

Chinese English in as lingua franca in global business setting: A case study of ongoing emails of a foreign company in China

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ABSTRACT: With the process of globalization, English has been increasingly become the lingua franca for people speaking different languages to communicate with each other, among whom the number of non-native speakers of English far outnumbers those native speakers in traditional sense. Against this background, the principle of taking the rules of native English speakers as the norms is undergoing challenges. The non-native speakers are claiming the ownership and rights of norm-providing to the English language (Crystal, 2003). In business setting, this is especially true (Charles, 2007). This paper intends to explore the use of Chinese English as lingua franca in business setting. Taking a foreign enterprise based in China as the case, this paper investigates over 400 ongoing business e-mails written in English by its Chinese employees, including the management and other staff. Four most salient patterns of Chinese English structures are identified, i.e., punctuations, absence of inflectional markers in number and tense, serial verb construction, and zero articles, which are then analyzed cultural, linguistic and social-linguistic perspectives. The effectiveness of such language patterns are proved according to the principle of “understandability” proposed by Kachru and Nelson (2006) from both intra-cultural and inter-cultural aspects. Based on the afore-said analysis, this paper concludes that Chinese English, during the process of language contact, has become a legitimate English variation, and has been providing new norms for the other countries to follow. It is suggested that business English users in China need to use their Chinese English with a confident stance, while business partners from other countries need to get familiar with this English variation in order for them to communicate effectively with their Chinese partners.

Keywords: lingua franca, business English, e-mails, Chinese English features, English variation

1 INTRODUCTION

English used as a lingua franca (ELF), i. e., “communication in English between speakers with different first languages” (Seidlhofer, 2001, p. 339) has been attracting increasing interest over the last decade (e.g., Jenkins, Cogo, & Dewey, 2011; Kachru Y. & Nelson, 2006; Meierkord, 2002). Kachru B. B. (1985) used the term “World Englishes” to capture the diversification of the language as the result of constant contact with other languages from different cultures, who further classified the English-using world into Three Circles: the Inner Circle where English is spoken as the mother tongue, the Outer Circle where English spread through colonialism, and the Expanding Circle where English spread with globalization. The term “world Englishes” is inclusive without privileging any Circle or any of its varieties (Kachru Y. & Nelson, 2006).

Against this background, especially when users of

English in Outer and Expanding Circles outnumber users from the Inner Circle, the traditional notion of taking Inner Circle English, e. g., American and British English, as the standard is undergoing challenges (Marckwardt, 1942; Kachru Y. & Nelson, 2006). There has been a tendency to recognize the legitimacy of rule-governed nativized World Englishes or English varieties (Kachru B. B., 1992; Bolton, 2005). Ownership of the language no longer privileges the Inner Circle users, for everyone who has learnt the language owns it and “has the right to use it in the way they want” (Crystal, 2003, p.2). Instead of passively accepting norms provided by the Inner Circle, English users from the other two Circles are entitled the power to negotiate the norms of language use (Canagarajah, 2000; Kachru B. B., 1992).

This is especially the case when ELF is used for international business purposes, where in spite of divergences that is common, business partners are pro-

pelled by business goals to efficiently communicate with each other (Charles, 2007). Focusing more on function rather than correctness of the language (Paradowski, 2013), speakers of various language backgrounds accommodate to differences of each other (Cogo & Dewey, 2006). Business English as ELF has become a “neutral” and shared communication code for the function of conducting business” (Louhiala-Salminen, Charles & Kankaanranta, 2005), representing various cultural identities of its users (Jameson, 2007).

This study takes interest in investigating into Chinese English as ELF used in business setting in China. As an Expanding Circle country, China is gradually becoming the world’s prime destinations for foreign investment (Child & Tse, 2001). Choosing an international company based in China as the case, the study investigated into features of Chinese English reflected in on going emails of the company. Email exchanges constitute a large part communication in international business (Louhiala-Salminen, 2002). The study reviewed over 400 on going company emails written by its Chinese employees, all being short informal messages written in English. Based on salient features of Chinese English identified, it interpreted these features from linguistic and cultural perspectives, arguing for the effectiveness and legitimacy of Chinese English variety in business contexts, and suggested implications and directions for future research.

2 CHINESE ENGLISH FEATURES IDENTIFIED IN THE COMPANY EMAILS

2.1 Punctuation

A striking feature identified in the reviewed emails is the common practice of using a comma in place of a period, a semicolon, a colon, or a dash to join two or more complete sentences together.

Examples:

- 1) The scrap materials have been ready in HUB warehouse, which would be send about on 17-Dec.
- 2) We are working with supplier to investigate root cause, it is in process.
- 3) Arrival notice is not received yet, and invoice is missing, I had pushed EI to provide it.
- 4) Would you please help us to provide PL to forwarder Expeditors according to attachment information, meanwhile I will inform our supplier provide whole shipping docs in the future, if you have any concerns please let me know, Thanks!

Though not considered accepted by Inner Circle grammar, in the native Chinese language, commas may be used to separate complete sentences. The cause of the linguistic deviation in Chinese English

can be traced back to difference between the two cultures in contact. Chinese falls into the typical high-context culture (Hall, 1976), where a large part of meaning of the text depends on the understanding of context. In contrast, in low-context cultures like that of most Inner Circle countries, language is the primary tool for constructing meaning. Compared with that for Inner Circle English varieties, there is less work that language structures need to do in Chinese.

An interesting evidence shows the fact that punctuation system is relatively new happening in Chinese, which has not been in place until 1919 when it is borrowed from the Western languages (Chen, 2008). Thus, it is not strange to find in Chinese English commas are used to link groups of complete sentences, while full stops are used to separate meaning groups.

2.2 Absence of inflectional markers

Inner Circle English is a variety in which inflectional morphemes are used to show grammatical relationships (Klammer, Schulz, & Volpe, 2004). As a phonographic language developed from a synthetic language to an analytic one (Li, 1999), it remains a lot of inflectional features. However, inflections are often absent in Chinese English as the result of influences from the Chinese language. As a typical analytic language with its pictographic origin (Norman, 1998), Chinese is less morphologically complex than English (Li & Thompson, 1981), allowing less variability in structure (Ho, 1997).

2.2.1 Number

Inner Circle English expresses plurality through various devices, among which the most often used is the addition of the morpheme –s or –es. However, it is common to find morpheme –s/–es tend to be dropped by Chinese writers, while plurality is rarely expressed in Chinese (Chang, 1987).

Examples:

- 1) Please make sure to notice all *suppliers* to use Fedex and chose BSO for shipment to Shenzhen Tigers.
- 2) XXX delivered *sample* of transparent label with grid adhesive to WCD, and XXX were satisfied with *result*.
- 3) They did not ask *engineer* in CQ site to update template to the new one.
- 4) There are two *versions* of templates in WM system, operator used wrong template for printing.

In rare cases where plurality is expressed in Chinese, it is through the addition of classifiers before the noun or adding of another character –*men* following the noun (Li, Y. H. A., 1999). Chierchia (1998) argued that in classifier language like Chinese, nouns fall into the category of mass nouns, which are inherently plural without plural morphology. Following this line, rare expression of plurality in Chinese language can

be attributed to the Chinese cultural preference to collectivity rather than individuality (Elena, 1980), where numbers are not considered important.

2.2.2 Tense

Comrie (1985) defined tense as “grammaticalised expression of location in time” (p. 9). As we can see from the reviewed emails, past tense in Chinese English is largely left unmarked, without tense marker *-ed* specifying the tense.

Examples:

- 1) XXX *inform* XXX today that 2 orders can't be delivered to bounded zone warehouse through DHL.
- 2) Supplier *send* us criteria, we will work with XXX for alignment.
- 3) Nothing abnormal *occurs* in scanning process.
- 4) We arranged XXX product for trail test last Saturday and *pass* the test.

Chinese expresses temporal relations very differently from English. It does not conjugate the verb to express time relations (Chang, 1987). Temporal relations in Chinese are achieved through various devices beyond morphological level, such as additional words like auxiliary word *le* and time phrases in the sentence such as *last year* (Wong, Li, Yuan & Zhu, 2002). Most often, grammatical cues are absent, and tense depends largely on contextual factors (Liu, Liu & Liu, 2011).

2.3 Serial verb constructions

Serial verb construction (SVC) refers to “a sentence that contains two or more verb phrases or clauses juxtaposed without any marker indicating what their relationship is between them” (Li & Thompson, 1981, p. 594). It is one of the most common sentence types in Chinese (Li & Thompson, 1973).

Examples:

- 1) Asked supplier review their operational process, and *ensure* factory inventory *have* no same issue.
- 2) Customs inspect it and withhold this shipment, which *caused* this shipment *didn't delivery* to XXX in time.
- 3) Corrective action: *assign* XXX as one person *is* responsible for checking XXX during printing.
- 4) There *are* total 4000 turnover pallets *are* broken.

Li & Thompson (1981) classified SVC structures into four types. All the above examples of Chinese English usage fall into the pivotal type where “a noun phrase [...] is simultaneously the subject of the second verb and the direct object of the first verb” (p. 607). Relationships are implicitly encoded in SVC structures, while in Inner Circle English language they have to be explicitly specified with syntactic markings.

Chao (1968) held that SVC structure lays itself on

the coordinative end of a subordinate-coordinate continuum. Brandt (1992) referred to it as pseudo-coordination. Multiple verb phrases involved are not equal; rather, one of them is more central than the others. Noonan (1985) aligned SVC with parataxis to distinguish it from hypotaxis, which, according to Wang (1954), is the most notable difference between Chinese and English. In parataxis language like Chinese, relationships are less encoded in language structures but more context dependent (Müller & Lipenkova, 2009).

2.4 Zero article

According to the grammar rules of Inner Circle English, in most cases a determiner would precede a noun phrase to form a complete noun phrase, clarifying its reference in the context, the most common determiners being the articles *a*, *an*, and *the* (Greenbaum, 1996). The definite article *the*, which denotes information that is already or presumed familiar to the audience, is counted as the most commonly used word in Inner Circle English. However, definite article *the* in Chinese English is largely absent.

Examples:

- 1) *Reason* is DHL has already finished *custom clearance*, *material* now is non-bonded.
- 2) Shipment is scheduled to be picked up this afternoon, and will arrive in *terminal* tomorrow. *Shipment* is located in *central* of Taiwan, thus, it will take 1 day for cartage.
- 3) For Silver support, *supplier* will update inventory to *planner*, *planner* review to provide *supplier* preparation suggestion ...

Master (1997) noted that zero article use is common in English users across the world whose native language does not share the article system. Croft (1990) suggested the economical rule of communication, where people have a natural tendency to express maximum meanings with minimum structures. Moreover, a deeper reason can be found in cultural differences, i. e., the high-context nature of Chinese culture compared with that of the low-context Inner Circle cultures (Hall, 1976), the former relying more on context than structures to specify the reference.

3 CHINESE ENGLISH AS A LINGUA FRANCA FOR BUSINESS COMMUNICATION

3.1 Intra-cultural and inter-cultural communication

Here we classify email communication of the company in case into two categories: intra-cultural communication where they communicate with people within the same Circle like their colleagues and their partners in China and Hong Kong; and inter-cultural communication where they communicate with people from

other Circles such as those from Singapore and America. Such a distinction is made based on the consideration that success in communication, i. e., degree of achievement of understanding, can only be assessed while “simultaneously taking the participants into account” (Kachru Y. & Nelson, 2006, p. 74).

From the analysis, we can see that English usage revealed in the company emails is different in many ways from that of the Inner Circle. We can understand this as the evidence for English to become acculturated and transform itself into a localized variety (ibid) as the result of constant contact with Chinese language and culture. When communicating within cultures, parties involved can understand each other with ease due to shared linguistic and cultural backgrounds. When communicating across cultures, driven by business goals, various parties have learned to accommodate to each other’s differences (Cogo & Dewey, 2006) and communicate effectively across cultures.

3.2 *Effectiveness of Chinese English in inter-cultural communication*

With deviations from the Inner Circle English, an Expanding Circle variety has to be understood correctly to ensure effective communication, which is essential for successful business communication. Kachru Y. and Nelson (2006) explored three dimensions of understandability: intelligibility that refers to the recognition of words, comprehensibility that refers to the recognition of meaning, and interpretability that involves the recognition of the intention. They further suggested that understandability can be checked through interactions and responses between parties involved.

In the same ways, understandability or success of language in business communication can be judged by whether business goals are achieved through interactions. From the dataset we can see that though the language of the Chinese employee’s emails deviates from that of the Inner Circle receivers, it functions well in the company’s routine communication.

3.3 *From norm accepting to norm negotiating*

Under the background that English has become a lingua franca for international communication, Inner Circle English users can no longer claim ownership of the language. As Smith (1992) observed, “being a native speaker does not seem to be as important [for understandability] as being fluent in English and familiar with several different national varieties” (p. 8). We have to realize that intercultural communication is not one-way but is an interactional process between different parties. Where any language user can be foreigner to another variety, no one English variety is better or more understandable than the other, and each country or region can negotiate and decide on where their norms are from (Kachru, Y. & Smith, 2008).

The implications are two-fold. First, for Chinese English users in Expanding Circle, especially when they are using English for communicative purposes, they need to assume a confident stance, accepting differences in their language use as part of their cultural identity rather than language deficiency. They need to be positive “in believing in their ability to function in English” (Kachru Y. & Nelson, 2006). Second, For English users from the other two Circles, they need to accommodate to differences in language use through exposure to the English varieties that they are in contact with (Brown, 1995).

4 CONCLUSION

Based on the analysis of ongoing business emails of an international company based in China, this study focused on exploring Chinese English as a lingua used in business context. Through an analysis of the emails, four salient patterns of Chinese English features are identified, namely, joining complete sentences with commas, absence of inflectional markers for number and tense, serial verb constructions, and zero article use. For the purpose of this study, other less salient patterns are not included.

From a cultural and linguistic analysis we can see that, as the result of contact with the local Chinese language and culture, Chinese English has been established as a nativized and acculturated variety. This is further supported by the success of Chinese English in both intra-cultural and inter-cultural communication of the company. It is also found that there has been a trend for Chinese English to develop from a norm accepting to a norm negotiating variety enjoying its share of ownership of the English language.

Based on the above discussion, it is further suggested that the Chinese English users need to be more confident and positive in their English variety and their ability to function in English, and it is important for parties involved in intercultural communication to develop intercultural competence through exposure to other English varieties.

However, this study is not without limitations. It only selected one company as the case, and the collected data are all short informal messages consisted of one or more paragraphs. This opens to future research into larger scale research in the similar area. It is also possible that richer information such as genre differences across cultures can be explored by analyzing longer and more formal emails.

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