

Chinglish: an Emerging New Variety of English Language?

You WANG

PhD Candidate, Centre for Language and Language Education, Central China Normal University
School of Foreign Languages and Research Centre for Languages and Literature,
Jianghan University

ABSTRACT: English, as a global language, is learned and used in China to fulfil the needs of international communication. In the non-Anglo-American sociocultural context, English language is in constant contact with the local language, Chinese. The contact gives birth to Chinglish, which is based on and shares its core grammar and vocabulary with British English. This paper investigates and tries to offer answers to the following two questions: 1. To what extent can Chinglish be tolerated in China? 2. Could Chinglish be a new variety of English language?

KEY WORDS: Chinglish, Standard varieties of English, Non-native varieties of English

INTRODUCTION

For a long time, studies and learning of English in China have been focused on native-speaker Englishes, especially British English, and little attention has been paid to non-native varieties of English. At the times when non-native varieties were mentioned, it was often for the purpose of pointing out their deviances from Standard English. However, the status of English language in the world today is no longer what it used to be like. It is a property of the world, not only belonging to native-speakers, but to all speakers of English worldwide. It is wrong and absurd to assert that English is still the language of people in its inner circle countries only. Non-native varieties of English can be found in many parts of the world, and are beginning to gain recognition and acceptance. It is the same case for Chinglish, English used in China. We found that the roles of native-English variety may not function well in the sociocultural network of China. There is no intrinsic reason why native standards for English should be adopted in non-native contexts, such as in Chinese contexts.

TO WHAT EXTENT CAN CHINGLISH BE TOLERATED?

1. AN EMERGING NEW ATTITUDE TOWARDS CHINGLISH

Chinglish has for a long time been frowned upon in English classes in China. ‘Chinglish’ used to be a term of disapprobation, implying a bad command of Standard English. On the one hand,

* E-mail: wangyou1018@yahoo.com.cn

Chinglish was not accepted in class. On the other hand, it was hard to prevent Chinglish in class or in public use. Few Chinese users of English, including teachers of English, can avoid Chinglish in their speech. In addition, with the popular use of Chinglish among speakers, it has been covertly accepted by many people. It is in this situation that many teachers and users of English have begun to reconsider their attitude towards Chinglish and English language in China as well.

In universities, students no longer accept completely what their teachers teach them. They have more opportunities to get access to English than before. In fact, many of them know more about English countries and their culture than their teachers. They are able to and also want to develop their own attitude towards English in China. Chinglish is sometimes used in chatting by students to achieve some funny and special result. For example: 'The brother in the upper bed, who is your lover in dream?' (a boy student asked another student who is sleeping in the upper bed that who is his ideal girl.) Some students tease others by saying 'Good good study, day day up.' (Study hard, aim high everyday. It is one of late Chairman Mao Zedong's most famous sayings, but it is a quite out-of-date slogan.) In this situation, Chinglish is more welcome than Standard English. When they speak Chinglish, they can fully understand each other. Sometimes using Chinglish is better than using Standard English.

However, their new attitude of 'linguistic tolerance' does not at present result in the 'linguistic favour'. Chinglish is still low on the attitudinal scale, though it may be widely used in various functions. To have one's English labelled *Chinglish* is an ego-cracking linguistic insult. This phenomenon is what Kachru (1992:56-57) termed the second stage of the development of non-native varieties of English. The new attitude towards Chinglish may influence the future of English in China, because the users of English are the most active elements in the society, and they are the most frequent users of English in China. They can decide whether or not the time will come when Chinglish is slowly accepted as the norm, and the time when the division between the linguistic norm and behaviour is reduced.

2. QUESTIONNAIRE AND ITS ANSWERS

Although the attitude towards Chinglish is now changing, but to what extent can Chinglish be tolerated is a question worth serious consideration. The definition of Chinglish, according to the research done by the writer, is the English language performance of Chinese users of English. It focuses on language performance rather than language competence, thus acceptability should be concerned principally when we try to evaluate Chinglish. We think the judges of acceptability should be native-English speakers who are native-British-English speakers, because their language intuition is good enough to make sound judgement of acceptable language performance. To obtain information about the tolerance of Chinglish, a questionnaire is designed. Eight students and two teachers at School of English, the University of Leeds were asked to answer the questionnaire which consists of nineteen Chinglish sentences chosen from the corpus. All the ten people involved are all native British English speakers. The questionnaire and the result are given below.

Questionnaire and Response Distribution

Please read through the given list of sentences. Indicate the responses to these by using one of the following signs in the margin.

(+)=This sentence is acceptable. (-)=This sentence is not acceptable. (?)=I am doubtful.

Sentences	Response distribution		
	+	-	?
1. My favourite sport is the football game.	1	9	0
2. When I am in middle school, I like English very much.	0	10	0
3. I advised her send email at home.	0	9	1
4. Don't think you are superior than any of us.	1	6	3
5. The book's cover is colourful.	9	0	1
6. Your room has one bed and two chairs.	9	0	1
7. It's unpolite to interrupt others when they are talking.	2	7	1
8. Let's welcome the President to give us a welcome address.	2	5	3
9. --You love him? --Yes, I love.	0	10	0
10. You are a teacher, right?	9	1	0
11. --You don't teach English, right? -- No, I teach English.	1	8	1
12. You are going to where?	5	5	0
13. I don't understand what do you mean?	3	7	0
14. The dress very beautiful.	2	8	0
15. The dress is too small that I can't wear.	0	10	0
16. Write in English is difficult for me.	0	10	0
17. Because I am ill, so I can't go to school.	0	8	2
18. According to his opinion, you should go on with your education.	4	4	2
19. They are now in the love river.	2	5	3

Test Results

Unacceptable items

- **Six** sentences (2, 3, 9, 15, 16, 17) are picked out by **all** the informants as unacceptable.
- **Two** sentences (1 and 3) are picked out by **nine** out ten informants as unacceptable.
- **Three** sentences (11, 14 and 17) are picked out by **eight** out ten informants as unacceptable.
- **Two** sentences (7 and 13) are picked out by **seven** out ten informants as unacceptable.

Acceptable items

- **No** sentence is acceptable to all the ten informants.
- **Three** sentences (5, 6 and 10) are acceptable to **nine** out of ten informants.
- **One** sentence (12) is acceptable to five out ten informants.
- **One** sentence (18) is acceptable to four out ten informants.

3. DATA ANALYSIS

The result reveals lack of complete unanimity as to the acceptability of the Chinglish extracted from the corpus. It shows that Chinglish is unacceptable to the native speakers of English, when tense, transitivity or intransitivity of verbs, auxiliary verbs, set patterns and subordinate conjunctions are not in agreement with British English. Sentences accepted by native speakers show that native speakers are tolerant where number concord, part of speech, possessive, tag questions are concerned. Sentences 9, 15, 16, 17 are picked up by all the informants as

unacceptable, but the features of the three sentences, which are highly influenced by Chinese language, are the ones that appear most frequently in Chinglish. This finding is of interest in that Chinglish usages derived from Chinese language are the least acceptable compared to other Chinglish sentences. This may be attributable to the intrinsic differences between English and Chinese languages which make native English speakers feel that such usages are uncomfortable and strange.

The result of the questionnaire indicates that it may not be very easy for native-British-English speakers to accept Chinglish, which bears the Chineseness, as a derivative of British English. Chinglish may be acceptable for Chinese, but not acceptable for some British people. This is not unique to Chinglish. Englishes in outer circle countries (e.g. Indian English, Nigerian English) are considered as deficient English and are unacceptable to many Native-British-English speakers. Despite the negative attitude, these Englishes serve communication in these countries so well that they have become new varieties of English or new Englishes (see also Strevens 1992, John Platt et al. 1984, and Wong 1982). Chinglish is not the same as Indian and Nigerian Englishes which have a longer and more complicated history and have already collected so much academic attention. It is still a term seeking evaluation and attention. To what extent can it be tolerated is so far a question waiting for answers.

COULD CHINGLISH BE A NEW VARIETY OF ENGLISH?

Unlike English in other countries, such as India, Singapore, Philippine and Caribbean Countries, English in China has not been paid much attention to in the past century. With the concept of 'world Englishes' having been accepted by more people, and with more and more research work done in this field, Chinglish might be much more important in the English family. What could English be in the new century in China?

English is a language used by the world rather than imposed on the world. When talking about English in China, Brumfit (1977:22) suggests that,

If we really want to consider English as a world language, we must be prepared to recognize dialectal difference whenever a different cultural framework is to be expressed through English, and not only in the second language situation.

Chinese people use English as a tool to communicate, to assist their work and their lives. They are not learning the language so as to become Englishmen or Americans. They want to use English to express the ideology, the emotions, the assumptions and the cultural basis of themselves rather than of native English speakers'. It is quite strange that Chinese emphasize students' ability to express themselves in Chinese language teaching, while in English language classes students are demanded to express a culture of which they have scarcely any experience. It is not surprising that many Chinese learners and users of English find it difficult to feel fully involved in British or American English.

The status and prosperity of English at present owes greatly to the openness and tolerance of the language. Quirk (1967:13, quoted in Labru 1984:3) says,

Fresh dialects of English will arise abroad—as they have always done in English-speaking countries. Standards of acceptable speech will vary—as they do in Britain itself. The language's assets may indeed be increased rather than diminished by wider use; overseas varieties of English may continue to contribute to the richness and resources of the language as a whole, as they have done in the past.

It is a fact that in many countries people have realised and asked for their linguistic identity. Native speaker English is the language in specific countries. The vast majority of learners of English around the world have no wish to separate themselves from their own cultural/national identity (Lester 1978:6, see also Norrish 1978, Strevens 1977). English has played and will continue to play a very important role in China. It is quite possible for English to become more popular in China just as it is in the countries where English is the second language. If English is considered the possession of the world rather than the possession of inner circle countries, it is not unreasonable for Chinese users of English to declare their own right of using and doing something to the English language in their own way. They could use English in a way that they think could distinguish them from other English speakers (see also Brumfit 1977 and Cheng 1992). If Chinglish could serve them in this sense, couldn't it be accepted by the world as something belonging to the Chinese? Couldn't it be recognised as one of the possible new varieties of English language? As far as Chinglish in the English class is concerned, China may need a methodology which will enable Chinese learners of English to use the language actively as a product of their own needs. English language teaching should serve the development of China and the Chinese social context. English language may be taught not only as a vehicle to introduce British or American culture, but also a tool of communicating with the rest of the world, and means of expressing Chinese culture and ideology. The Chinese need to mould English to their perception, and perhaps mould their perceptions to English at the same time.

Chinglish, as other varieties of English, aligns decisively with one of the main branches of the English language: British English. However, Chinglish certainly distinguishes itself from it with its own features. This research started with the assumption that there might be a variety of English, used in China, with 'Chinese' characteristics. Chinglish could not be adequately described in terms of language form only. The root of Chinglish lies in its function and not its form. Besides, it is seen to be futile to tear Chinglish limb by limb into taxonomies because at the core the structure of Chinglish, especially syntax, has to be the same as that of British English. The two are not totally different. They have more similarities than differences, because throughout the world, irrespective of whether English is a foreign or a second language, core grammar and vocabulary are taught and learned without variation (Strevens 1992:39). Hence, Chinglish should be regarded as

1. a derivative of British English and
2. manifesting a tacit acceptance of English as a language of Chinese people.

According to the criteria of judging a new English (Platt et al. 1984:2-3), Chinglish could be a new English, because

1. Chinglish has developed through the education system.
2. It has developed in China where a native variety of English was not the language spoken by most of the population.
3. It is used for a range of functions among those who speak or write it in the region where it is used.
4. It has become 'localized' by adopting some language features of its own.

However, if Chinglish is a new variety of English, it is a developing or emerging variety. This means that it has speakers who are also learners (Platt et al. 1984:164). Children who speak Chinese at home have to be taught English as a subject. Then, to what extent is Chinglish a developing variety, and to what extent has it reached the level of being a functional variety? One answer may be when Chinglish is used by most educated speakers in China. There is a problem

that should have to be seriously considered--Who are the *educated* speakers of Chinglish? The situation in China is that speakers of English in China are all educated or at least educated speakers of English. My corpus is based on performance of speakers who have received higher education in China. Can they be classified educated speakers of Chinglish? One would also have to consider to what extent social and economic factors should be included when selecting the group of educated speakers, or even where these educated speaker are educated. I am now doing an MA in English in Britain, but my English still embodies features of Chinglish. Or I may say I am a user of Chinglish. There may be a lot of users of English like me in China. If we are of the educated speakers of Chinglish, could our use of Chinglish make it become a new variety of English?

Another important element that deserves consideration is Chinese users' attitudinal readjustment toward English. Teachers and users of English should avoid regarding English as an influence leading to westernization. They also ought to develop an identity with Chinglish without feeling that it is 'deficient' English. Chinglish may be functionally as much a part of the linguistic repertoire of people as Chinese is.

CONCLUSION

English, as a global language, has gained its superior status in China. Its international reputation and the social benefit which it brings to China make the learning and the use of the language very popular in the country. It is learned and used to fulfil international communication. In a non-Anglo-American sociocultural context, English language is in constant contact with the local language, Chinese. The contact gives birth to Chinglish, the English language performance of Chinese users of English, which is based on and shares its core grammar and vocabulary with British English. However, Chinglish distinguishes itself from British English with its own features. Social attitude towards Chinglish has experienced the process from being overtly opposed to covert acceptance. This is attributed to China's socioeconomic changes, the influence of modern language teaching methodology and modern view on world Englishes. The changing attitude towards Chinglish, the emerging recognition of English as a world possession in China, and the features that Chinglish bears to help the Chinese to express their own culture and ideology may eventually make Chinglish a new variety of English language.

REFERENCES

- Brumfit, C. J.** 1977. The English language, ideology and international communication: some issues arising out of English teaching for Chinese students, in: *The British Council. ELT documents: English as an international language*. London: The British Council, English Teaching Information Centre, pp. 15-24.
- Cheng, Chinchuan.** 1992. Chinese varieties of English, in: Braj B. Kachru, ed. *The other tongue: English across cultures*. 2nd ed. Urbana / Chicago: University of Illinois Press, pp. 163-177.
- Kachru, Braj B.** 1992. Models for non-native Englishes, in: Braj B. Kachru, ed. *The other tongue: English across cultures*, 2nd ed. Urbana / Chicago: University of Illinois Press, pp. 48-74.
- Lester, Mark.** 1978. International English and language variation, in: *The British Council. ELT documents: English as an international language*. London: The British Council, English Teaching Information Centre, pp. 6-14.

-
- Norrish, John.** 1978. Liberalisation of views on non-standard forms of English, in: *The British Council. ELT documents: English as an international language*. London: The British Council, English Teaching Information Centre, pp. 34-39.
- Platt, John, Heidi Weber, & Ho Mian Lian.** 1984. *The new Englishes*. London, Boston, Melbourne & Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Quirk, R.** 1967. *The use of English*. 6th impression. London: Longman.
- Smith, L.** 1976. English as an international auxiliary language. *RELC Journal*, 7, 1, 38-42.
- Strevens, Peter.** 1992. English as an international language: directions in the 1990s. in: Braj B. Kachru, ed. *The other tongue: English across cultures*. 2nd ed. Urbana / Chicago: University of Illinois Press, pp. 27-47.
- Wong, Irene.** 1982. Native-speaker English for the third world today? In: John Pride, ed. *New Englishes*. Rowley: Newbury House Publishers, Inc., pp. 264-286.