China English: Attitudes, legitimacy, and the native speaker construct

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Is China English becoming accepted as a legitimate variety of English?

Introduction

China English (CE) is the fastest growing variety of English in the world. While some estimate that there are between 200–400 million learners of English in mainland China, other researchers put the numbers between 440–650 million (cf. Bolton & Graddol, 2012; He & Zhang, 2010). Although not all learners of English in China will become active users of English, the numbers above are staggering, especially if we consider that the population of the United States is currently 319 million (United States Census Bureau, 2014). As Kirkpatrick (2007: 151) notes, CE is 'soon likely to be the most commonly spoken variety of English in Asia'. One could argue that, judging by the numbers given above, CE will become the most commonly spoken variety of English in the *world*.

Despite the rapid growth of CE, only a few studies have examined attitudes towards CE, particularly in terms of whether CE is perceived as a legitimate variety of English by speakers of English in China, whether an individual can be a native speaker (NS) of CE, and why these attitudes are held. The current study therefore seeks to address these issues via a survey study conducted with 123 tertiary students from China. The results offer important insights into how CE is defined, perceived and used by speakers of English in China.

Literature review

The past decade has seen an increase in the recognition and acceptance of CE. While early research on CE (see Hu, 2004; Kirkpatrick & Xu, 2002) found that few tertiary students wanted to speak English with a Chinese accent, or had even heard of CE, later research found more positive attitudes towards CE. He and Li (2009) found that the majority of their respondents had heard of CE and believed that one day CE would exist as a legitimate variety of English. However, these respondents still preferred an exonormative model of English pronunciation. He and Zhang (2010) surveyed college teachers in China and found that the majority felt that a CE accent was acceptable as long as the speech was comprehensible.

While it appears that attitudes towards CE in China have become more favorable in recent years, as demonstrated by the research findings

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discussed above, it is not clear *why* speakers of English in China do or do not accept CE as a legitimate variety of English, and what reasons and criteria they give to justify the lack of its legitimacy. The current study also probes the construct of the NS in light of the emergence of CE as a variety of English. As world Englishes researchers (see Bolton, 2008; Schneider, 2010) note, NS definitions are becoming increasingly problematic as we are observing shifts in the way English is learned and used in both outer and expanding circle countries. The current study probes the question of whether a person can be a native speaker of CE. It is likely that when new Englishes, such as CE, gain acceptance, speakers of these Englishes may begin to view English as 'theirs', rather than as the purview of speakers of inner circle Englishes. As a result, the view of who can be a native speaker of English may expand from an inner-circle English norm to speakers of world Englishes, such as CE (see Singh, 1998).

Methodology

The current study was conducted in October 2014 at a tertiary institute in Hong Kong with a large population of students from China. An online questionnaire was developed, with a total of 123 respondents completing the survey. The survey consisted of demographic questions and closed- and open-ended questions addressing the following three research questions:

1. What attitudes do speakers of English in China hold towards CE?
2. Do they perceive CE to be a real variety of English? Why or why not?
3. Do they believe a person can be a NS of CE? Why or why not?

The data analyses provide a summary of the main findings from the closed-ended questions, along with patterns from the open-ended questions. For the open-ended questions, each respondent could write as much as they wanted and therefore some participants' responses were coded for multiple answers. Finally, for a number of questions, responses were analyzed in terms of whether the respondents indicated that they spoke CE in order to determine whether attitudes towards CE differed depending on whether the respondent was a speaker of CE.

The data were initially coded by the author before another researcher independently checked the author's coding of the answers to the open-ended questions. The raters were in agreement for the majority of the codes, with an inter-rater reliability of 97%. In the few cases when the raters did not agree on the coding, a third rater was asked to code the responses.

Results

Table 1 provides an overview of the demographics of the participants in the current study. The majority of the respondents were female, between 21 and 25 years old, and full-time students in postgraduate programmes. Nearly three quarters had learned English in China in primary school. The respondents came from every region of mainland China, with 20 out of the 22 provinces[1] represented as well as the municipalities of Beijing, Chongqing, Shanghai, and Tianjin, and the autonomous regions of Guangxi, Xinjiang Uyghur and Ningxia Hui. The diversity of the geographical (and thus linguistic) backgrounds of the respondents helps ensure the responses reflect the attitudes of speakers of English across China.

In order to examine the acceptance of CE as well as the native speaker construct in relation to CE, the following questions were asked:

> Why is or isn't China English a 'real' variety of English?
> Why can or can't a person be a native speaker of China English?
> Why do you or don't you think you speak CE?

Responses to the first set of questions were coded for patterns, which are presented as categories in the Tables 2, 3, and 4. As participants could write as much as they wanted for each question, some responses were coded for multiple categories. Percentages were calculated based on the number of respondents within each group that gave a similar answer (e.g. 13 out of 49 respondents, or 29%, who said CE was a real variety of English stated it 'has its own unique accent of English').

Of the 123 respondents, 37% agreed that CE was a real variety of English, 39% stated it was not real, and 24% of respondents stated they were unsure. The main reason respondents felt that CE was a legitimate variety of English was that CE had 'many speakers' (38%). The second reason was the linguistic features, and in particular, the accent (29%), vocabulary/expressions (27%), and syntax (9%) unique to CE.

There was less agreement among those who stated that CE was not a real variety of English. 19% felt it was a learner variety while 17% stated that English was not an official language in China and that there were too many different kinds of

Table 1: Demographics of the participants

Demographic		Number	Percentage
Gender	Male	28	23%
	Female	95	77%
Age	18–20	34	28%
	21–25	78	63%
	26–30	7	5%
	31–35	2	2%
	36–40	2	2%
Degree	Undergraduate	34	28%
	Postgraduate	89	72%
Age of beginning English learning	Birth	1	1%
	2–3 years	5	4%
	4–5 years	12	10%
	6–7 years	31	25%
	8–9 years	29	24%
	10–11 years	31	25%
	12–15 years	14	11%

Table 2: Why is or isn't China English a 'real' variety of English?

Reasons	Yes it is real n = 45 (37%)	No it is not real n = 48 (39%)	Unsure n = 30 (24%)
Linguistic features			
Unique accent of English	13 (29%)	7 (14%)	3 (10)
Does not have its own grammar, words	0 (0%)	3 (6%)	2 (7%)
Different syntax	4 (9%)	1 (2%)	0 (0%)
New words/expressions from Chinese into English	12 (27%)	2 (4%)	1 (3%)
International acceptability and intelligibility			
Accepted internationally	6 (13%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Intelligible	6 (13%)	0 (0%)	1 (3%)
Learner variety	0 (0%)	9 (19%)	7 (23%)
Environment			
English not official language in China	0 (0%)	8 (17%)	1(3%)
Too many different kinds of English in China	0 (0%)	8 (17%)	4 (13%)
Many speakers of CE	17 (38%)	0 (0%)	1 (3%)
Other			
Not sure	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	11 (37%)

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Table 3: Why can or can't a person be a native speaker of China English?			
Reasons	Yes n = 59 (48%)	No n = 35 (28%)	Unsure n = 29 (24%)
Linguistic features			
Has a unique accent	2 (3%)	1 (3%)	0 (0%)
Influenced by Chinese	10 (17%)	2 (6%)	1 (3%)
Environment			
Born and raised in China (CE environment)	21 (36%)	2 (6%)	2 (7%)
Learned English in an educational context	12 (20%)	0 (0%)	1 (3%)
Parents speak CE	9 (15%)	0 (0%)	1(3%)
Many dialects in China so no 'one' English	0 (0%)	4 (11%)	2 (7%)
Many speakers of CE	5 (8%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Proficiency and use			
Advanced English proficiency	6 (10%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Lack of proficiency in English	0 (0%)	4 (11%)	3 (10%)
Not used often	0 (0%)	4 (11%)	1 (3%)
History and status			
Not mother tongue in China	0 (0%)	3 (9%)	2 (7%)
Not official language in China	0 (0%)	3 (9%)	0 (0%)
Doesn't exist	0 (0%)	10 (29%)	3 (10%)
Not sure	2 (3%)	0 (0%)	12 (41%)

English in China for there to be one CE. Finally, respondents who said they were unsure whether CE was a real variety or not stated they were unsure as to the reason (37%), followed by them perceiving it to be a learner variety (23%).

Respondents were also asked if a person could be a NS of CE. Table 3 presents these answers to this question. Nearly half of the respondents (48%) agreed that a person could be a NS, while 28% stated 'No' and 24% were unsure. The major reason respondents gave as to why a person could be a NS of CE related to the environment, with 36% stating that if one was born and/or raised in China, one could be a NS of CE. Teacher/educational (20%) and parental (15%) influences were also commonly cited.

The primary reason for why respondents felt that one could not be a NS of CE related to the history and status of CE, with 29% of these respondents stating that CE did not exist. Some respondents (11%) also stated that since there were many dialects in China, one CE could not exist. Interestingly, this response does not disagree with the possibility of

CE existing, only that *one* variety could not exist due to the different types of English in China. A second section of the questionnaire was designed to examine the extent to which the speakers themselves spoke CE; these results are outlined in Table 4. Nearly half (46%) of the respondents stated they spoke CE, while 19% stated they did not speak CE, and 35% were unsure. Linguistic features were the major reasons respondents felt that they spoke CE. They felt their English had a Chinese influence (33%) and a unique accent (26%).

The reason respondents did not feel they spoke CE was due to proficiency and use, as 43% of these respondents stated that they tried hard to improve their English so they did not speak CE. Those that were unsure about speaking CE also cited proficiency: 16% stated they tried hard to learn English so they would not speak CE and 12% stated they spoke another variety of English.

The 57 participants who said they spoke CE were asked if they liked speaking CE. Answers to this question are presented in Figure 1. The majority (54%) said they did not like speaking CE, while

Table 4: Why do you or don't you think you speak CE?

Reasons	Yes, Do n = 57 (46%)	No, Don't n = 23 (19%)	Unsure n = 43 (35%)
Linguistic features			
Unique accent	15 (26%)	0 (0%)	3 (7%)
Chinese influenced English	19 (33%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Environment			
Born and raised in China	8 (14%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Parents speak CE	1 (2%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Teachers speak CE	12 (20%)	0 (0%)	1 (2%)
Friends speak CE	2 (4%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Proficiency and use			
I try hard to improve my English so I don't speak CE	0 (0%)	10 (43%)	7 (16%)
I speak another variety of English	0 (0%)	3 (13%)	5 (12%)
Not sure	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	14 (33%)

26% said they liked speaking CE, and 19% said they were unsure. The main reason respondents liked speaking CE was that it was intelligible (47%), they used it for fun with friends (27%), and it represented their Chinese identity (20%). Those that did not like speaking CE stated that it was not attractive (23%), intelligible (23%), or standard (19%), and that they wanted to speak English like a NS (19%). Those that were unsure whether they liked speaking CE or not also stated that they wanted to speak like a NS (27%), though they used CE for fun with friends (18%).

Participants were also asked to give their attitudes towards CE based on a set of closed-choice questions, which were also analyzed according to whether the speaker spoke CE or not in order to determine whether speaking CE affected their opinions of CE. The results are presented in Figure 2. For those that stated they spoke CE, the majority (74%) felt that it represented the English spoken
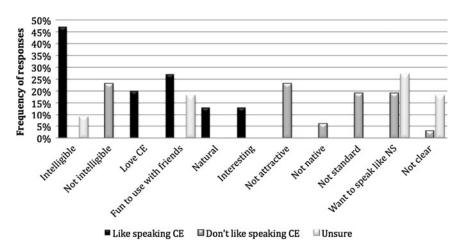
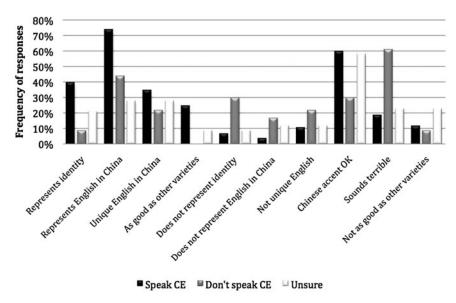

Figure 1: Reasons for liking or not liking speaking CE

Figure 2: Attitudes towards CE

in China and that it represented their identity (40%). These respondents also felt it was a unique variety of English in China (35%) and that a CE accent was not a big deal, as long as the speaker's English is understandable (60%) and nearly 25% felt it was as good as any other variety of English.

Interestingly, nearly half of those that stated they did not speak CE also felt that CE represents the English spoken in China and over 30% felt that a CE accent was not a big deal if the speaker's English was understandable. However, these respondents perceived CE more negatively than those who stated they spoke CE, as over 60% of those that did not speak CE thought a CE accent sounded 'terrible', compared to only 20% of those who said they spoke CE. In addition, over 30% felt it did not represent their identity and 22% felt it was not a unique variety of English in China. Those who said they were unsure about speaking CE had positive attitudes towards CE for the most part, with 58% stating that a CE accent was not a big deal if the speaker's English was understandable, and 28% stating that it represents the English spoken in China and is a unique variety of English.

Discussion

This study confirms the findings from previous research (cf. He & Li, 2009; He & Zhang, 2010) that attitudes towards CE in China have become more positive across time. The majority of the

respondents believed that CE represents the English spoken in China and that a CE accent is not a big deal if the person's speech is intelligible. Over a third believed that it is a unique variety of English in China, and over a quarter believed it represents their identity. Over a half also believed it was normal to speak English with a Chinese accent. More negative attitudes were expressed about the linguistic features of CE, with over a third perceiving it to be ungrammatical and nearly half agreeing that CE sounds 'like the speaker has not learned "correct" English'. This finding – the division between positive attitudes towards the *status* of the variety vs. negative attitudes towards the *linguistic features* of CE – indicates that some speakers of English in China are experiencing 'linguistic schizophrenia' (Kachru, 1983). On the one hand, they accept CE's existence and believe it represents the English in China, but on the other hand, they view the linguistic features of CE negatively, most likely due to a continued comparison of CE's features to those of 'native' varieties of English. Interestingly, this has also been found for speakers of Hong Kong English (see Groves, 2011; Hansen Edwards, 2015). There is also a divergence in how the respondents view linguistic features of CE. Those that believe CE is a real variety of English view the features of CE as innovations while those who do not view CE as real view them as errors, to use Bamgbose's (1998) terms.

Another finding is the schism between accepting CE and speaking CE. While most of the

Table 5: Defining a native speaker

Davies (2008)	This study
1. NS by birth (that is, by early childhood exposure)	1. Born and raised in China (learned English in CE environment)
2. NS by virtue of being a native user	2. Learned English through education
3. NS (or native speaker-like) by being an exceptional learner	3. Speakers of English in China speak China English (not other varieties of English)
4. NS through education in the target-language medium	4. Parents speak CE or Chinese
5. NS through long residence in the adopted country	5. Speaks English with advanced proficiency
	6. Frequent use of English/early age of learning/ unique accent

respondents were generally accepting of CE, very few actually wanted to speak it. There also appears to be a relationship between speaking CE and attitudes towards CE. Speakers of CE were much more likely to agree that it represented their identity and that it was as good as another variety of English, and were much less likely to have negative perceptions about the linguistic features of CE, while the reverse was true for non-speakers of CE. As these findings illustrate, perceptions about CE may depend on whether the respondents speak CE or not.

Surprisingly, the construct of the NS of English was rarely evoked in the discussions of CE. In response to why speakers of CE did not like speaking CE, only a few respondents stated CE was not the 'standard' and said they wanted to speak like NSs and of those who were unsure, only three respondents wanted to speak like a NS. However, while speakers of English in China may not directly refer to inner circle norms in their discussion of CE, it is clear that for many, CE is a learner variety and that the features of CE are errors, rather than markers of a Chinese identity, as noted above.

The study also found that whether the respondents spoke CE affected their attitudes towards the legitimacy of CE. Of the respondents who said CE was a real variety of English, nearly half (49%) spoke CE. In contrast, of those who said CE was not a real variety of English, the majority (61%) did not speak CE. The study also found that speaking CE had an effect on perceptions of NSs. The majority of those that spoke CE said one could be a NS of CE, while a large percentage (39%) of those that did not speak CE stated that one could *not* be a NS of CE.

The answers from those respondents who stated that one could be a NS of CE were analyzed to determine which criteria respondents employed to define a NS of CE. These criteria are compared with the summary of different views of what a NS is by Davis (2008), and presented in Table 5.

The criteria the respondents use to define NS are similar to those employed in most applied linguistics research: environment, education, proficiency, and age of learning. The criteria themselves, therefore, are not necessarily different. It is *how* the criteria are defined that differs. The respondents stated that beginning to learn English at an early age was one reason why one could be a NS of English. Traditionally, 'early age' is defined as 'birth' or 'early childhood' but for the respondents, age of English learning is typically related to education as the majority started learning English in primary school. The respondents also stated that English education was a reason why CE could be a native language. For the majority of the respondents, English would not be a medium of instruction for all courses, but rather a subject taken daily or several times a week. Environment was another criterion; which for the respondents refers to the fact that they are living in an environment of CE. Proficiency is a particularly important definition of a NS, as NS proficiency is often used as a yardstick with which to assess the language of 'learners', typically to determine deficiencies or errors. However, the respondents defined proficiency as 'the ability to use the language well', which is a more appropriate definition of proficiency in a world English context.

While some researchers argue that the NS construct is obsolete (cf. Wang, 2012), I would argue

that the construct is so ingrained in the psyche of the language learner that it is difficult for users of English to ignore. Instead, the construct has been claimed and redefined in two ways. Firstly, NS of *what*? Traditionally, the implication of NS is an inner circle English, but now speakers of English in outer and expanded circle countries are claiming the 'NSness' of their own variety of English. According to the respondents, their 'nativeness' is 'nativeness' of CE, which is different from the 'nativeness' of another variety of English.

The second way in which the NS construct has been changed is in terms of what proficiency one has to attain, and most importantly, *how* (against what norm?) this proficiency is measured. Traditional NS proficiency is measured against an inner circle, typically *monolingual*, norm whereas for most new Englishes, speakers are typically *multilingual*, and their competency in English cannot be measured against a norm or model that is not relevant or indigenous to the context in which the language is spoken.

Conclusion

While this study was small-scale as only 123 speakers of English were surveyed, the level of representation of the speakers in terms of regions of China provides some indication of the attitudes towards CE across China. The current study provides confirmation of the changing attitudes towards CE and further explores how speakers of CE and non-speakers of CE differ in their views of CE, as well as *why* respondents hold these opinions. There is no doubt that CE is gaining recognition and acceptance within CE, particularly by those who state that they speak CE, and that the status of English is changing in China, from an exonormative language, to one of China's own. With the change of the status of English in China comes a change in the status of the NS construct, which this study shows is undergoing redefinition in China. As the findings from the current study illustrate, further research is needed on the NS construct in light of world Englishes, particularly among those who speak a new English such as CE, in order to examine how this construct is being claimed and redefined by speakers of English around the world.

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