

# Why China English should give way to Chinese English

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## Chinese English: A linguistic perspective

China English or Chinese English? To my mind, the time is ripe for Chinese English to be adopted as the preferred term, or banner, for characterizing the variety of English of a country which has the largest number of users and learners of English in the world. There are sound linguistic and sociolinguistic reasons for this important terminological choice and decision. There is little research on the naming of the multiplicity of Englishes to date. After discussing the theoretical underpinnings of the acts of naming, Seargeant (2010) provides a taxonomy consisting of six clusters of name labels categorized by function (e.g., ESL, EFL, EAL, EIL, ELF), community (e.g., native vs. non-native varieties; immigrant Englishes), history (e.g., indigenized varieties; language-shift Englishes), ecology (e.g., three concentric circles of world Englishes; new Englishes), and structures (e.g., pidgin English, creolized English). The sixth category, which he calls multiplex, is much broader in scope, featuring English as a link language between specific groups transnationally (e.g., World English). After conducting a meta-analysis of 100 research articles written in Chinese by mainland authors between 1980 and 2013, Xu (2017) found that compared with Chinglish and Chinese English, China English is preferred by the majority, but there are signs that change is in the offing:

Although the term China English has dominated the literature on Chinese English research in the past three and a half decades, there has been an increasing awareness and a change of attitude towards Chinese variety of English, and people start disassociating Chinese English with Chinglish. The current literature points to the direction that Chinese English

should be used as a term to refer to the Chinese variety of English on a par with other members of World Englishes. (Xu, 2017: 241; cf. Xu, He & Deterding, 2017)

Linguistically, for a name label with the structural pattern ‘xxx English’, there is a fine semantic distinction between a premodifying noun (e.g., China English, Singapore English) versus its adjectivized form (e.g., Chinese English, Singaporean English). Let us first examine the semantics of the ‘N1 + N2’



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noun phrase (NP). The premodifying N1, a common noun or possessive noun, typically gives the meaning ‘a type of’ N2. Just as a music therapy is a type of therapy while therapy music is a type of music, a summer school takes place only in summer while a girls’ school is for girls only. There is no shortage of contact varieties of English named after the ‘N1 + N2’ pattern. For instance, for hundreds of years the governance and presence of British colonizers in the Indian subcontinent resulted in the spread of English demarcated along vocational lines, such as Butler English, Kitchen English (domestic helpers), and Babu English (used by babus, especially lower-level officials and clerks [McArthur, 2002: 317]). Likewise, in West Africa, sustained contact between English-speaking colonizers and the peoples of Liberia, notably the Kru and Mande, gave rise to Settler English (McArthur, 2002: 272) and Soldier English (McArthur, 2002: 276). In Japan, frequent contact between US forces of occupation and local people after the Second World War popularized a patois called Bamboo English (McArthur, 2002: 370), while the creolized variety used by Aborigines in Australia was self-mockingly labeled Blackfella English (McArthur, 2002: 386). Interestingly, some varieties whose labels are derived from the names of islands or peninsulas simply have the words ‘island’ or ‘peninsula’ truncated (e.g., Bequia English spoken on the Bequia Island in the Caribbean [Williams et al., 2015]; Samaná English, spoken by a black community in the Samaná Peninsula of the Dominican Republic [McArthur, 2002: 240–241]). This seems to be a rather productive naming pattern of new Englishes spoken by inhabitants living on islands, seaports, or other seaborne territories; no attempt is made to adapt an adjectivized form.

China, in reference to the country, is frequently used as a premodifying N1 in many ‘N1 + N2’ collocations. N2 may refer to an animate being or an inanimate entity. A China basher/critic is a person who holds negative views about and frequently voices critique against China. A China expert/insider is someone who knows China in depth and/or inside out. Where N2 refers to an inanimate entity, as in China office/news/story/threat/trade, China is what the entity in question is about (i.e., office dealing with China, news or story about China, threat posed by China, trading activities with China). Notice that in all of these examples, strictly speaking, reference is made to the country but not the Chinese people.

On the other hand, an NP with the ‘Adj + N’ structure is semantically rather different. For the

premodifier ‘Chinese’, core and integral to its meaning is ‘pertaining to the Chinese nation and/or people’. For instance, whereas conceptually Chinese capital (Beijing) and Chinese sovereignty rarely make one think of the Chinese people, one could hardly talk about Chinese culture/heritage/history/tradition/rule without referring to what (at least some of) the Chinese people<sup>1</sup> did or do. By contrast, reference to the country is semantically backgrounded or indirect at best.

Between China English and Chinese English, therefore, if ‘English as used by the Chinese people’ is semantically an indispensable component and conceptually a crucial characteristic of the increasingly indigenized variety in China, there is no question that Chinese English is more suitable.

In short, what is semantically lacking and conceptually wanting in China English – that human connection regarding English being a language of the Chinese people – is built or weaved indubitably into both the denotation and connotation of Chinese English. This is why linguistically speaking, China English should yield its current terminological salience and rightful conceptual space to Chinese English.

Another compelling and closely related argument may be found along the sociolinguistic dimension. For users of an indigenized variety, ownership is an important and indispensable attribute. Where ownership of English matters, the choice between a noun form and its derived adjectivized form for the premodifier is crucial: whereas the connotation ‘pertaining to the Chinese nation and/or people’ is lexico-grammatically indexed in the adjectivized form (Chinese), such a people-focused connotation is missing in the noun form (China). This is clearly evidenced by the fact that all but one of the traditional and widely known ENL varieties have an adjectivized form of the territory as the premodifier:

ENL varieties: American English (cf. General American), Australian English, British English (English English, Irish English, Scottish English, Welsh English), Canadian English, New Zealand English

Of these ENL varieties, New Zealand English appears to be an exception, but this is because the derivation of an adjectivized form from a compound noun like New Zealand is blocked. Many ESL varieties, including “lesser-known varieties”, contain a premodifying compound noun (e.g., Cayman Islands English, Cook Islands English, Dominica Creole English, New Guinea Pidgin English [Crystal, 2003: 57–60]; South Seas English and Pacific Jargon English in Melanesia

[McArthur, 2002: 397]; Channel Island English, Falkland Islands English, Honduras/Bay Islands English, Tristan da Cunha English [Schreier et al., 2010]; Irish Traveller English, Palmerston Island English [Williams et al., 2015]).

The structural pattern ‘xxx English’ with a pre-modifying adjectivized form is also shared by the majority of ESL varieties:

*ESL varieties:* Bahamian English, Bangladeshi English, Barbadian English, Bermudian English, Gambian English, Ghanaian English, Indian English, Jamaican English, Kenyan English, Liberian English, Malawian English, Malaysian English, Maltese English, Namibian English, Nepalese English, Nigerian English, Pakistani English, Palauan English, Philippine English (Filipino English), Puerto Rican English, (American) Samoan English, Sierra Leonean English, Singapore(an) English, South African English, Sri Lankan English, Tanzanian English, Tongan English, Trinidadian English, Ugandan English, Zambian English, Zimbabwean English

Of the long list of ESL varieties listed here, Singapore(an) English seems to be the only exception, in that some researchers may have a predilection for the shorter, three-syllable version. While both variants are encountered, the shorter version seems to be getting more and more prevalent (e.g., after commenting on terminological variation, McArthur refers to the national variety of the island state as Singapore English, [2002: 339–341]). Still, where the longer, five-syllable version is used (e.g., Mesthrie & Bhatt, 2008), hardly any objection could be raised. This in turn might well be the motivation and explanation: so long as referential identity is assured, using the shorter version can save two syllables and some space every time that national variety is invoked. Much the same ‘principle of economy’ argument may help explain the popular preference for Hong Kong English rather than Hong Konger/Hong Kongese English, whose function vacillates between a typical ESL or EFL variety (Li, 2018). Other similar examples include Fiji(an) English and Gibraltar(ian) English (compare Gibraltarian English [Levey, 2008]; Gibraltar English [Levey, 2015]). Where no additional syllable is entailed, expanding the immediately preceding noun form into an adjectivized form seems very common, as in Puerto Rican English and Sri Lankan English. Between Sierra Leone English and Sierra Leonean English, we may observe whether the shorter

version will win out over time. In sum, where the adjectivized premodifying ‘xxx’ is felt to be heavy and the linguistic ‘cost’ is marked, the principle of economy – i.e., preference given to the shorter noun form – may override the semantic concern of reference being made to the country or territory but not its people.

What about EFL varieties where English has no official language status? Where English is not used spontaneously by the locals for intra-ethnic communication, ownership of English is strictly speaking a non-issue. This is reflected lexico-grammatically in the relative paucity of or dispreference for the structural pattern ‘xxx English’ (e.g.; \*Argentina/Argentinean English; \*France/French English; \*Vietnam/Vietnamese English); instead, a post-modifying prepositional phrase ‘in xxx’ (i.e. ‘English in xxx’) is preferred, for example, English in Argentina/France/Vietnam.<sup>2</sup>

The term China English was first coined by Chinese scholars over 40 years ago (Xu, 2017), shortly after the ideological baggage of English being the language of the imperialists and enemy of the Chinese people was put aside strategically since the late 1970s in favor of ‘learning from the West’ while the whole nation embarked on a great march towards the Four Modernizations as a higher-order national objective (cf. Li, 2003). Gradually English was made an integral part of the school curriculum, beginning with its introduction at the onset of secondary education (age around 11 or 12) nationwide. It did not take long for English to become an important school subject and later a requirement for university admission. In the early 1980s, a debate caught on among mainland scholars concerning what to do with miscellaneous non-standard lexico-grammatical features produced by young Chinese learners nationwide, and how to distinguish poor translations and unidiomatic-sounding ‘interlanguage’ from massive numbers of sorely needed standard English terms specific to New China (e.g., the Four Modernizations, the Long March, the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution). As the numbers of learners and users of English were relatively small during the 1980s and 1990s, using China English in reference to characteristics of China-specific usages in contradistinction to error-prone Chinglish was understandable and reasonable. Chinglish, a portmanteau coinage derived from Chinese English, was widely held to be synonymous with Chinese English probably for that reason. It was widely felt that a term like China English was needed to avoid confusion with sundry non-standard features in many EFL learners’ interlanguage outputs (see, e.g., Eaves, 2011).

Compared with the 1980s over four decades ago, the numbers of users and learners of English in China today has mushroomed from hundreds of thousands to hundreds of millions. Even though English has no official language status in China, in view of the prominence of the de facto global lingua franca in the mainland's curriculum and education system from primary to tertiary levels, plus its spontaneous use by experienced and expert Chinese users of English regularly for work-related purposes, to continue adhering to China English would hardly do justice to the myriad creative and productive ways English is learned and used by multiple millions of educated bilingual speakers of English. Increasingly, such an anachronism looms large like an elephant in the room. To bring home the argument that English is now a language of the Chinese people, there is nothing simpler to stop using China English and start embracing Chinese English.

### Notes

- 1 Or China's people, but not \*China people.  
 2 Notable exceptions include Japanese English, Korean English, and Taiwanese English (Kachru, Kachru & Nelson, 2006: 123–125, 372).

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