

## China English: Adaptation of English to Chinese Culture

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### Abstract

Today in the world of English language teaching and learning, EIL(English as an international language) has been gradually preferred, instead of the traditional ESL(English as a second language) or EFL(English as a foreign language). It is believed that non-native English varieties developed worldwide should be as important as the native English varieties and it is rational for decision-makers of a country to choose the right English variety to teach and to learn. China English is one of such non-native English varieties, and it is the product of adaptation of the English language to Chinese culture. Even it is still controversial, China English has began to gain more and more recognition in academic world. This paper is to discuss development of China English in Chinese culture and explore some of its linguistic features in terms of phonology, vocabulary, syntax, semantics, and discourse, etc.

**Keywords:** English variety, China English, Chinglish

### 1. Introduction

In the world of English language teaching and learning, EIL(English as an international language), was first proposed by Smith(Smith, 1983), instead of the traditional ESL(English as a second language) and EFL(English as a foreign language). This term has been preferred by other American scholars for the past two decades. They believe that today English language not only belongs to British, American, and Australia, where it is spoken as a native language, but to countries like India, Philippine, and Singapore, etc., where English has been adopted as necessary communication tool among people, and even to everyone who speaks it. So English should no longer be considered with sense of colonialism and imperialism, but only a neutral communication tool. Both English teachers and learners are encouraged to combine English language with their own native culture, to express unique idea and phenomena of their own culture with English.

The advocators of EIL believe both native English varieties, such as American English, British English, and non-native English varieties, such Singapore English, India English, and Philippine English, etc., should share same equality. They proposed such concepts such as “denationalization”, “de-Anglicizing”, “de-Americanization”, referring to the native cultures, and “nativiaztion”, “indigenization”, and “localization”, referring to the non-native cultures.

In terms of recognition of non-native English varieties, the most conspicuous is the “Quirk-Kachru” debate. B. B. Kachru has consistently advocated the recognition and acceptance of separate regional/national standards. More important, Kachru, in line with Quirk, is essentially interested in stressing the global strength of English. He proposed three concentric circle to view the current sociolinguistic profile of English: Inner Circle, Outer Circle, and Expanding Circle (Kachru, 1992). These circles represent the types of spread, the patens of accusation, and the functional allocation of English in diverse culture contexts. Randolph Quirk, in his widely circulated “Use of English” affirms the importance of English worldwide. However he rejects the identity of the varieties of English in Kachru’s Outer Circle and considers the recognition of such identities “...the false extrapolation of English ‘varieties’ by some linguists. He rejects the use of identificational terms such as “Singapore English”, “South Asia English”, and “Philippine English”, and characterized them as “ misleading, if not entirely false....” (Quirk, 1968). He does not believe that the varieties of English are adequately described at various linguistic level and, can not be used as pedagogically acceptable”. He also feels concerned about the prospects of deterioration in global standards and would like to prevent this by reliving “the desperately acute shortage of qualified teachers”.

Quirk has recently been criticized for his conservatism. His idea of global standardization of English, and rigorous

observance of native norms, apparently does not agree with the general situation worldwide. Today it is the trend to accept the different forms and varieties and the differentiation within English. Thus a new plural word, Englishes, came into use, as employed in the title of journal, World Englishes, co-edited by B.B. Kachru and L.E. Smith.

## 2. Development of English variety in China

Today in China, the English language is the most-studied foreign language. In many areas English instruction begins in elementary school and some urban children even start to learn English when they are in kindergarten. Most middle schools and universities take English to satisfy foreign languages requirement. Adults are also interested in learning English for various purposes. In spite of the large population involving English learning and speaking, the language has never been the communication tool among native Chinese themselves, but for communication with foreigners. In the history of China, the English language, as an introduced language to Chinese culture, has never been institutionalized. It mainly serves the “utilitarian” or “instrumental” purpose, for either economy or politics, or for both.

The introduction of English occurred at eighteenth century, when western powers came to China for colonialism. At that time Chinese people knew little about the outside world, and were unwilling to learn from outside world, as well as a foreign tongue. However, they had to communicate with foreigners in China, so pidgin English developed gradually. In education, particularly at the university level, English learning focus on memorizing the literature works of famous writers of the past, rather than contemporary and colloquial English.

From the 1850s to 1950s, aiming at national liberation, in China emerged Westernization movement. Chinese people, tended to learn new ideas from outside world. Because the English language was an important communication tool for westernization and modernization, so people started to learn it in its full norm.

From 1960s to 1970s, it is a special period in the history of China, that is, the cultural revolution. China tends to be isolated from the western world, and English developed in this period containing many political terms and expressions, such as “a capitalist roader”(zou zi pai), and “right deviantionalist wind to reverse correct verdicts(you qing fan an feng), etc. These terms and expressions are almost intelligible to a foreigner who is unfamiliar with Chinese history. Since the end of this period, they gradually lost their dominating position in English spoken by people in China (Chin, 1992).

English has been flourishing in China for the latest two decades due to policy of reformation and opening. China starts to introduce itself to the world in full scale, and the works began to know China unprecedentedly in the Chines history. Many new creative expressions appeared to express the uniqueness of Chinese culture and way of life, which has enriched the English language. Large number of Chinese borrowing words have been included in standard English dictionary or reference books. For example the word “taichi”(tai ji quan) has an access to most of latest dictionary in America and British. Many expressions denoting unique China-specific phenomena frequently appear in Beijing Review and China Daily, and become acceptable to native English speakers.

## 3. China English and Chinglish

English variety spoken by people of China has never been institutionalized, and it functions as “performance” variety that lacks official statutes and are typically restricted in their uses. To be more specific, it belongs to the “Expanding Circle” (Kachru,1992).

In terms of English variety in China, two terms have raised much debate and argumentation: one is “China English”, the other is :Chinglish”, or “Chinese English”.

The concept of China English was first proposed by Ge Chuangui( 1986). In a paragraph no more than 600 Chinese characters, he suggests that much attention should be drawn to distinguish China English and Chinglish. He believes that English language originally is the language of English people. Other peoples who speak English should follow the idiomatic ways of the English people. However, each nation has its own cultural peculiarity. As in China there is certainly typical Chinese culture and way of life to be expresses in English. That is, China English should express phenomena and ideas typical Chinese. He gave examples, such as “eight-legged essay”(ba gu wen), “four modernization”(si ge xian dai hua), and “ideological remolding”, etc. Li Wenzhong(1993) also published article differentiating the two terms. According to his definition, China English, taking standard native English as its basis, with vocabulary, syntax and discourse of Chinese characteristic, and without any interference of Chinese language, is to express social and cultural peculiarities of China, by the means of transliteration, borrowing, or semantic shift. And Chinglish is an malformed English which does not follow standard native Englsih langue, culture, and custom. Li thinks that Chinglish occurs due to interference of Chinese language. He believes China English does exist, not just a hypothesis. Jiang Yajun(1995) generalizes China English as “English with Chinese characteristic”. He makes some generalization concerning China English: a near-native yet Chinese accent; words which are basic only to Chinese because of its history, environment and politics; dead or old-fashioned forms or pronunciations resulting from Chinese approaches to language leaning; a linguistic mixture of British and American English in both spoken and written forms. Opinion on China English is not unanimous among scholars and linguists. Xie Zhijun(1994) disagrees with Li’s definition of both China English and Chinglish. Xie considers China English as interfering English variety in

international communication. It is too subjective and unrealistic to take China English as a standard variety of English, as American and British English. This can cause confusion both in theory and practice, and bring negative influence on intercultural communication. In spite of this voice of disagreement, China English tends to be acknowledged. According to a survey conducted by Chen Linhan(1996) among native English speakers for their opinion on English of China daily and Beijing Review, they all recognized the existence of China English, even they think there is certain Chinese English in both the periodical and the newspaper.

So far there has been no agreed definition about China English and unanimous agreement on how to distinguish China English from Chinglish, although accessibility has been proposed to serve the purpose. For scientific definition, orientation, and description of China English, there is much research work to do.

#### **4. Characteristics of China English**

##### *4.1 Phonology*

Within phonology, two branches of study are usually recognized: segmental and suprasegmental. Segmental phonology analyses speech into discrete segments, such as phonemes. Apart from sound segments, every language has other linguistically important phonological features which relate to units larger than the phoneme, such as the syllable, word, phrase, clause or sentence, hence the term suprasegmental(zhang, 1998). Leather(1983) suggests that transfer of segmental phonology is self-limiting, whereas transfer of suprasegmental phonology is cumulative. For people whose native language is Chinese to speak English, most of the problems concerning pronunciation occur at the suprasegmental level. So Du&Jiang(2001) believe that characteristic of China English phonology should be well indicated at this level, including stress, juncture, reduction, and assimilation, etc. Because of the quite different suprasegmental phonology systems of the Chinese language and the English language, Chinese characteristic of China English at this level is hard to eliminate. So for native English speakers, China English sounds like “foreign talk”, even it has no any problem to express ideas. Currently most of research on phonological differentiation between English and Chinese has been confined to segmental level(Du, 1988; Yue & Ling, 1994). However, scientific description of China English phonology depends largely on research achievement on phonological contrast between English and Chinese at suprasegmental level.

##### *4.2 Vocabulary, phrase and idiom*

In respect of vocabulary and phrase, there is inevitable departure of China English from native and other non-native English varieties, due to the life style, cultural and social peculiarity of China. This is also one of the most persuasive evidences of existence of China English.

To express cultural and social phenomena typical Chinese, we have to produce creative words and expressions, such as “four modernization)(si ge xian dai hua), “may four movement”(wu si yun dong), and Mr. Science(sai xian sheng), etc. These expressions, for the first time, may be intelligible to native English speaker who have no any idea of Chinese culture and history. However, with some explanation and together with introduction of Chinese culture and history, they could understand. In terms of intercultural communication, intelligibility can only be achieved on the basis of knowledge of multi-culture. So these expressions of China English can only be accepted with familiarity of Chinese culture and typical Chinese way of life.

The standard native English has enriched itself by absorbing many Chinese borrowing words. In Webster's New International Dictionary of the English Language, there are more than 100 Chinese borrowing words, besides of proper nouns. According to a survey conducted by Cannon(1988), until middle of 1970s, 979 Chinese borrowing words have been included at various standard English dictionaries and reference books. Since the policy of reformation and opening, more and more Chinese borrowing words have access to the English language. These Chinese borrowing words, such as “taichi”, and “fengshui”, of course are rich resource of China English vocabulary with Chinese characteristic.

Idioms are another resource of typical China English expression. Idioms are culture-oriented, so to have an idea of idioms of a language, is a good way to understand a culture which nurtures the language. For some Chinese idioms, there are English equivalents, such as, “as timid as a rabbit” for “dan xiao ru shu”, “an ass in a lion's skin” for “hu jia hu wei”, and “as poor as a church mouse” for “yi pin ru xi”. However, most of Chinese idioms do not have such equivalents. So the proper expressions of these idioms will be important element of typical China English. Similar to the culture-specific vocabulary, these expressions can only be understood on the basis of idea of Chinese culture and society.

For lack of guide and regulation both in theory and practice, currently there is much confusion for usage of China English vocabulary. For example, there is no English equivalents for many Chinese words carrying uniqueness of Chinese culture in most of published Chinese-English dictionaries in which these equivalents should have been given. The word “fengshui” has been included in The Macquarie Dictionary of New Words(1990) and The Oxford Dictionary of New Words(1997), however, domestically it is still translated as “the location of a house or tomb, supposed to have an influence on the fortune of a family; geomantic omen(Wu, 1999). So further research on formation and acceptance of

china English vocabulary should be carried out to change the situation.

#### 4.3 Grammar and discourse

In terms of grammar, many linguists and scholars devoting to research and study of non-native English varieties, have proposed that the idealized norm continues to be a native prescriptive model (Bailey & Gorlach, 1982). B. B. Kachru and F. H. Wong (in Smith, 1981) in their study of non-native Englishes have made description of deviant uses of definite and indefinite articles, tense, modal auxiliaries and prepositions, however, none of them consider these deviant uses as characteristics of a standard variety of English. In china, even some studies on characteristics of English spoken and written by Chinese students have been conducted, however, there has been no systematical description of grammatical deviation of China English from standard native English. Breakthrough of this description will certainly makes its great contribution to development of china English.

At the discourse level, development of China English aims at successful mutual understanding between Chinese people and other native or non-native English speakers, while reserving unique Chinese cultural peculiarities. Chinese culture, as any other cultures, has its distinct norms and behavior, such as way of greeting, apologizing, showing gratitude, and the most conspicuous response to compliment. These norms are neither better of worse than those of English-speaking countries. However, to speak English, we used to sacrifice theses cultural peculiarities, and follow norms and behavior of western countries. China English, as an English variety developed in Chinese culture, should carry Chinese cultural peculiarities. That is one of the most important reasons why China English is encouraged.

Then we come to the question of acceptability of China English carrying these China-specific norms and behaviors. This is a question in nature similar to the acceptance of idioms discussed above. It depends on intercultural knowledge of the listeners or readers. With an idea of Chinese culture and modesty convention, they should not be surprised or confused while hearing our response of "You have over praised me" to compliment of "Your dress looks very nice". So China English can only be acknowledged and even popularized, together with Chinese culture and tradition gradually known to English-speaking world.

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