Retrospection and Expectation: A Review on Studies of China English*

Wu Jihong

Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, Guangzhou, China

The globalization has witnessed an increasing interest in “China English,” and much attention has been devoted to its form, status, function, and people’s language attitudes since it was first proposed in 1980’s in the 20th century. In this article, the author first undertakes a review of the arguments concerning China English and the preferable model of English teaching in mainland China, and then with a critical reflection on the strength and weakness of the studies, proposes that it is necessary to clear the misunderstandings in studies of China English by strengthening the theoretical construction of English Chinese and refining the research methods.

Keywords: China English, variety, globalization, reflection

Introduction

English globalization has posed a great challenge to the nativization of the English language and culture. With the Globish (Jenkins et al., 2011) and the formation of new variants, the monolithic approach, and normativity of native English are defied, while plurality and variability of English are accepted by an increasing number of people. At present, the perception of English can be divided into the following three: English as a native language (ENL) model, a traditional and purist one which view native English as the only viable option and the best model of English in the world; the second one is the world Englishes (WE) paradigm, which is against a monolithic ENL model and for a pluralized and pluricentric view of English in the world; and the third one, English as a lingua franca (ELF) model, in which English is a lingua franca for international communication as an alternative model to ENL model (Saraceni, 2008). In China, since 1980’s in the 20th century, China English has become a focus in language research, especially in sociolinguistics and applied linguistics, and various even opposite conclusions have been reached in term of its form, status, function, and people’s language attitude. In retrospect, the author considers it necessary to reexamine the theoretical framework for studies on China English, so as to bring forth a more comprehensive and objective perception of China English, thus, further deepening its study.

Literature Review

The study of China English began in 1980’s in the 20th century. The concept was first introduced by Ge Chuangui (1980), then it was elaborated by Wang Rongpei (1991) and Li Wenzhong (1993), who redefined China English as “a variety with normative English as its core, but with Chinese characteristics at the levels of

* **Acknowledgements:** This work was supported by the Humanities and Social Science Research Funding of the Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China under Grant (No. 15YJA740048).

Wu Jihong, Ph.D., associate professor, School of English for International Business, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies.

lexis, syntax, and discourse; it is free from first language (L1) interference and can be employed to express Chinese-specific linguistic and cultural features by means of transliteration, borrowing, and semantic transfer” (Li, 1993, p. 19). Along with Li, scholars who adopt a positive attitude towards China English affirm that China English is a variant of English (Eaves, 2012; He & Li, 2009; Jiang, 1995). However, some other scholars are reluctant to accept China English as a variant, contending that China English is not yet an established variant, but a developing one, and “it is neither objective nor practical to impose China English as an equal to America English and British English as it lacks political, social and theoretical basis, and the imposition will likely cause the theoretical and practical confusion” (Xie, 1995, p. 10). The research on the language attitude also includes some empirical studies, which target on the intelligibility and acceptability of China English (Chen, 1996; Gao & Wen, 2012). It is worth noting that many language attitude researches are oriented on Chinese university teachers and students, along with their perception of language teaching model (He & Li, 2009; Hu, 2004; Kirkpatrick & Xu, 2002). The studies have shown that the subjects are inclined to have a strong attachment to native English norms, and English teachers tend to adopt the ENL-based English model in their teaching.

Apart from language attitudes studies, researchers on China English devote their attention to language description and application as well. Descriptive researches mainly concentrate on phonetics, morphology, syntax, and discourse (Li, 1993; Kirkpatrick & Xu, 2002; He & Li, 2009). It is widely accepted that China English has demonstrated Chinese-specific characteristics in all these four aspects. Meanwhile, researches on the application of China English are mainly oriented towards English teaching models (Hu, 2007; Wen, 2012), but some researchers on China English also incorporate their efforts into studies on intercultural communication (Xie, 1995; Pan, 2005), translation strategies (Xu & Huo, 2008), and language function (Hu, 2008).

Reflection on Studies on China English

Previous studies on China English have been fruitful yet deficient to some extent. It is hoped that improvement can be made when the studies are based on more solid theoretical foundation, more standardized concepts, and more productive research methods.

Sociolinguistics Perspective vs. Applied Linguistics Perspective

In studies on China English, it is imperative to make a distinction between sociolinguistic perspective and applied linguistic perspective. As is shown, variant is the core concept of sociolinguistics, and sociolinguistic studies mainly focus on the standard for establishment of variants and their process of development (Kachru, 1985; Schneider, 2007). Therefore, studies on China English from sociolinguistic perspective are oriented on its status as a variant and its developing process. *China Englishes: A Sociolinguistic History* (Bolton, 2003) is a typical study of China English from sociolinguistic perspective: Its author tries to define, describe, and analyze Hongkong English and China English as a social, historical, and linguistic phenomenon. The sociolinguistic studies on China English, as an important part of the world Englishes, may provide the foundation for studies on China English from applied linguistics perspective.

On the other hand, the focus of applied linguistics is English teaching with the distinction between features of China English as its priority. Unlike sociolinguists who show a concern for intelligibility and acceptability, applied linguists put learnability and testability into consideration (Sewell, 2009; Jiang & Du, 2003). However, at present, there is no theoretical framework for description of local features of China English, nor is there any

serious effort to incorporate it into curriculum in English teaching, to say nothing of any systematic research on its assessment. So, the studies on China English are far from comprehensive in terms of integrity, systematicity, and objectivity. Therefore, it is impractical to insist that “Chinese English learners should learn China English” (Hu, 2004, p. 26), nor is it realistic to suggest that “only China English in lexical level should be put into the teaching content” (Wang, 2009, p. 18). It is certain that in the theoretical level, the importance and necessity of teaching China English is beyond discussion, yet for all practical purposes, teaching China English is still unattainable in the short term. As for the viewpoint that China English and Chinglish are two ends of one continuum, it may bring an end to the debate on China English and carries some sociolinguistic significance, but in applied linguistic studies, it has little practical value, for at present, there are no standards and tools for segmentation of the continuum. Consequently, it does make sense when some people reject China English.

Learners vs. Users

A recent research shows there have been approximately 400 million English learners in China, among whom 69% “Seldom,” 7% “Often,” and 23% “Sometimes” use English in daily life (Wei & Su, 2012, p. 11). It is estimated that among hundreds of millions of English users in China, only 70 million are actual users in real sense (Yang, 2006, p. 8). These data indicate that English in China serves more pedagogical than practical function, and the number of English learners is far greater than the number of English users, hence, English at home is more a learner’s language. It is true that there is no absolute boundary between learners and users, or the users’ language and learners’ language, but if we do not separate users from learners in the research, we run the risk of oversimplifying the situation. China English has some common features with Englishes in other countries in expanding circle, but it also demonstrates its own characteristics. Viewed from the external language environment, English has the absolute dominance in China as a foreign language, but due to the historical reason, it only reentered the public view in the late 1970’s in the 20th century, and has practical applications only in some specific domains including tourism, trade, and academia. As a matter of fact, English in China only carries a dominant weight in educational setting. Meanwhile, viewed from the internal environment, British and American English have assumed overwhelming dominance in China over other foreign languages, and there is little space for China English in academic setting, literature (for Chinese local recipients) or reference books compiling (although China does have a certain number of Chinese learner English corpus and China English corpus). The distinction between users’ language and learners’ language not only attaches great importance to the perception of China English, but also helps to illuminate the difficult issues in the research, especially those concerning English teaching: When we view China English from learners’ perspective, we should pay more attention to learners as individuals in the process of their language development, for their language is more characterized with errors embedded in the interlanguage, so practically, it is necessary to emphasize the nativization of English and stress accuracy and standardization. Nevertheless, viewed from users’ perspective, persistent errors are found in their language usage and the high frequency and prevalence turn these errors more as salient features in China English, therefore, we should perceive users as a community, who communicate with common linguistic features and play the most important role in the process of localization. For them, to emphasize comprehensibility and communicative effectiveness than accuracy makes more sense.

Localization vs. Indigenization

Localization and indigenization are two concepts which overlap slightly in sociolinguistics. It is the

acceptability of the variants in the local language community that differentiates one from the other. The language process determines the degree of localization while the attitudinal process is crucial to indigenization as attitudinal process and the linguistic process seem to work simultaneously in the development of non-native models (Pang, 2003; Kachru, 1982). The current researches show that China English has been localized to a great extent, but the language attitude researches indicate that China English has not yet indigenized. Even though many people acknowledge China English has become the language reality, most of them still adhere to the normative role of American and British English. Obviously, the developmental process of China English is undergoing an unbalanced trend: attitudinal process lags behind the linguistic process, which may hinder the indigenization. Kachru (1982, p. 39) claimed that “a variety may exist, but unless it is recognized and accepted as a model it does not acquire a status.” Sociolinguistic studies show that all variants will go through the phase of exonormative norm to the phase of endonormative norm, and as we can see that the development of Englishes in the inner circle and outer circle, such as America and India all follow the pattern. Therefore, we should try not to be too optimistic about China English with its linguistic process, nor should we be too pessimistic with its attitudinal process. The development of a language is not subject to man’s will. Undoubtedly, the increasing influence of Chinese in the international community will accelerate the localization of China English, which will eventually facilitate its indigenization.

Conclusions

The past 30 years have witnessed the flourishing of the research on China English. However, there is still much left to be done. It is suggested that improvement can be made with broadened perspective, expanded scope, and refined methods in the research. First, researches on China English should include both the macro-perspective and micro-perspective. In the macro-perspective, studies on China English will be put under the framework of world Englishes, investigating the impact of the changing status and function of English exerted on the development of China English as a regional variant. From the micro-perspective, the local features of China English as a developing variant, including the historical, political, and cultural factors should be stressed. Meanwhile, it is hoped that studies on China English will extend its scope. The present studies have bore more fruits in linguistic level, but yielded fewer results from pragmatics and culture studies. So, the priority of the researches on China English at present is to establish a framework to describe local features of China English and to seek a balance in linguistic, pragmatic, and cultural level. What is more, researches on China English should involve Chinese in other Chinese-speaking countries and regions, including Hongkong English, Taiwan English, etc.. The studies on the bilingual research can also be extended to the trilingual research (triglossia) in which local languages, such as Cantonese also play a part. Finally, to refine research methods, both qualitative and quantitative studies should be given equal importance. The current studies have yielded more fruitful results in qualitative than quantitative studies, more overall description than micro-analysis. Consequently, overgeneralization and simplification are not rare when researches are confined to small quantity of data. The situation can be hopefully improved with the development of corpus research. It is of great significance for researchers to put more effort into construction of China English corpus, and enhance the reliability and validity of their work with corpus-driven research.

At present, China English has attracted more and more attention. It is to be expected that greater efforts will be made to advance the study of China English and enhance its academic significance, which in turn will contribute to the English teaching reformation in China.

References

- Bolton, K. (2003). *China Englishes: A sociolinguistic history*. Cambridge: CUP.
- Chen, L. (1996). How foreigners evaluate two China English newspapers? *Modern Foreign Language*, 71(1), 44-46.
- Eaves, M. (2011). English, Chinglish or China English. *English Today*, 27(4), 64-70.
- Gao, C., & Wen, Q. (2012). A study on the intelligibility and acceptability of nativized English in China. *Foreign Language Education*, 33(5), 53-58.
- Ge, C. G. (1980). On the C-E translation. *Translation Communication*, (2), 13-14.
- He, D., & Li, D. C. S. (2009). Language attitudes and linguistic features in the "China English" debate. *World English*, 28(1), 77-89.
- Hu, X. L. (2008). On function of China English. *Foreign Language and Education*, 22(11), 13-16.
- Hu, X. Q. (2007). The development of "global English" in globalization and its impact on English teaching in China. *Foreign Language Teaching*, 118(2), 16-23.
- Hu, X. (2004). Why China English should stand alongside British, American, and the other world Englishes. *English Today*, 20(2), 26-33.
- Jenkins, et al.. (2011). Review of developments in research into English as a lingua franca. *Language Teaching*, 44(3), 281-315.
- Jiang, Y. (1995). Chinglish and China English. *English Today*, 11(1), 51-53.
- Jiang, Y., & Du, R. (2003). On China English—A response to the "China English" debate. *Foreign Language Teaching*, 24(1), 27-35.
- Kachru, B. B. (1982). Models for non-native Englishes. In B. B. Kachru (Ed.), *The other tongue: English across cultures* (pp. 31-57). Urbana: Pergamon Press Ltd..
- Kachru, B. B. (1985). Standards, codification and sociolinguistic realism: The English language in the outer circle. In R. Quirk, & H. G. Widdowson (Eds.), *English in the world: Teaching and learning the language and literatures* (pp. 11-30). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kirkpatrick, A., & Xu, Z. (2002). Chinese pragmatic norms and "China English". *World English*, 21(2), 269-279.
- Li, W. Z. (1993). China English and Chinglish. *Foreign Language Teaching and Research*, 3(4), 18-24.
- Pan, Z. (2005). *Linguistic and cultural identification in China English*. Beijing: Beijing University Press.
- Pang, T. T. (2003). Hong Kong English: A stillborn variety? *English Today*, 19(2), 12-18.
- Saraceni, M. (2008). English as a lingua franca: Between form and function. *English Today*, 24(2), 20-26.
- Schneider, E. W. (2007). *Postcolonial English-variety around the world*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Sewell, A. (2009). World Englishes, English as a lingua franca, the case of Hong Kong English. *English Today*, 25(1), 37-43.
- Wang, J. (2009). Problems with China English studies. *Journal of PLA Foreign Languages Institute*, 32(6), 14-19.
- Wang, R. P. (1991). China English is a reality. *Journal of PLA Foreign Languages Institute*, 48(1), 1-8.
- Wei, R. & Su, J. (2012). The statistics of English in China. *English Today*, 28(3), 10-14.
- Wen Q. (2012). The framework of teaching English as an international language. *Syllabus, Materials, and Methods*, 32(1), 77-81.
- Xie, Z. (1995). China English: Interference in cross-cultural communication. *Modern Foreign Language*, 70(4), 7-11.
- Xu, J. & Huo, Y. (2008). Translation of classic works: Foreignization and China English. *Foreign Language and Education*, 232(7), 45-48.
- Yang, J. (2006). Learners and users of English in China. *English Today*, 22(2), 3-10.