China English and Chinese culture

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A student and teacher perspective

Introduction

In his short list of predictions for the future of English, written in 2006, David Graddol wrote that 'Asia may determine the future of global English' (2006: 15). India and China especially, he suggested, were likely to be the major influences on how the concept of English as a global language would develop. As Asian economies grew, so did their political status, potentially offering a different model for the global ecology of languages. Nearly two decades on, we are beginning to see notable shifts in the way English is perceived in different parts of the world. As a variety in an Expanding Circle country (Kachru, 1985), English in China has conventionally been seen as a foreign or international language, and the concept of an indigenized variety has received less discussion than it has in Outer Circle countries. But with shifts in geopolitics, the conventional rationales for naming practices around English in China may no longer be applicable. The discussion below is centred, therefore, around the issue of what might be a better term to capture the contemporary reality of English use, and attitudes to this use, in China; and on how an emergent variety, associated with the term China English, is becoming a more and more accepted part of linguistic culture in Chinese society.

Name and phenomenon

Before looking at the naming of English in China it is worth starting with a brief overview of the significance of naming practices and the contexts in which they occur. There are three broad functions behind naming practices, which tend to be linked to different contexts: naming as

1. a theoretical conceptual tool (i.e. one used in academic discourse)
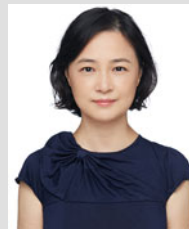
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2. a marker of community attitude (i.e. an index of a mainstream linguistic ideology)
3. a marker of cultural identity (i.e. a form of positioning by policy)

The conceptual tool (1) is a terminology used by the community of a discipline as part of the theoretical apparatus it adopts to analyse a phenomenon. English Language Studies abounds in names and acronyms which attempt to divide up the nature, uses and attitudes towards English as these exist and evolve around the world (Seargeant, 2010). The overlap between this conceptual terminology and language ideologies (and the accompanying discourses) in broader society (2) is often slight. For instance, it has been standard practice in sociolinguistics to talk of 'Englishes' plural now for several decades, but the assumption encoded in this terminology is far from the norm in everyday understandings about the language.

To accord usage patterns the status of a distinct variety – e.g., Australian English – is to recognise (or promote) the status this usage has for the cultural identity of a community (3). It is to assert the existence of usage patterns which are distinct for that community and, importantly, are to be considered features of the variety rather than errors within the context of standard British or American English. The creation of institutions, including that of a dedicated dictionary for the variety, helps to establish this status.

The positioning of a variety as a marker of cultural identity is the product of both policy and academic interventions (e.g., research into its features and usage) and, importantly, public attitudes. In other words, all three of the contexts listed above can affect, to different degrees, how a variety is perceived. If we take the example of Singlish, we can see how the contexts initially worked in opposition to each other: public embrace of the variety, along with academic theorising about it, was not matched by political acceptance, and thus the status of the variety was markedly unstable. In this case, societal attitudes appear to be swaying political attitudes, and the variety has a more positive status now than it did previously (Seilhamer & Kwek, 2021).

So where does the English used in China today sit according to these factors? And how might naming practices influence or reflect its position within the politico-linguistic environment of the country?

English with Chinese characteristics

Some scholars suggest that a distinctive variety of English may have already emerged and developed in China. Research on this issue has been reported since the 1980s (Ge, 1980) and has been flourishing in recent decades (e.g., Chen & Hu, 2006; Jiang & Du, 2003).

The history of 'English with Chinese characteristics' (i.e., the influence on English of words or expressions originating in Chinese) goes back much further than this period however. For instance, in 1946, Mao Zedong, then paramount leader of China's Communist Party, used the term 'paper tiger' to describe his opponents, the Nationalist Party, as outwardly powerful but inwardly weak. This direct translation of the Chinese idiom soon spread across the West and was incorporated into English usage. Currently, with hundreds of millions of English learners in China and the ubiquity of social media, the development of English with Chinese characteristics is thriving. One avenue for academic exploration is about the naming practices of English with Chinese characteristics. Several terms have been used to refer to the English spoken or written by mainland Chinese. These include, most notably, 'Chinglish', 'Chinese English' and 'China English'. Scholars differ in defining these terms.

'Chinglish' is a highly stigmatized term. It was referred to by Jiang (1995) and Dong (1995) as sub-standard English usage, by Wei and Fei (2003: 43) as a result of learners' ignorance of the fundamental grammatical structures of standard English, by Pinkham and Jiang (2000: 1) as a 'misshapen, hybrid language that is neither English nor Chinese', and by He and Li (2009) as a product of problematic word-for-word translation. There is also the term 'Chinese English' which is seen as almost synonymous with Chinglish (Zhang, 1997: 40), and some scholars deem it unnecessary to differentiate between the two (e.g., Hu, 2004; Wang, 2015). In more recent research, Xu and Deterding (2017) point out that, from a translanguaging perspective, Chinglish can be a powerful code that facilitates the creation of new forms of usage. In line with Li (2016), they call this a 'new' Chinglish practice, which is often playful and joyful, and is quite frequently adopted by young people in China as a way to express their identities, subjectivities and ideologies in the context of new nationalism and enhanced geopolitical awareness.

'China English', a term first proposed by Ge (1980) assumes a distinct variety, either emergent or established, which has some form of institutional recognition. He (2009: 71) differentiates China English from Chinese English. He explains that 'a premodifying *adjective* (e.g., Indian English, Australian English) is usually used to label an institutionalized variety', that is, one which has official status and is used both

intranationally and internationally (Kachru, 1985). Meanwhile, he suggests that 'a premodifying *noun* is more suitable for a performance variety like "China English"' as it is mostly for the purposes of international communication in politics, economics, culture, science and technology (He, 2009: 71). This distinction does not hold across the board – e.g., New Zealand English and Hong Kong English can be seen as institutionalized varieties. Nevertheless, the term China English is useful in being able to convey a variety with China-specific cultural phenomena (Edwards 2017), which has a different form of heritage and scope of use from Outer Circle varieties. Even though there is not yet full consensus on which term to use, from two decades ago, an increasing number of scholars prefer this latter term to describe the English variety used in China (e.g., Hu, 2005: 5–34; Kirkpatrick & Xu, 2002: 269–79).

How do students and teachers view China English?

As discussed in the opening to this paper, an important issue with any name is how the concept it refers to is perceived and the extent to which it is socially accepted and thus legitimized. In the remaining part of the article we look at how learners and teachers use (and feel about their use of) China English to promote Chinese culture, and what this indicates about the current status of China English as an emergent world Englishes variety.

Previous studies on China English have indicated that the acceptability level of China English in China is low or ambivalent (e.g., Liu & Fang, 2017). In Fong's (2009: 47) study, for instance, her interviewees felt that 'China English is just a joke. It is only used when people make fun' and 'would not be understood by foreigners'. This echoes many of the definitions cited above for Chinglish or Chinese English. In more recent studies, however, views towards China English seem to have been changing (e.g., Pan et al., 2021). As an illustration of this, responses to a survey we carried out investigating attitudes towards English among middle school teachers and students in China revealed the following patterns of opinion.

This survey was sent to teachers and students in 33 middle schools in 12 provinces across China in August 2022, and 54 teachers and 357 students replied to the survey. One of the closed-ended questions within the survey listed examples of China English and then asked whether the respondents had a positive or negative attitude towards the concept. A total of 55.74% of students and 64.81%

of teachers answered that they accept China English as a form of communication.

In addition, an open-ended question, 'What do you think of the use of China English?', further explored the participants' attitudes towards China English. Among the 54 teachers' answers (cited below as T), 27 answers related China English to promoting and spreading Chinese culture, and 25 related China English to China's growing international influence and the power of the country. Examples included:

> The status of China English is constantly improving. China English can help spread Chinese culture. We still need to strive to expand the influence of Chinese culture in the world! (T27)

> China English has gradually been accepted by the international community, representing China's increasing importance in the world and greater influence. (T53)

Likewise, among the 357 students' answers (cited below as SS), 135 related China English to promoting Chinese culture, and 139 to China's increasing impact and power around the globe:

> Chinese will eventually become a global language, and its importance will be the same as that of English today. However, the way it becomes an extremely important global language will be very different from English. China English is a stage of development, and the path to reach a global status is truly through cultural appeal, not colonialism. (SS26)

> Currently, China is gradually influencing the world. With the spread and promotion of Chinese culture, China English is gradually developing, and an increasing number of foreigners accept Chinese culture and China English. (SS67)

The above statements show that the participating teachers and students in the survey are shifting towards accepting China English as a legitimate variety and that they no longer see it as a source of embarrassment but rather a resource of empowerment.

Conclusion

The growing positive attitude towards China English has likely been influenced by state ideology as reflected in Chinese foreign language education policies, which plays a vital role in reifying naming practices and, through practice, promoting specific attitudes towards the language. In previous English Curriculum Standards, no particular cultural model, such as American English or

British English, was assigned as a standard for teaching and learning due to the state's concern that this might potentially promote Western cultural values and place local and Chinese languages at a disadvantage (Pan, 2011). In the 2017 English Curriculum Standards for middle school students, a notable feature is that one of the ultimate targets of English language education is identified as being a means 'for spreading Chinese culture and enhancing mutual understanding and exchange between China and other countries' (Chinese Ministry of Education, 2018: 1). The curriculum explicitly states that learning English is intended to promote 'Chinese culture' and to cultivate 'patriotism':

> the development of cultural awareness (in English education) helps students enhance their national identity and patriotism, increase their cultural confidence, cultivate a sense of community with a shared future for mankind, learn to enhance self-cultivation and function properly in society, and thus become educated and responsible persons (Chinese Ministry of Education, 2018: 7)

As stated, the development of China English can be a tool used to spread Chinese culture and a means by which to help Chinese people identify with their national identity. It is highly possible that China English – both the name and concept – will thrive via formal education as a state-authorized, -sponsored and -guided variety, for the purposes of promoting Chinese culture and cultivating patriotism. In this way, the state can counterbalance the potential 'Westernizing' effect that English may have on Chinese language and culture, and instead help learners consolidate their own subjectivity and Chinese cultural identity with the ultimate goal being to create a desirable societal scenario for cultural governance. However this may develop in the future. The current situation is one in which previous disparaging attitudes to the so-called flawed and undesirable usage are being superseded (He & Li, 2009).

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