is another important area, which remains almost untouched by commentators. However, an interesting study by Feng Zongxin (2000) challenges the view of simple rejection of Chineseness in Chinese speakers' English as 'pragmatic failures'. He investigated everyday dialogues between Chinese English-speakers and native English speakers in a national university in Beijing and the results really set us thinking:

> Ways of initiating talks consists of greeting and asking questions, ranging from the most impersonal chat to the more personal 'How are you?' and 'Are you alright today?', from 'I haven't seen you for ages' to 'What have you been doing these days?' and 'where have you been recently?' The last two are often regarded as being inquisitive and nosy by Chinese scholars on cross-culture communication. However, not even a single English native speaker marked asterisks on any that he/she would in all instances regard as communicatively unacceptable (2000:2).

Similar things are discovered in ways of receiving compliments, receiving thanks, accepting offers, giving advice, and showing concern. So, when in China, do as the Chinese do – even when the medium is China English.

Conclusion

The Chinese variety of English is no doubt becoming an important component of world Englishes as China gets more and more involved in the process of economic and cultural globalization. McArthur (2000:2) is completely right when he says:

> And this is only a tiny part of the vast and growing Chinese interface with English, likely to be one of the linguistic wonders of the new century. Watch this space.

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So, let's 'watch this space' and see what will happen to both English and Chinese, the two linguistic giants. ■

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