The China English fallacy

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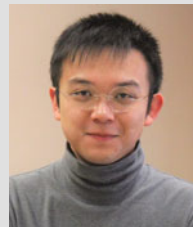Bryant University-Beijing Institute of Technology Zhuhai

A terminology turf war

Over the past decades, the pageantry of selecting the appropriate terminology for representing the Chinese English variety has evolved into a movement promoting the widely celebrated term, China English. In He's (2020: 14) book of *Chinese English in World Englishes: Education and Use in the Professional World*, an old Chinese saying, 'without a legitimate name, without authority to the words', is conjured to justify the rebranding of the Chinese English variety. However, initially, the term 'China English' did not automatically win the bid; many other terms were also pitched for being the representative terminology, including 'Chinese colored English' (Huang, 1988), 'Chinese-style English' (Gui, 1988), 'Sinicized English' (Zhang, 1997; Jin, 2002; Jiang, 2003), and even the widely criticized 'Chinglish' (Wang, 1999; Zhuang, 2000; Qiong & Wolff, 2003) had its day in the sun. Gradually, scholarly endorsements of China English begin to grow. However, one might wonder: What is the uniqueness of English in China that could trigger such decades of efforts to assert the ownership of an English variety through a mere terminological update?

The term Chinese English was voted out mainly because it carries or signals connotation of 'bad English or beginner's English or, at most, an interlanguage which needs to be improved' (Jiang, 2002: 6). The favoring of the term China English over others, especially Chinese English, raises concerns for world Englishes researchers who would regard the term Chinese English as a neutral and disciplinarily consistent identifier of the Chinese English variety (Bolton, 2006; Yiyang, 2019; Xu, 2020). Through the Kachruvian lens of viewing English varieties, Chinese English is terminologically commensurate with other English varieties such as British English, American English, Indian English, Nigerian English,

Japanese English and Korean English, to simply name a few. 'Chinese' is applied to recognize the nativization of English in China. According to Berns (2011: 4), such a process is a 'consequence of [English] contact with Chinese dialect and the social and cultural milieu in which the language is used, learned and taught'. The pejorative connotation attributed to the term Chinese English is a subjective interpretation, as the use of 'Chinese' is simply a descriptor within the framework of designating English varieties in the realm of world Englishes. Plus, there is hardly any well accepted empirical proof that the term Chinese English is utilized for denigration, aggression, or contempt toward its users.

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One of the critical demarcations between Chinese English and China English is that China English puts more emphasis on the linguistic liberation of English in China. The promotion of China English highlights the language variations that are only interpretable to those who are familiar with the social or political contexts. In other words, China English is with the modernization (Adamson, 2002) that showcases the sociolinguistic phenomenon of English in China. Moreover, the decades of political and economic advancement in China have inserted momentum into this terminological innovation. Eventually, the marketization of China English has resulted in the transformation of terminological promotion into a discernible trend, which may be perceived as the China English Movement (CEM) and serves to distinguish China from other countries within the Expanding Circle.

The motivation for advancing the CEM is paralleled with the sociopolitical conditions in China. Cheng (1992: 174) astutely noted that 'English in China largely reflects the sociopolitical situations there. The patterns of the Chinese varieties of English are clear; when China is inward-looking, the English there acquires more Chinese elements; when China is outward-searching, English there is more like the norm in the West'. Promoters of the CEM would cite the so-called globalization and economic development as the driving force for the thriving of China English. Xiaoxia (2006: 43) stated, 'China English now plays a significant role in increasing international understanding and cooperation within the WTO and in the whole world'. It appears that the terminological revival would lead to the elimination of the imaginary stigmatization associated with the old terms. As a linguistic abstraction, China English is surrounded by the motifs of ameliorating language stigmatization and advancing the representation of modernization.

In his historical account of Chinese English research, Xu (2017) presents a four-stage evolution according to respective historical periods. The first stage, occurring from 1980 to 1997, is described as the "Enlightenment Period" (Xu, 2017: 235). During this time, Ge (1980) introduced the concept of China English, which Wang (1991: 3) later elaborated as "English used by the Chinese people in China, based on standard English and having Chinese characteristics." Xu's illustration serves as a seminal elucidation of the advancements made in the field of research pertaining to the Chinese English variety. One key accomplishment during this period is that Wang's definition established three parameters for future China English

promoters: the standardized core of China English, the linguistic variations in China, and the users and functional domains of China English. The second stage, the 'Great Leap Forward Period' (Xu, 2017: 235), takes place from 1998 to 2001. The dramatic flair in the naming of this period echoes with certain truth in the conceptualizing of China English – the research of China English during this period was mainly about different attempts of defining such a term 'with virtually no empirical studies' (Xu, 2017: 235) regarding the linguistic features and sociocultural contexts of China English.

During the 1990s, the baton of conceptualizing China English was passed to the next generation of researchers. A group of scholars (Li, 1993; Jia & Xiang, 1997; Jin, 2002) have contributed their versions of defining China English to this movement. Despite the multiple variations, the parameters Wang (1991) established are still applied in the revisions. Hence the updated definitions could not impart additional conceptual nuances. However, the eagerness to adopt China English as the representative brand for the Chinese English variety demands a platform for the CEM preaching even before locking the draft of defining China English. Kairotically, an optimal platform is presented for the promoters. In Xu's characterization, the CEM enters the 'Renaissance Period' and the 'Open Door Period' (Xu, 2017: 236), in which the world Englishes (WE) approach comes to the center stage. The CEM promoters line up their contentions within the WE theoretical frameworks and emphasize the integration between the legitimization of China English and the adoption of a China English ELT approach. In the fourth stage, a China English-centered pedagogy is placed on the CEM's blueprint. Such an agenda is still in its infancy, in which elaborated pedagogical designs are yet provided. Meanwhile, an assertion toward the suitability of China English to the Chinese classroom is evident in the CEM. According to He (2020: 37), 'it is claimed that the choice of China English as a model for the Chinese classroom is not only feasible but can also be desirable and that such a choice has significant implications for ELT in the Chinese classroom'.

However, I argue that the CEM faces an inevitable theoretical dead-end due to its critical flaws. The first and foremost flaw of the China English movement is the failure to necessitate the rebranding of the Chinese English variety. The terminological update seems to be solely reacting to a linguistic inferiority complex that views English

varieties from a hierarchical perspective; it aims to brand an English variety that reinforces the linguistic stigmatization of expanding circle varieties. Secondly, it can be contended that the advocacy of the China English movement disregards essential sociolinguistic aspects regarding the limited scope of English usage and the differentiation between English users and learners in China.

In previous work, I proposed a restoration of the Kachruvian approach for conceptualizing the Chinese English variety due to the established theoretical frameworks within the Kachruvian paradigm of world Englishes studies. I have also attempted a definition of Chinese English as a 'performance variety of English with restricted functional domains [that] has formal linguistic characteristics displaying the Chineseness resulting from the nativization of English in the Chinese sociocultural context' (Yiyang, 2019: 6). The retainment of Chinese English is preserving the Kachruvian convention which disassociates the work of conceptualizing Chinese English from ideological irrelevancy and perplexing discrepancies. Stabilizing the Kachruvian lens also highlights the fact that Chinese English is an Expanding Circle variety whose uses are largely restricted in functional domains; hence researchers should be acutely aware that depicting the uses and users of English in China is necessary for expanding the scope of understanding Chinese English. More importantly, I also suggest that the Kachruvian approach, proposed by Berns (2011: 8), offers a means of locating diverse established English varieties within a continuum of bilingualism. Within this conceptualization, China English can be conceptualized as a highly proficient variant of Chinese English. Qiong (2004: 27) also notes that different English varieties can be situated on a 'continuum', with Chinese Pidgin English at one end and China English at the other.

The main reason I am hesitating to concur with the adoption of China English is that such a terminological makeover not only heightens the linguistic stigmatization but also further mystifies the very existence of the Chinese English variety (Yiyang, 2019). The CEM's endeavor of validating special treatment for China English will inevitably and unfortunately typecast the English variety in China as a 'unicorn variety' among world Englishes, suggesting that it is seen as a unique and rare phenomenon rather than a naturally occurring variation within the construct of world Englishes. On top of that, the terminological replacement is a contentious sociolinguistic inquiry carrying agendas that echo sociopolitical affairs.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge that the CEM's endeavors have significantly augmented our understanding of the Chinese English variety and its place within the internationalization of English. In particular, the CEM has aided in the elucidation of the linguistic characteristics of Chinese English varieties. Through research and advocacy, the CEM has illuminated the distinctive qualities and evolution of the Chinese English variety, as well as its role in facilitating communication and cultural exchange in China and beyond. However, the fixation on the terminology turf war will unavoidably enfeeble the substantiality of world Englishes studies of English in China.

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