Using English in China

WEI YUN and FEI JIA

From Chinese Pidgin English through Chinglish to Chinese English and China English

SINCE ITS introduction in the 18th century, English in China has gone through three stages: partial colonization and *Chinese Pidgin English* (CPE); a Chinese-influenced variety often called *Chinglish*; and a more recent indigenization that has resulted in a variety known as both *Chinese English* and, more recently (with a subtle change of emphasis), *China English*. This paper discusses these stages and calls for more attention to be paid to the nativization of English in China in the 21st century.

The first stage: *Chinese Pidgin English (CPE)*

English initially spread around the world as a result of British imperialism. On the one hand, the settlement of new lands took substantial numbers from the British Isles to such underpopulated territories as Australia, New Zealand, and North America. The language went with them and became both dominant and native in those regions. On the other hand, imperial control in other lands entailed few if any settlers but took the language to peoples who did not previously know it. The non-native Englishes are largely the legacy of this second process, in a 'colonialism' without colonists, India being a classic example. In the case of China, however, Britain and the other imperialist western powers reached only a few areas along the coast, notably Canton (Guangzhou), Xiamen, and Shanghai.

Chinese Pidgin English took shape in the eighteenth century when the British established their first trading post in Guangzhou, in the Pearl River Delta. It came into existence as a result of the need to communicate between people from different countries, notably English-speaking traders and the local Chinese. Spreading to other coastal cities and the Changjiang Valley after 1843, CPE began to decline during the last decade of the nineteenth century, but in its heyday had a considerable influence on other pidgin Englishes in East Asia and the Western Pacific. Few traces of CPE (also known as China Coast Pidgin English) now survive.

CPE was mostly "a means of communication between foreign masters and Chinese servants and a medium used in retail shops catering for foreigners" (Cheng, 1992:164). With a limited vocabulary, a reduced grammar and a simplified phonology as compared with native English, it was a mixed language with English as its so-called "superstratum" and Chinese as its "substratum", and diverged considerably from native English. Some examples are:

1 "Tailor, my have got one piece plenty hansom silk my want you make one nice evening dress." (Cheng,1992:114)
2 "Dat master poni" (that [is] master's pony)

WEI YUN was born in 1973 and obtained her BA in English Education at Suzhou University in 1995. Currently she teaches College English at the Foreign Languages School, Suzhou University. Meanwhile she is working for her MA in Applied Linguistics at the Foreign Languages School, Suzhou University. Her research interests include classroom research, language transfer in SLA, comparative education and varieties of English.
<samathaywei@sina.com>

FEI JIA was born in 1974 and educated at Nanjing Normal University. She obtained her BA in English Education in 1996 and her MA in linguistics in 1999. Currently she works as an instructor at the Foreign Languages School, Suzhou University. Her areas of interests include SLA, sociocultural aspects of teaching EFL, and metaphor.
<faculag@sina.com>

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and "yu legan" (your legs) (Bailey & Robinson, 1973:97).

3 "I/Me not want it" or "I/Me no can do it" (negation achieved by putting "no" before the verb)

Although short-lived, some CPE has found its way into the vocabulary of English, as for example the idiomatic expressions "No can do" and "Long time no see".

The second stage: *Chinglish*

As this blend-name suggests, Chinglish is an interlanguage ("the linguistic system that any given learner or community of learners or users has at any particular moment… quantitatively and conceptually somewhere between the first language and the target": Kachru & Nelson, 1996:80). People in China feel ashamed if they are scolded for speaking Chinglish, because they strive to approximate Received Pronunciation or General American and may be proud of what they consider their native-like accent.

Chinglish is a common phenomenon. Individual learners, in using English, translate more or less from Chinese and tend to ignore the basic grammatical structure of English. The result is a low level of intelligibility, which hampers international and intercultural communication. Typical Chinglish expressions that are more or less opaque to outsiders are:[1]

4 Good good study, day day up!
(From: hao hao xue xi, tian tian xiang shang)
'Study hard: do have a progressive spirit every day'

5 Don't old three old four!
(From: bu yao zhao san mu si)
'Don't be changeable/volatile', 'Don't blow hot and cold'

6 Look and look, see and see.
(From: wang wang kan kan)
'Look around and really see what is there'

7 People mountain people sea.
(From: ren san ren hai)
'Many people', 'Very crowded'

8 You really have two down sons!
(From: ni zhen you liang xia zi)
'You really have ideas', 'You really know how to handle things', 'You really have the right skills'

Foreigners cannot derive much sense from this kind of word-for-word translation from Chinese, and need to have such expressions explained. Because the medium is English, the style and meaning are both bizarre. Chinglish has therefore been as seriously scorned at home and abroad as Chinese Pidgin English, and remains a matter of concern and contention.

The third stage: *Chinese English into China English*

In the past few decades, with deepening reform, an open-door policy, and increasing demand (particularly as a consequence of China's recent entry to the WTO), English is by far the most widely studied foreign language in China. The primary purpose of study has switched from being a valuable tool for gaining access to western science and technology to serving the needs of society better: that is, mutual communication with people from different cultures.

Investigations indicate that the use of English in China is increasing. However, it is not desirable and perhaps not possible for non-native speakers to become like native speakers when using English. It should therefore be treated as a tool, in the process becoming a specifically Chinese brand, for which a widely preferred name in recent years has been *China English* (CE), in the sense of 'English as used in China'. Some scholars call it an interference variety in cross-cultural communication, because there is inevitably transfer from Chinese, but CE has in recent times been receiving more attention as a member of the worldwide English family.

The term *China English* (CE), which derives from *Chinese English*, was proposed in 1980 by Professor Ge Chuangui (1983). He regards English in China as the inevitable outcome of translating into English items specific to Chinese culture, as with 'Four Books' (from *Si Shu*), 'Five Classics' (from *Wu Jing*), and an 'eight-legged essay' (from *Baguwen*).

Chinese English has received more criticism than encouragement, so that it has come to be considered much the same as both *Chinglish* and *Chinese Pidgin English*. However, as the role of English as an international language increases among the Chinese, some scholars have taken note not only of the existence of a *Chinese English* but also its importance. They have therefore extended its study from the

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lexical to the discourse level, and evidence is accumulating that such English is a common nativized product within the sociocultural context in which English is learned and used.

The scholar Li Wenzhong (1983) considers Ge's term *China English* more appropriate, since the term *Chinese English* has tended to be held in contempt by both native speakers and most Chinese. In short, therefore, the term *China English* has become self-justifying as a label for an English with Chinese characteristics and culture – to be regarded as a member of the family of English in its own right. Some elements in CE distinguish it from other varieties of English, and especially from so-called standard English (SE).

Some aspects of China English

The lexis of a language distinctively demonstrates the culture of its speakers. Thus, some Chinese words have made their way into English by transliteration or literal translation: for example, on the one hand, *kowtow*, *mahjong*, *typhoon*, *yin-yang school*, and *Shi Jing*, and on the other *paper tiger*, *Gang of Four*, *one country two systems*, *vegetable basket project*, *two-way choice system*, and *three representatives*. Equally culture-bound idioms include: 'It does not matter whether a cat is black or white, so long as it catches mice' *(Bu guan hei mao bai mao, zhuo dao lao shu jiu shi hao mao)*; 'The mountains are high, and the emperor is far away' *(Tian gao huang di yuan)*; 'It takes more than one cold day for the river to freeze over' *(Bing dong san chi fei yi ri zhi han)*; 'The well need not interfere with river water' *(Jing shui bu fan he shui)*. In addition, some expressions in CE can be identified as the products of "semantic shift": for example, propaganda, which is positive in CE, and *intellectual*, which refers to anyone with a higher education. Such items are manifestly used and understood in a different sense from native English.

As Kachru (1992) has shown, aspects of a non-native English speaker's native linguistic and cultural life may be transferred to English. In this regard, the noteworthy feature of CE is its syntax, which differs considerably from SE syntax. Some characteristics are:

9 A preferred word order: S +adv./adjunct +V+O or adv./adjunct +S+V+O, as in:
- **a** Mary yesterday bought a dictionary. (Not "Mary bought a dictionary yesterday.")
- **b** Last week I went to Nanjing. (Not "I went to Nanjing last week.")
- **c** After dinner I went out for a walk. (Not "I went out for a walk after dinner.")

10 A common feature of sentence structure in CE is open head while SE is open end. In other words, CE sentences often have a "top heavy" structure, the so-called "lion style" (Jia Delin, 1990), in which modifiers are put in front of the item modified. In contrast, a native English speaker tends to use the "top light" or "peacock style", which often results in large-scale embedding, as follows (Jia Delin, 1990):
- **a** **SE** It is impossible for me to get up before 6 o'clock in the morning.
  CE For me to get up before 6 o'clock in the morning is impossible.
- **b** **SE** There is no use crying over spilt milk.
  CE Crying over spilt milk is no use.
- **c** **SE** Now is the best time for doing it.
  CE The best time for doing it comes now.

11 There is a tendency in CE to arrange sentences according to time sequence, that is, 'first come, first served', as in (Jia Delin, 1990):
- **a** **SE** He had flown in just the day before from Georgia where he had spent his vacation basking in the Caucasian sun after the completion of the construction job he had been engaged in.
- **b** **CE** He had been engaged in a construction job, and after he completed it he went to Georgia to spend his vacation basking in the Caucasian sun, and now he just flew back the day before.

12 Simple and compound sentences tend to be commoner than complex sentences:
- **a** **SE** I gave him the book that I bought yesterday.
  CE I bought a book yesterday and I gave it to him.
- **b** **SE** I shall explain to you the detail of the proposal discussed last week.
  CE The proposal was discussed last week, and I shall explain to you the details of it.

13 Special subjects are often used to replace

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the formal subject it:

a **SE** It is/It's Sunday.
CE Today is Sunday.
b **SE** It's raining heavily.
CE The sky is raining heavily.

14 Use of the passive voice is rare:.

a **SE** I was told that you had lost the game.
CE Some people told me that you had lost the game.
b **SE** It is a hard job but it has to be done.
CE It is a hard job but someone must do it.

15 Response to negative questions and tag-questions. In CE, a question like "Isn't there any coffee in the cup?" will often be answered "Yes", meaning "Yes, there is no coffee." Tag questions such as "You went to school yesterday, didn't you?" could be answered with "Yes, I didn't."

We have discussed the considerable difference between the two kinds of English at the level of the sentence. Another striking feature of CE is its pattern of discourse (that is, the pattern beyond the sentence, for cultural and linguistic differences, is distinctively reflected in discourse structures. In this part, the discourse refers to both dialogues and written passages.

16 Dialogues: The following examples illustrate some typical CE communicative patterns, which are strongly influenced by Chinese thought patterns, and some are direct translations from the mother tongue.

a Greeting: *Have you eaten up? /Where are you going?*
b Form of address: *Teacher Zhang, Dear Teacher*
c Response to compliment: *No, no, my English is not good at all.*

17 Patterns of written discourse in CE writing are marked by what Kaplan (1996) has called "an approach by indirection". In this kind of writing, "the development of the paragraph may be said to be turning and turning in a widening gyre. The circles or gyre turn around the subject and show it from a variety of tangential views, but the subject is never looked at directly" (ibid. p.10). Contrarily, the normally desirable pattern in English writing is what may be called, according to Kaplan, the "General-Particular Pattern", which is dominantly "linear" (ibid. p.4) in its development.

In some empirical research into the thought patterns demonstrated in Chinese students' compositions (Wang Moxi, Li Jin, 1994) 66.11% of 180 students employed the indirect pattern in their English writing, while only 6.11% employed the "general/particular" pattern, and the rest used a mixed pattern. This characteristic type of CE discourse pattern can be demonstrated in the following paragraph by a Chinese college student:

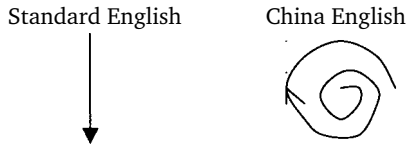
18 *Telephone: A Convenience or A nuisance?* Telephone was invented in the 19th century. With the development of science and technology, telephone can be found everywhere, especially in big cities. There are many people talk with their friends in USA directly. We can know what is happening at one place thousands miles away immediately. Can you image how long it would take to send a letter to USA? At least Two Weeks. So, it brings much convenience to us, particularly in communication.

Disregarding the grammatical mistakes in the paragraph, we can see that it demonstrates the typical "indirect" pattern of CE: 4 series of superficially irrelevant sentences are posed before the topic appears finally.

The striking difference in language organization (CE indirectness *vs*. SE directness) can be shown by language styles. In CE writing, the language or choice of words is characterized by lack of conciseness, floweriness, and clichés or trite expression. In some cases, passages are overloaded with hyperboles, idioms and quotations, as in:

19 I am a poor Chinese boy who very much desires every kind of information about your prestigious and famous university which has graduated so many esteemed scholars in every kind of field. (1994)

The two representative patterns may be graphically illustrated by the following manner:



(Kaplan, 1996, p.15)

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Although many scholars are reluctant to accept CE as a variety of English, evidence has begun to accumulate to show that it is neither possible nor desirable for Chinese English learners to attain a native-like proficiency in a Chinese sociocultural context in which English is learned and used as a foreign language. As the role of English increases as a medium of international communication in China, intelligibility competes as a measure of excellence with local values expressed through the language.

In CE, there is a clear linguistic transfer from Chinese. Some usages directly translated from Chinese strike foreigners as awkward or frustrating. But, in our opinion, CE has a cline of intelligibility much as in other varieties of English. On the other hand, intelligibility is a dynamic concept. As more foreigners make more contact with Chinese culture, intelligibility will presumably increase.

The rise of a New Chinese Pidgin English (NCPE)

Recently, an investigation by Gu Jiazu in Guangzhou Foreign Language College has suggested the rise of a New Chinese Pidgin English. This is a mixed language based on British English with an American accent or on other varieties such as Australian English.

As its name indicates, NCPE is different from Chinese Pidgin English in many respects. First of all, it is a product of the Reform and Open-door Policy which have promoted an increased desire to acquire and use English. British English was at first by far the most widely studied foreign language in China. With the deepening of the reform policy and the increase in cross-cultural communication with the wider world, it has become fashionable to speak English with an American accent. In the above investigation, 53 (out of 111) students admitted that they speak British English with bits of American English in it; 33 speak both without knowing which is which; and 5 speak American English with bits of British English in it. In addition, 7 students speak only British English; 2 only American English; and 11 speak both, knowing which is which.

The result of this investigation shows not only a rise but a spread of NCPE in China's colleges. Second, in contrast with CPE, which had a small vocabulary, a reduced grammar, and a simplified phonology, NCPE shows its character mainly on the phonetic level. The investigation made by Gu Jiazu indicates that except for the mixed spelling and use of some words (*colour/color*; *apartment/flat*, etc.) and some grammar rules (*have to/have got to*, etc.), Chinese learners mix British English with elements of an American accent. Third, NCPE is, to some degree, considered to be a necessary piece of equipment nowadays. Among the 111 students investigated, most of them feel proud of their American accent.

People's attitudes towards NCPE vary. There is no good or bad language, but there are more or less appropriate uses. Because of its flavor, this NCPE can be regarded as another nativized product of English in China.

Pedagogic implications

Language has a dual character: both as a means of communication and a carrier of culture. This study offers a new direction to English education in China. Studying a foreign language does not change one's identity. One's culture and ideology remain the same. English as an international language can be used by anyone to express a personal position or a cultural heritage. China English is a result of struggling to keep one's own cultural identity within the framework of intercultural communication.

According to some researchers, one cause of lack of success in the teaching and learning of English as a foreign language in China is inappropriate and unrealistic teaching materials. Some argue that the degree of students' familiarity with the subject matter to which they are exposed may greatly influence their performance in language study. Since it is well agreed that language is tied to the culture of its user, we have to readjust our English teaching materials in order to help learners to use English fluently in a Chinese cultural context, and enable foreigners to understand our culture better, particularly when China has succeeded in becoming a member of the WTO. It is essential for educational-materials writers to evaluate what changes are taking place and are going to take place in the foreseeable future. In this way, they can build an element of survivability into their course, which ensures that the materials will not become obsolete when the projected changes are being implemented.

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Conclusion

Which English to teach is an urgent issue for Chinese English teachers and researchers. English as a world language is not restricted to a particular culture. To embody different cultures in English is an effective way of putting non-native learners at ease in a global context of multicultural communication.

The aim of a study on English in China, and China English, is to offer comment and insights which may increase the competence of Chinese learners of English in intercultural communication. In interaction with foreign cultures, Chinese learners should be conscious of English in their own culture and elsewhere in the world.. In addition, with more and more non-Chinese becoming interested in and familiar with Chinese culture, China English may serve as a symbol of national identity in this global village. We should keep in mind that the goal for learning English is not only to learn the culture of its native speakers but also, importantly, to communicate our own culture within the world community. ■

Note

1 The writers Wei Yun and Fei Jia did not provide sources and glosses for the five China English phrases. These were added with the help of Dr Jacqueline Lam of the Language Center, Hong Kong University of Science and Technology. For the sake of simplicity of presentation, the tone numbers of the original Chinese have been omitted.

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Signs of the times in Seoul

Seen on 3 Jun 03 in one stretch of one main road in the South Korean capital, among the regular massed array of signs in Korean Hangul lettering:

Fruitspop, Sorento, Starlite,
Coffee, English, Korea First Bank,
SK Telecom, First Academy,
Jazz Dance Academy, Lotteria,
Family Mart, NOKIA Connecting People,
CHB, Inner HUNT Wear,
A Twosome Place, Grand Mart & Outlet,
Cash Corner KEB Bank, I-Space,
Paris Baguette,
Home Town, Pro Motors

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