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China English in trouble: Evidence from dyadic teacher talk

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

A B S T R A C T

This paper problematizes the designation of China English (CE) as a developing variety of English. Fourteen Chinese tertiary English teachers participated in a discourse-based study, in which they completed, via dyadic discussion, an acceptability judgment test (AJT) that contains a selection of 10 features allegedly emblematic of CE. Examination of the teachers' conversation shows that they did not associate these features with "China English". Further analyses reveal that they tended to comment negatively on and reject those features they saw as unacceptable in standard Englishes (SEs) and accepted those they saw oppositely, due to their general alignment with SEs norms, except that on one occasion, one of them did challenge the native-speaker benchmark openly. Drawing on these findings, we argue that the notion of CE might still remain esoteric, and CE is facing a dilemma between lack of distinctness from SEs and stigmatization of its potentially most characteristic features.

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1. Introduction

Following an upsurge of research interest in varieties of English worldwide, there has been strong advocacy of regional varieties such as China English (CE) as new members of the world Englishes family (e.g., He & Li, 2009; Hu, 2004; Kirkpatrick & Xu, 2002), with one ambitious argument claiming that CE should "stand alongside British, American, and the other 'world Englishes'" (Hu, 2004, p. 26). There have also been keen endeavors to identify features of these regional varieties, in particular, CE (or by another name, Chinese English) at phonological, lexical, syntactic, pragmatic, and textual levels (e.g., He & Li, 2009; Wei & Fei, 2003; Xu, 2010; You, 2008). It is hoped that through these efforts, a teaching model may finally be tailored for China's English classrooms, which supplements Standard Englishes (SEs) with "salient, well-codified, and properly implemented features of 'China English'" (He & Li, 2009, p. 70; see also Kirkpatrick & Xu, 2002; Zhang, 2000).

Unfortunately, the Kachruvian approach to naming varieties of English, though having effected legitimization and elevation of regional varieties worldwide, may be more "geographical and political" (Leimgruber, 2013, p. 6), than "scientifically real" (Seargeant & Tagg, 2011, p. 497). The linguistic diversity within the national border often defies unifying categorization (e.g., Bruthiaux, 2003; Kachru & Quirk, 1981; Leimgruber, 2013). Disentangling sub-varieties of English can be thorny, too, because their demarcations usually merge. Linguistic and cultural transfer, which has been taken as characteristic of nativization (Kachru, 1992), may have been abused as a reliable rationale for feature identification (Hartse & Shi, 2012). Or in other cases, feature identification can be "anecdotal" (Dasgupta, 1993, as cited in Pennycook, 2003, p. 518). A similar concern has been raised as to the extent of nativization of English (e.g., Yu & Wen, 2011). There is truth in Krishnaswamy and

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Burde's (1998) caution that "a few Indian loan words and fossilized expressions found in Indians' use of English do not constitute a valid base to claim 'Indianization' of English" (p. 150). Varieties of English are also subject to the varied understandings their speakers hold of them (e.g., Singlish, see Leimgruber, 2013), and more seriously and not uncommonly, to intra-linguistic stigmatization imposed by speakers of an acrolect or by government sanction (see Wee, 2005 for issues concerning intra-linguistic discrimination; see e.g., Rubdy, Mckay, Alsagoff, & Bokhorst-Heng, 2008 for Singapore's Speak Good English campaign). Candidate forms for a "nonstandard" variety may be viewed as "interference errors" (e.g., Pride & Liu, 1988, p. 63), or bad English (Yoo, 2014), which may prevent it from being accepted as a new variety of English.

Therefore, scholars' reiterative calls and proposals notwithstanding, the future of regional English varieties such as CE still remains rather murky. In the case of CE, constantly at issue are its legitimacy as a category, its definition, features, status relative to SEs, awareness, intelligibility, acceptability, and application (e.g., He & Li, 2009; Sun, 1989; Wang, 2009; Zhu, 2004). For example, while Zhu (2004) questioned the status of CE vis-à-vis British or American English, Wang (2009) problematized the top-down approach dominating CE feature identification, pointing out that the de facto linguistic data as evidence for the existence of CE, most noticeably at the syntactic and textual levels, are still missing. More research is needed to examine the status quo of CE. One approach to such an inquiry is to leave the much-proposed CE features (CEFs) to the judgment of Chinese tertiary English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) teachers, which this study was designed to do.

2. China English: a further critique

The term *China English* originally applied to Chinese-English translation when it referred to totally acceptable forms of SEs expressing China-specific contents (e.g., *eight-legged essay*, see Ge, 1980, p. 2). It has been reclaimed as a notion for the developing variety of English in China (e.g., He & Li, 2009). In this new conceptualization, however, definitional inconsistency exists since CE was sometimes deemed to be "free from cross-linguistic influence from the Chinese language" (Li, 1993, as cited in He & Li, 2009, p. 71) while at other times to be "an interference variety of English" (Xie, 1995, as cited in He & Li, 2009, p. 72). It was redefined by He and Li (2009) as "a performance variety of English which has the standard Englishes as its core but is colored with characteristic features of Chinese phonology, lexis, syntax and discourse pragmatics" (p. 83). He and Li claimed that their definition acknowledged "natural" "cross-linguistic influences from the Chinese language" (p. 83). The difference between "influences" and "interference", however, does not appear to make CE less ambiguous than does the presence or absence of "influences" or "interference" because their identification indispensably relies on subjective interpretation. The inconsistent definition of CE has underlain an ongoing debate over its source—whether a corpus of CE should be based on published texts alone or can include university learner texts (Hartse & Shi, 2012; Pang, 2006; Xu, 2010). It is for the same reason that different lists of CEFs have often been produced. For example, He and Li's (2009) sifting of CEFs at the syntactic level appears rather strict, for their exemplification excluded many of the syntactic features proposed by Wei and Fei (2003) (e.g., S + adv./adjunct + V + O). Still another manifestation of this inconsistency is the more lenient attitude to CE phonology than to syntax (e.g., Du & Jiang, 2001; He & Li, 2009).

CE is often distinguished from Chinglish and/or Chinese English (e.g., Eaves, 2011; Hu, 2004; Jiang, 1995; Wei & Fei, 2003). Most recently, Eaves (2011) has presented a seemingly clear picture of how CE is different from Chinglish and Chinese English. She defined Chinglish as "a nonsensical, problematic form of English that is the result of poor translation, misspelling, and errors" (p. 65) (e.g., *mental toy* for *intellectual/educational toy*, p. 66), and Chinese English as a still intelligible interlanguage representing "errors clearly resulting from the speaker's lack of practice using English (p. 68) (e.g., *You bring us happy*, p. 67). Both differ from China English as "new patterns developing in a China variety of English" (p. 68). But again, her distinction does not seem to eliminate the indefiniteness in telling acceptable *patterns* for CE from unwanted *errors* classifiable as Chinese English. Not to cavil about whether uttering /s/ as /θ/ is a CE feature for Eaves, or an error for others, what she viewed as characteristic of Chinese English (e.g., an uncountable noun used as a countable one, as in her exemplification, *a good work*, p. 67) has already become an attested form in the Outer Circle (i.e., *equipments*, Higgins, 2003, p. 627).

Some CE proponents frequently speculate on its features by deduction from the theory of linguistic and cultural transfer, as if they were not aware that this arbitrary approach could fabricate features that bear little relevance to real use and actual users. *For me to get up before 6 o'clock in the morning is impossible*, taken by Wei and Fei (2003, p. 44) as representing a *top heavy* structure, may be a rather rare occurrence because its usual equivalent can be formulaically acquired. Some elements of CE appear to be exemplary even to native speakers, for example, *effort halved, result doubled* in the case of CE idioms (He & Li, 2009, p. 73). Putative features like these need to be appraised, by potential recipients, and/or use-related information should be provided, to verify their status (see also Bamgbose, 1998 for factors determining the status of an innovation).

Attitude studies have been conducted to investigate the milieu for the sustainability of CE in relation to Chinese students and teachers as stakeholders (Chen & Hu, 2006; Hartse & Shi, 2012; He & Li, 2009; Hu, 2004, 2005; Kirkpatrick & Xu, 2002). Some of these studies used questionnaires or/and interviews, which involved (repetitive) exposure of the term *China English* to teachers and/or students, asking them questions about it, and juxtaposition/vicinity of similar terms (e.g., *China English* versus *Chinese English*) (e.g., He & Li, 2009; Hu, 2004, 2005). It should be reminded that such methods might have unduly magnified the informants' awareness of and knowledge on CE and its acceptability. The very name of *China English* in itself appears appealing due to the freshness of the idea, the recognition and respect it grants, and its nationalist connotations. Leimgruber (2013) adds, "[S]peakers are very happy to identify individual varieties by means of a convenient label" (p. 4). Therefore, questions like *Will China English stand alongside British, American and other world Englishes?* (Hu, 2005, p. 33) are likely to have evoked emotional answers, which guided subsequent reasoning. The instruments for and processes of data collection may have also been awareness-raising and instructive. For example, as a questionnaire item, *The variety of English in*