Asian Social Science
www.ccsenet.org/journal.html
Vol. 4, No. 9
September 2008

Cultural Identity in China English as a Variety of English

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Abstract

The status of English as an International language breaks the situation in which British English or American English is the sole standard. English becomes World Englishes, taking on a plural form, which include many varieties of English with nativized cultural, political and economical characteristics. Researchers in China believe that China English as a variety of English has been objectively in existence. It refers to English used by the speakers with Chinese linguistic and cultural background who consciously or unconsciously transfer the Chinese cultural identities into English, thus endowing China English with distinctive cultural identities. China English consolidates the cultural identity of the Chinese speakers of English, enriches the multiple identities of English and plays an important role in promoting Chinese culture internationally.

Keywords: World Engllishes, China English, Cultural identity

1. World Englishes

The widespread of English and its importance in international communication has established its status as an international language or a global language (Crystal, 1997). The Indian linguist Brai Kachru (1985, 1992) views English today in terms of three concentric circles: the Inner Circle, the outer circle and the expanding circle. The inner circle refers to the places where English is a native language (ENL), including the US, UK, Ireland, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. The Outer Circle involves the earlier phases of the spread of English in non-native settings, where English is a second language, including Singapore, India, Malaysia and fifty other territories (ESL). The Expanding Circle involves those nations which recognize the English as a foreign language (EFL), including China, Japan, Greece, Poland, and an increasing number of other countries. A plural word Englishes came into use, which had been admitted by scholars such as Strang (1970), Strevens (1982), and Kachru (1997, 1980). As language expresses, embodies and symbolizes cultural reality (Kramsch, 1998:3), the pluralistic English has taken upon itself double roles: one is manifestation of Westerness, the Judeo-Christian tradition, the other is the representation of the culture of its speaker. As Kachru states, “English has multiple identities… in the international contexts, English represents a repertoire of cultures, not a monolithic culture. (1989: 86). It is in this context that the issue of China English has been brought into discussion.

2. China English

In view of the multiplicity of English and the increasing attention on it, it’s justified to regard the English spoken and used by Chinese people as one of its varieties. Here I would like to use the term China English. China English is different from Chinglish since the latter is a term the foreigners use to describe the substandard language phenomenon occurring in the English spoken by the Chinese, due to the influence of the Chinese language. The difference between these two concepts has for long time been the object of attention in the field of linguistics. So far as I am concerned, the major difference lies in their acceptability. China English can be accepted by other English speakers while Chinglish is despised as substandard.

China English means the English spoken or used by speakers with a Chinese linguistic and cultural background. The concept of China English and the discussion of it was brought about by Ge Chuangui (1982) when he talked about some issues of translation from Chinese into English. He said that in translating things typically Chinese it was inevitable to use some Chinese expressions for English, such as “Four Books (si shu), “Five Classics”(wu jing), juren, xiucai,etc, of which the equivalent couldn’t be found in English. Many scholars joined the discussion in the wake including Sun Li (1989), Wang Rongpei (1991), Li Wenzhong (1993), Xie Zhijun (1995), Du Ruiqing& Jiang Yajun (2001) and Pan Zhangxian (2002, 2005). *World Englishes* published a special issue on English in China from interdisciplinary perspectives, providing ideas and thought in the issue “how cultural, linguistic and literary contact between China and the West has been mediated by the English language and what the current status, functions and features of English are in China” (2005, Pan) These studies of China English point to a fact that China English has become an objective existence.

3. China English in Use in China's Intercultural Communication

In expressing things typically Chinese that have no counterparts in English, we resort to China English expressions, such as Cultural Revolution, Red Guard, Mahjong, Fengshui, etc. Even in cases that an English semantic equivalent convey with different expression, China English may be purposefully adopted by the user so as to enhance his or her Chinese identity apart from showing the Chineseness of the English expression. In journals of external publicity, there is an increasing tendency to use China English wording. For instance,

(1) There is an old Chinese saying," *How can you catch tiger cubs without entering the tiger's lair*?" The saying holds true for man's practice and it also holds true for the theory of knowledge.

This is a translation of a quotation from Mao Zedong's *On Practice*, published by Foreign Language Press in 1964. In English there is one equivalent: Noting ventured, nothing gained. However, it fails to communicate to the readers the cultural implications of that the tiger carries in Chinese culture.

(2) *Three cobblers with their wits combined equal Zhuge Liang the master mind.* In other words, the masses have great creative power. (published by Being Foreign Language Press in1965)

In Chinese culture, the historical figure Zhuege Liang represents one of the greatest minds, so familiar to the Chinese people that he became a symbol of wisdom. In English, similar meaning is conveyed by "two heads are better than one", which is used less vividly. In English, "Solomon" is a biblical figure used as a metaphor for a wise person, however "three cobblers make one Solomon" would lose the original Chinese color in the works by Mao Zedong.

(3) *Good wine is not afraid of being located at the end of a long lane.* (*China Today*, Vol.49, No.7, 2000)

In English we find its equivalent: Good wine needs no bush. Both idioms are intended for things that are of true value and that don't need advertisements. However, they carry different cultural features, though similar in meaning. The Chinese idiom reflects a production culture typical of traditional Chinese society, in which manual production is an additional mode of economy apart from farming. There is also another Chinese element, lane, emphasizing the folk way of living. Still, the translation of the Chinese idiom allows for improvement in the rendering of *jiu* into wine, as wine is not more Chinese than liquor. In contrast, the English idiom emphasizes the more highly developed commercial civilization.

4. China English in Contact Literature

According to Kachru (1992), English has four functions in the expanding circles of it: instrumental (as a medium in education; regulative (as a regulative instrument in the legal system and administration), interpersonal (as a lingua franca in interpersonal communication), creative (as a language in creative and imaginative writings). Contact literature refers to the non-native writing or non-native English literature, or English-language literature by non-native writers. As an extension of contact language which has both a face of its own and a face of the language with which it has contact, contact literature is a blend of two or more linguistic textures and literary traditions. Contact literature writers such as Lin Yutang, Amy Tan, and Jung Chang, etc. consciously or not, are using China English in writing. They write for westerners or the native speakers of English rather than the Chinese readers while drawing on Chinese stories as their fictional resources, which cater to the needs of the western readers to understand China and the life of Chinese people. Lin Yutang is known for his achievements in introducing Chinese culture to the West. In his works, we find a distinct Chinese cultural identity in his purposeful use of China English.

(1) The *Dog-Meat General* was called a man of *three-don't-knows*. He didn't know how many soldiers he had, how much money he had, and how many wives, Chinese and Russian. (Lin Yutang, Moment in Peking. 709)

Lin is referring to Zhang Zongchang. He was derogatively nicknamed as "dog-meat general" because he was gambler and lover of dog meat. Chinese people eat almost everything including dogs. Yet to foreigners, dog-meat is unthinkable because they regard them as Man's Best Friend and keep them as pets. Lin interwove the Chinese image into English, and the meaning is self-evident in the context although the expression is exotic to the English readers.

(2) Heaven has no eyes! (Lin Yutang, The Importance of Living, 1998, p.23)

Westerners believe that it's God that controls the world, while the Chinese believe it is the Heaven that cares everything for them. When Westerners cry out "Oh, my God!" "God Bless you!", the Chinese exclaim "Oh, my Heaven!" The exclamation as an example here is typically Chinese, showing the dominating role of Heaven in the life of Chinese.

(3) Killing the landscape appears in *Moment in Peking*, and is literally translated by Lin from *sha feng jing*, although an English idiom "a wet blanket" denotes the same meaning. This purposeful choice of words shows Lin's effort to communicate Chinese culture to the West, and his effort to maintain his Chinese identity.

(4) Does he mean to throw the city editor and break his *rice-bowl*, starving all the people dependent on him? *(My Country and My People, 170)*

Rice-bowl is a literal translation of *fan wan*, the meaning of which is expressed figuratively in English is "bread and

butter". Both are used metaphorically to mean "the means of livelihood" yet manifest different cultures.

From what's stated above, we can see that the speakers with Chinese linguistic and cultural identities are consciously or unconsciously transferring Chinese cultural identities into English, thus endowing China English with distinctive cultural identities. Meanwhile, China English functions as a cohesive device in consolidating its speakers' cultural identity in intercultural communication. As Claire Kramsch declares that "there is a natural connection between the language spoken by members of a social group and that group's identity. By the accent, their vocabulary, their discourse patterns, speakers identify themselves and are identified as members of this or that speech and discourse community. From this membership, they draw personal strength and pride, as well as a sense of importance and historical continuity from using the same language as the group they belong to".(Kramsch, 1998: 65-66)

5. China English in the International Community of English

China English is gaining increasing recognition in international community of English and frequently find their way in the circle of English as a Native Language (ENL). Examples are as follows:

(1) These colonies are constant and even increasing drain on France. They are for her *the tiger which she has mounted* (to use the Chinese phrase) *and she can neither manage nor get rid of.* (Time, November 10, 1989)

The Chinese phrase is used metaphorically for a dilemma situation, the equivalent of which in English is "to be on the horns of a dilemma" or "to have a wolf by the ear". However, the use of the Chinese idiom would produce exotic color to English, which would arouse the interest of the readers and would help them gain a kind of strange, but rewarding reading experience, and learn something about Chinese culture.

(2) So allow me to begin by using a Chinese expression---and you will have to forgive my pronunciation—*pao zhuan yin yu—to throw a brick to retrieve a jade*—and try to explain American perceptions about our hopes and dreams for the future. (Speech by US Vice President Gore at Tsinghua University, March 26, 1997)

The purpose of having the Chinese borrowings in the speeches of political leaders is to shorten the distance between the speakers and the audience by showing their respect to the Chinese language and culture. Of course, this is a diplomatic strategy or tactic to appeal to the audience, nevertheless it suggests the transfer of Chinese culture into English. In the repertoire of loan words in English, we find Chinese loan words showing that China English enriches the language of English. They include food, medicine, plant, traditional arts and sports, political expressions and terms etc. A recent report says that there are altogether 1488 Chinese loan words in English (Wang, 2002: 391). As language changes with society, such number is bound to mount. As language is the embodiment of culture, China English words also makes a great contribution in promoting Chinese culture. A convincing example is seen from former US President Ronald Reagan who quoted from the *Daodejing* in his State of the Union Address: "To govern a great nation requires the same care as to fry a small fish." With the more frequent cultural exchanges in the globalization era, we're justified in predicting that China English will be playing an increasingly important role in cross-cultural communication and gain an increasingly recognition in the international community of English.

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