World Englishes or English as a Lingua Franca: Where does English in China stand?

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An ideological negotiation and attitudinal debate of the use and function of English in the Chinese context

Introduction

As the English language spreads and functions as an international language, scholars have been investigating some of the ideological issues behind the function and use of English in various contexts, and have pondered the future status of this global language. From early research of World Englishes (WE) the legitimacy of post-colonial Englishes, or 'New Englishes', as they have been termed, has emerged in scholars' discussions (Platt, Weber & Ho, 1984; Kachru, 1985, 1992). Some have argued that the research on WE envisages the varieties of English in the outer circle contexts, such as the varieties of English spoken in Singapore, Nigeria, and India, and that people have used those varieties of English to exhibit their own identities (Kachru, 1992; Kachru & Nelson, 2006). Therefore, WE has created 'new paradigms and perspectives for linguistic and pedagogical research and for understanding the linguistic creativity in multilingual situations across cultures' (Kachru, 1985: 30).

More recently, scholars have also turned their attention to a broader context of the spread of English, especially in the expanding circle contexts. This has led to the study of English as a lingua franca (ELF), which transcends boundaries to investigate the fluid and dynamic nature of English, as the use of English in practice is no longer based on its forms but the functions (Cogo, 2008). In this sense, researchers on ELF have argued that English should be viewed from a perspective of fluidity and flexibility (Jenkins, Cogo & Dewey, 2011; Seidlhofer, 2011). From the ELF framework, notions such as multilingualism and pluricentrism are envisaged, and some concepts, such as language contact, standards, and linguistic norms, have also been reconceptualised within this paradigm (Cogo & Dewey, 2012; Jenkins, 2007; Seidlhofer, 2011). In contrast to the research of WE, mainstream ELF research no longer attempts to codify features of any particular variety of English, but accentuate the communication strategies and accommodation processes of communication, as well as how ELF is positioned within the backdrop of multilingualism (Jenkins, 2015).

The WE-or-ELF argument has drawn scholars' attention and raised several debates in various geographical contexts (Pakir, 2009; Seidlhofer, 2009; Sewell, 2009), with China as a primary example. Therefore, in this article I will explore a question of whether English in China should be positioned within the WE or the ELF paradigm. First, I provide an overview of the state of English in the Chinese

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context. Then, I deal with the WE-or-ELF argument specifically to see how the use of English in China is moving between the WE and ELF paradigm.

The English language in China

Although English was used between Chinese people and foreign traders as early as the 17th century (Bolton, 2003), it was not until the late 1970s, with China's reform and opening policy, that the significance of English was again recognised for the purpose of modernisation and 'international stature' (Lam, 2002: 247). Today, English is a primary tool in various aspects of people's lives, and it acts as a link to international communication. Adamson (2004) has noted the unprecedented status of English in the Chinese education system and for university graduates in procuring well-paid jobs in the commercial sector.

Recent statistics indicate that the population of English learners in China has reached around 400 million (Wei & Su, 2012). With the prevalence of English and the boom of the English learning industry in the past several decades, Jiang (2003) even claims English to be a Chinese language. This is because China has the largest population of English learners and users in the world, and many people have adopted and adapted the English language for various purposes in their daily lives. Under such circumstances, and because English is still regarded as a foreign language in China, ideological debates concerning English in relation to local languages and Chinese culture have emerged (Niu & Wolff, 2003, 2007; Pan & Seargeant, 2012). On the one hand, learning English will help people to gain more access to science and knowledge, and thus generate more opportunities for both individuals and international trade. On the other hand, people have concerns that the current situation of English learning in China will pose certain threats to local Chinese language and culture. This dilemma, as well as ideological concerns of whether or not to 'embrace' this international language, raise some specific debates. Although the development of WE and ELF has blurred national boundaries and has broken some entrenched language ideologies, many still believe that the ownership of English in Asia 'is still largely in the hands of the English-speaking Western superpowers' (Tsui & Tollefson, 2007: 18). Given the impact of language contact on the amalgamation of English and Chinese, and the fact that English is used by more and more Chinese speakers, the issue of whether China English (CE) should be regarded as a variety of English in the WE framework has gradually drawn some attention (He & Li, 2009; Hu, 2005; Kirkpatrick & Xu, 2002).

China English in the WE framework

Since Ge (1980) first proposed the term 'China English', the legitimacy of such a concept has become the subject of debate. Although Ge (1980) does not define CE in great detail, he provides some expressions specific to the Chinese culture and Chinese speakers of English (e.g., *eight-legged essay, four modernisation, imperial examination*). These expressions do not originally exist in English and thus may require further explanations for speakers of English outside China. The proposal of CE has therefore led to contentious and ideological debates in terms of whether CE should be regarded as a variety of English (Hu, 2005; Kirkpatrick & Xu, 2002; Yang & Zhang, 2015).

One of the main debates concerns the definition and existence of CE, as opposed to its counterpart of *Chinglish*. Scholars use different terms to portray the Chinese variety of English, and they tend to distinguish CE from Chinglish, which some regard as 'pidgin English' or an 'interlanguage' (Hu, 2004; Li, 1993). Chinglish is described as interference from the L1 (in this case, Chinese) during the process of English learning. Chinglish adopts Chinese rules and habits, which creates a kind of English that may result in difficulties of communication because it deviates from Standard English.

Scholars have also adopted the theory of a continuum that contains both CE and Chinglish but allows for both subtle and wide distinctions between them. For example, Hu (2004: 27) claims that Chinglish is at one end of the continuum, where 'words are ungrammatically strung together, with often inappropriate lexis and probably only a partially comprehensible pronunciation'. At the other end of the continuum is CE, 'a language which is as good a communicative tool as standard English' (Hu, 2004: 28).

Such a distinction leads to new questions in terms of how, and to what extent, an expression or a morphosyntactic feature will be categorised into either CE or simply Chinglish, as both CE and Chinglish reflect the use of English in China and display 'the national identity of Chinese culture' (Fang, 2008; Fang & Yuan, 2011: 97). For example, according to Pinkham (2000: 3), expressions such as '*to accelerate the pace* of economic reform' should be revised to '*to accelerate* economic reform' as *to accelerate* means 'to increase the pace of'; while the word *foreign* in the expression 'imports of *foreign* automobiles have declined

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sharply this year' should be deleted, simply because 'you cannot import a domestic product' (Pinkham 2000: 29). It seems hard to explain why the former expressions are called Chinglish, as Henry (2010: 671) also argues that 'many of her examples would not look out of place in a native speaker corpus', and the examples 'are explicitly drawn from English native-speaker produced texts' (ibid.). For instance, the expression 'long time no see', which originated in Chinese Pidgin English, is widely used as a common expression in English in many countries (Fang, 2008). As both English and Chinese are continuously changing and developing, the exact distinction between CE and Chinglish is fuzzy.

With respect to some positive arguments why CE should be regarded as a variety of English, Kirkpatrick and Xu (2002: 276) have suggested that 'the natural process of language change will inexorably lead to a shift away from an exonormative model to a model based on China English' and that 'the development of a China English "with Chinese characteristics" may be an inevitable result' (2002: 278). Xu (2008: 4) then summarises CE as:

> a developing variety of English, which is subject to ongoing codification and normalization processes. [. . .] It is characterized by the transfer of Chinese linguistic and cultural norms at varying levels of language, and it is used primarily by Chinese for intra- and international communication.

According to Xu, CE should be regarded as a developing variety of WE. Based on Kachru's (1992: 56–57) three phases of the development of non-native models, namely, 'non-recognition, development of varieties within a variety, and recognition', Kirkpatrick and Xu (2002: 270) argue that:

> China English is slowly moving towards phase two. [. . .] As standards themselves inexorably change and as China moves towards international self-assurance, hundreds of millions of China English speakers will inevitably create a Chinese variety of English that will be socially accepted as the norm within China.

In a similar vein, Hu (2004) lists three reasons why CE should be regarded as a variety of English with its own standard in the WE family. First, CE 'retains a "common core" that renders it as intelligible to speakers of other varieties of English as Hiberno-English or Australian English' (2004: 28). Second, CE might be more useful in communication process because it is closer to some Asian countries politically, economically, and culturally, compared to other varieties of English. Third, China has the largest amount of English language learners. With the increasing attractiveness of international cultural and business contacts who communicate in English, Hu (2004: 29) argues that a variety of English within China 'may very well dominate, due – if nothing else – to the sheer numbers of Chinese speakers and foreigners' new contacts with China'. In short, Hu (2004: 32) concludes that 'it is to be hoped that in the course of time China English will become an honored member of the Inner Circle'.

Although some have argued that CE is a variety of English within the WE framework, at its current stage it is still regarded as a 'performance variety' (Kachru, 1992; Kachru & Nelson, 2006), which 'tends to be used for international communication purposes' (He & Li, 2009: 71). Being a performance variety, it is true that CE is 'not confined to users in China; nor is it just based on "Standard English"' (He & Li, 2009: 83) but 'has the standard Englishes as its core' (ibid.). From this perspective, English in China can also be used in a flexible manner, and CE may not be used within certain communities as a variety of English per se. Therefore, the English language spoken in China is also viewed from an ELF perspective.

China English in the ELF framework

Although some English expressions based on the Chinese language have also been accepted and are used by English speakers, some scholars posit a more conservative perspective that as a potential variety of English, CE is still in its infancy (Xie, 1995; Yang & Zhang, 2015). It is argued that a variety of English has to develop from being exonormative to being endonormative, meaning that the use of English within the community will no longer be regarded as norm-dependent (Kachru, 1992). It requires a long process for a variety of English to become recognised and accepted as the norm. Although English in China is in the process of developing from non-recognition to a developing variety within society, it seems sensible that CE must undergo a lengthy process and an even lengthier amount of time to reach the third stage of recognition by Chinese people. Kachru (1992) also notes two factors in terms of how a variety of English can be developed to the status of recognition. First, in terms of attitudes, and second, in terms of teaching materials, which should be contextualised.

The reason why CE has not been regarded as a variety of English as of yet is largely due to its lack of recognition by the Chinese people as a

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whole, and due to opposing voices from Chinese scholars. For instance, Xie (1995) argues that it is not realistic to place CE alongside British English and American English, as CE suffers interference from the Chinese language and culture. In this sense, the use of CE interferes with intercultural communication between Chinese speakers of English and people of other cultures. Although Xie seems not to support the idea of perceiving CE as a variety of English, his arguments are consonant with Xu's claim (2011, personal communication) that features of CE should be further investigated and analysed in order for people to realise its fluid and dynamic nature, and to understand which expressions of CE are acceptable in scenarios for international communication.

From other empirical studies, it is noted that although Chinese people tend to realise that CE exists, the majority of participants from these studies tend to possess a negative attitude towards CE, and still regard native English as the sole norm (Hu, 2004; Jenkins, 2007; Kirkpatrick & Xu, 2002). For instance, Hu (2005) investigates university teachers' perceptions of CE, and points out that 'two-thirds of all the teachers think that China English will become a standard is a sign that it almost certainly will' (2005: 33). However, according to the data shown in the study, we cannot neglect the fact that university teachers seldom use CE in classrooms. It is also unclear why the teacher participants in Hu's (2005) study chose the option 'yes' that CE will become a standard as their response, given that the majority of the teachers still favoured native standard English as their teaching model. To my knowledge, very few teaching materials today have introduced the concept of the Chinese variety of English. Even though CE is used in daily communication (probably more among Chinese speakers of English), it has not yet been formally introduced or recognised, and it may not be encouraged to be used in the classroom by a majority of language educators. Therefore, it is more challenging for people to claim CE as a variety of English in the WE family.

Another reason why people may claim that the English used in China cannot be regarded as a variety of English confirms what Li (2011: 106) said about the situation of the English spoken in Hong Kong, where 'few local Chinese use English entirely and spontaneously for intra-ethnic communication'. It is quite obvious that English use in Hong Kong is unlike English use in Singapore. This is even true when looking at the function and status of English in mainland China. Therefore, there are both ideological and practical concerns of whether CE can be recognised as a variety of English in the Chinese context, at least now or in the near future.

Having discussed the use of English in China from the ELF perspective, it seems that it is still too early to stipulate that CE is a variety of English in the WE family. Based on the above discussions and my own experience as a Chinese speaker of English and as a language educator, it seems that CE may be merely regarded as a developing variety of English, but that at the moment, English is not inherently used *intra*nationally among Chinese speakers of English on a daily basis. The task for Chinese scholars to codify the Chinese variety of English will be a lengthy and ongoing process (Xu, 2011, personal communication). The attitude towards this variety of English by local Chinese people is another aspect to be addressed in relation to positioning the English language in China.

Further food for thought

A key focus of this paper draws upon the debate over whether English in China fits into the WE paradigm as a relatively fixed variety (Hu, 2004; Jiang, 2003; Xu, 2010), or whether it fits more in the ELF paradigm, where the use of English is more flexible and more dependent on the specific interlocutors.

As mentioned above, in terms of whether CE is viewed as a variety in the WE family, some claim that both CE and Chinglish represent interference from the Chinese language that impedes the effectiveness of intercultural communication, and thus should be avoided (cf. Li, 1993; Xie, 1995; Yang & Zhang, 2015). If CE is to be placed within the large family of WE, it needs to be codified, which is a long process. From another perspective, the English spoken in China might better be considered in the ELF framework as a 'similect': as parallel idiolects of speakers of a particular language background in another language that they have all learned (Mauranen, 2012).

More importantly, from another perspective, it should be noted that English use among Chinese people is rather fluid and flexible with various features which are traceable to people's own L1s. More often, English is also used by Chinese speakers and speakers of other first languages in intercultural communication. It is reasonable to observe that a Chinese speaker of English might use more features of Chinese when talking with a group of East Asian speakers, but would use fewer features of Chinese when talking with a group of, say,

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European speakers. As English is not exclusively used among Chinese people themselves, the notion of 'similect' (Mauranen, 2012) can better explain this situation. The term *similect* may be more appropriate to describe ELF users within the expanding circle, as in this paper it is adopted to refer to the use of English by Chinese people. For instance, the recent *Gaokao* reforms in China propose that the weighting of English will be cut from 150 to 100 points, and an English test will no longer be placed in the traditional *Gaokao* examination system, which may be a signal that the importance of English has shifted and that the local identity of using English in China is not advocated by the authorities. Thus, it is quite difficult for English to gain social recognition among Chinese speakers, let alone for a variety of English to gain acceptance in China's education system.

Therefore, it seems reasonable to argue that when English is spoken and used by Chinese people outside China for intercultural communication, the use of English may not fit into the category of a variety of English. This is because in the WE paradigm, English is used within a relatively fixed speech community such as Singapore English, Indian English, and Nigerian English. With regards to English use among Chinese people within China, although people use English with certain features that are influenced by their L1s, those features are not relatively fixed, but instead are fluid and dependent upon their interlocutors. This reflects the situation that English is not used inherently with codified features within a certain community as a variety of English, but is instead more fluid and emergent.

From the perspective of the WE paradigm, Chinese people do create and manipulate certain specific expressions and idioms that they use to demonstrate their identities in the local context among people who share Chinese as their L1 (Fang, 2008). In addition, there are specific phonological features in terms of how Chinese people use and speak English, but these features vary and have not yet been codified, compared to lexical, syntactic, discourse and pragmatic features of CE (see Xu, 2010). However, from the ELF perspective it is not the aim to codify the features of CE, simply because of the complexity of how people use English to communicate with others, and because English is not *intra*nationally used among Chinese people, let alone widely introduced in educational settings. On the one hand, ELF recognises specific features that Chinese people use when speaking English. On the other hand, the ELF paradigm does not restrict English use within a certain fixed community, but focuses in more detail on how people communicate with each other who do not share the same first L1.

Conclusion

As can be seen from the discussions above, the spread and use of English in the Chinese context is a rather complex phenomenon. People are currently still negotiating their identities in relation to the prevalence and popularity of English in China. Echoing the debate of whether the vogue of English education in China is conducive to China's wellbeing, or whether this phenomenon endangers local Chinese culture and identity, we should recognise that it is an inevitable trend that people adopt and adapt English for intercultural communication.

In conclusion, this paper draws upon the complex situation of English employed in the Chinese context. When delving into the argument of whether English in China should be regarded from the WE or ELF paradigm, we need to see that although WE and ELF both legitimate the use of English in different settings, they also differ in how they regard language use in a certain community. If English is to be regarded as a variety in the WE family, further research on people's attitudes towards CE will be needed in order to see whether English will be recognised by more Chinese people. There is an increasing number of English speakers in China, and people use English to demonstrate their own identities during the process of intercultural communication. It should also be noted that it will be a long process for CE to be codified, especially in terms of its core phonological features. We shall thus recognise the variety of English in China as a 'performance variety', as it may be too premature to argue that CE is an established variety of English at this stage. From a broader perspective, English might function as a lingua franca in the international setting. This is because the English language that Chinese people use is still rather fluid and dynamic, and certain expressions may still not be mutually intelligible even within the Chinese context.

There is no doubt that English will continue to use and function as an international language. The influence of English in China will also continue, even under the reforms of *Gaokao*, to reduce the weighting of English tests in the examination system. The issue of whether English in China should be regarded in the WE or ELF paradigm will still last, but we cannot ignore the significance of the use of English in the Chinese context. Therefore, it is necessary to understand the phenomenon of language exchange between English

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and Chinese to link language use within a certain community, as well as to acknowledge and research how English is used across boundaries by speakers of different L1s to break the concept of fixed community and investigate language use from a broader perspective. In either paradigm, we should realise that language is not a static entity in a vacuum, but rather develops and evolves through language contact. ■

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