



The Feature and Future of Chinglish

ลักษณะทางภาษาและอนาคตของภาษาอังกฤษแบบจีน

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Abstract

This article aims to study the features, future, and position of Chinglish in modern world divided into five major parts which are demonstrated as follows: (1) Introduction (the making of world Englishes) (2) the history of Chinglish (3) the unique language features of Chinglish (4) Chinglish through the perspective of the outsider, and (5) the future of Chinglish in modern world. The understanding acquired from this study would expand the readers' vision concerning varieties of English, world Englishes, and particularly the development and an introduction of Chinglish to the world. Moreover, the very special characters and elements of Chinglish for example, phonology, lexical, and syntax are portrayed. In addition, the display of strange authentic Chinglish signs and example of food names are declared with Chinese character, Hanyu Pinyin, and the explanation of their errors. As a final point, the continued existence of Chinglish is discussed and anticipated based on the social and economic explanations.

Keywords: Chinglish; world Englishes; language feature

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บทคัดย่อ

บทความนี้มีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อศึกษาอนาคต และสถานภาพของภาษาอังกฤษแบบจีนในโลกยุคปัจจุบัน โดยแบ่งการนำเสนอออกเป็น 5 ส่วน ได้แก่ (1) บทนำซึ่งว่าด้วยความเป็นมาของภาษาอังกฤษตระกูลต่าง ๆ ในโลก (2) ประวัติของภาษาอังกฤษแบบจีน (3) ลักษณะพิเศษทางภาษาของภาษาอังกฤษแบบจีน (4) ภาษาอังกฤษแบบจีนในสายตาของบุคคลภายนอก และ (5) อนาคตของภาษาอังกฤษแบบจีนในโลกยุคปัจจุบัน ทั้งนี้ ผู้อ่านจะได้รับความรู้และความเข้าใจเกี่ยวกับความหลากหลายของภาษาอังกฤษ รวมทั้งภาษาอังกฤษตระกูลต่าง ๆ โดยเฉพาะอย่างยิ่ง วิวัฒนาการและการเกิดภาษาอังกฤษแบบจีน นอกจากนี้ยังได้กล่าวถึงลักษณะพิเศษและองค์ประกอบพื้นฐานของภาษาอังกฤษแบบจีน อาทิเช่น สัทวิทยา คำศัพท์ และวากยสัมพันธ์ เป็นต้น บทความนี้ยังได้ยกตัวอย่างป้ายประกาศที่ใช้ในเหตุการณ์จริงรวมถึงเมนูอาหารที่สะกดด้วยภาษาอังกฤษแบบจีนที่มีลักษณะเฉพาะตัวทางภาษา โดยแสดงอยู่ในรูปแบบของตัวอักษรจีนและพินอิน นอกจากนี้บทความยังได้อธิบายสาเหตุที่ใช้ภาษาอังกฤษแบบจีนอย่างไม่ถูกต้องตามหลักภาษา ในตอนท้ายบทความมีการอภิปรายและคาดการณ์อนาคตของภาษาอังกฤษแบบจีน โดยคำอธิบายดังกล่าวอ้างอิงถึงลักษณะของสังคมและเศรษฐกิจเป็นพื้นฐาน

คำสำคัญ: ภาษาอังกฤษแบบจีน; ภาษาอังกฤษตระกูลต่าง ๆ ในโลก; ลักษณะทางภาษา



Introduction: The Making of World

Englishes

There are numerous varieties of languages used to serve multiple purposes of communication in a wide range of arenas, such as business, education, politics, military, and social media, and English, which is considered an international language, is the most widespread. “Englishes” around the world are also currently used and play crucial roles in the exchange of ideas between people who both are and are not English natives. It is likely that the most widespread Englishes applied today are British and American English; however, certain countries have created their own, unique English-based pattern of language elements. Moreover, some countries use English as a second language or foreign language. All in all, it is observed that there is a wide variety of Englishes used in today’s world. In general, varieties of English can be classified along several dimensions, for example, historical expansion, language shift, language contact,

and region, such as national entities. Based on those reasons, different types of Englishes are established and applied around the globe (Seimund, 2013, p. 7).

Generally speaking, Englishes around the world can be categorized into three major types. First is English as a Native Language (ENL), which is spoken and passed down as the mother language of the mainstream population of native speakers. ENL is used in the United Kingdom, the United States of America, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. Second is English as a Second Language (ESL), which is intensely rooted in historical explanations and is used for domestic functions within a country, for instance, in education, business, legal system, and politics. ESL is normally used in postcolonial countries such as Uganda, India, Nigeria, and Malaysia. The third is English as a foreign language (EFL), which is generally taught in educational system, and people use it for its international functions, but it usually does not have any internal functions (Schneider, 2011, p. 30).



In Japan, for example, children will study English at school for the same reasons as children in the UK study German or French. In this situation, people learn English not because they desire to use it in their daily life but as a valuable tool for learning about the cultures of English-speaking countries or traveling abroad (Seargeant & Swann, 2012, p. 27).

Generally speaking, the Three Circle Model represents the classification of ENL, ESL, and EFL speakers. This model portrays three overlapping circles which are labeled 'Inner Circle,' 'Outer Circle,' and 'Expanding Circle.' The Inner Circle signifies the USA, UK, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, regarded as 'norm providing' in their projection of received norms of language use. The Outer Circle is considered 'New Englishes,' that is to say, 'norm-developing,' which means developing its own norms individually from the Inner Circle. The Outer Circle includes India, Singapore, Malaysia, Tanzania, and Pakistan, for instance. The

Expanding Circle (Taiwan, Japan, Nepal, USSR, and China, for example) is 'norm-dependent' in that it looks to the Inner Circle to provide such norms. Obviously, with increased globalization, greater numbers of English speakers tend to be found in every corner of the world; as a result, the number of those people in EFL countries grew (Galloway & Rose, 2015, p. 17), especially among English-speaking population in Chinese-speaking countries and territories, such as the Republic of China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Singapore (Wikipedia, 2018). The three circles can be illustrated as follows, in Figure 1:

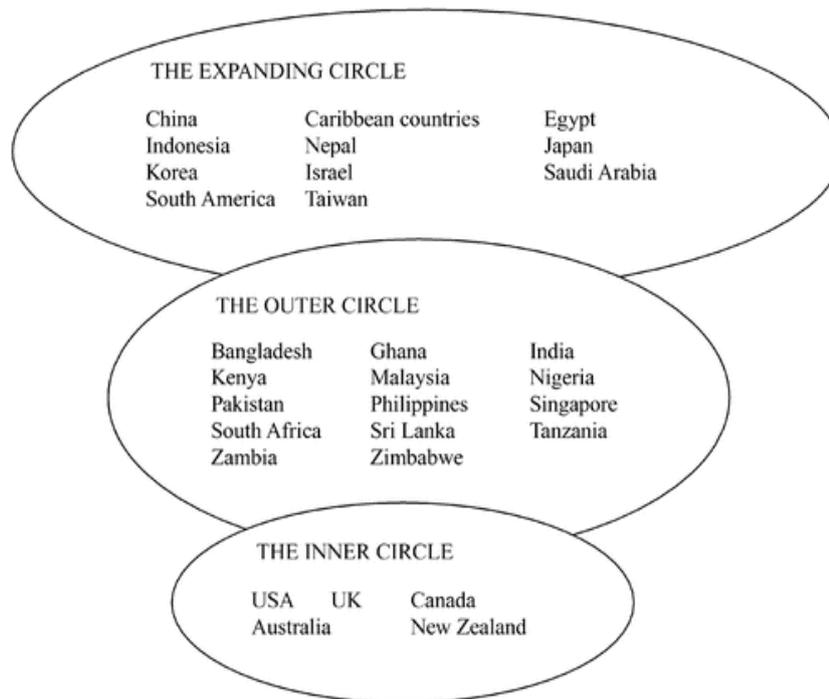


Figure 1: Kachru's Three Circle Model

Source: https://www.researchgate.net/figure/309726946_fig1_Figure-1-Kachru%27s-Three-Circle-model-Bhatt-530-Adapted-from-Kachru

The History of Chinglish

Initially, English is the language spoken by people who live in Great Britain, the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and some other countries (Sinclair, 2000, p. 548); in contrast, 'Chinglish' is a hybrid of the

Chinese and English language used by people who speak Chinese as a mother language (Chinglish, 2018). According to the online Oxford dictionary, Chinglish can be informally understood as a mixture of Chinese and English language, particularly a variety of



English used by speakers of Chinese, integrating some Chinese terminology or constructions (*English Oxford living dictionary*, 2018). Moreover, this term is normally applied to hard-to-understand, senseless, or ungrammatical English in Chinese contexts. The Chinese equivalent of Chinglish is *Zhōngshì Yīngyǔ* (中式英语). It can be compared with other interlanguage varieties of English, for example Singlish (in Singapore), Spanglish (in Spain), Runglish (in Russian), and Tinglish (in Thai). Chinglish also signifies written or spoken English influenced by the Chinese. However, in Hong Kong, Macau, and Guangdong, the term “Chinglish” appears special since it refers chiefly to Cantonese-influenced English.

The history of Chinglish can be traced back to the 17th century, which was a time of trading between Great Britain and China, and Chinglish was introduced as a tool for business communication. At that time, Chinese business people learned English by means of interaction with foreigners and they made up English

basic words and sentences with Chinese language structures. During the 1980’s, the Chinese government commenced to open China’s doors to the outside world, helping China connect to other countries for the tasks of business and politics. Consequently, more and more Chinese people began to learn English. During the Olympic Games hosted by China in 2008, Chinglish public signs emerged almost everywhere on roadways, public places, and commercial areas, but its language features were bizarre and improper. This issue attracted global attention, which made the Chinese government decide to consider whether ‘Chinglish’ should be preserved or eliminated to save the image of the country (Yeung, Brown, & Lee, 2012, p. 127).

Features of Chinglish possesses some unique language features. Some scholars criticized it as a type of broken and disgraceful language rather than linguistically revitalizing. Moreover, it has been related to surprising development and restricted



self-awareness. It is observed that Chinglish has linguistic features that are different from normative English at a linguistic level, including phonology, lexicon, syntax, and discourse.

Unique Language Features of Chinglish

In terms of linguistics, Chinglish is an inter-language between the native and the target languages used by English learners of the Chinese when they have not mastered standard English (Xu, He, & Deterding, 2017). David Compared with other English varieties, it is obvious that Chinglish has its own exceptional language features.

At the phonological level, for instance, ‘chip’ and ‘cheap’ have the same pronunciation because Chinglish does not distinguish between certain vowel elements since they don’t exist in Chinese. Therefore, there is no difference between the two sounds for Chinglish speakers. Another example of inaccurate pronunciation in Chinglish is found in the words “temple” and “temper.”

These two words could be pronounced as “tem-po” or “tem-pa” (Baggio, 2015). Likewise, Chinese people tend to stress the last sound of a word and produce an extra syllable for instance, “and” becomes “an-deu.” Furthermore, Chinese people simply replace the *th* sound, which doesn’t exist in the Chinese language, with an *s* sound. In addition, Chinese people have a tendency to add an extra *g* at the end. Hence, Monday becomes “Mongday,” London becomes “Longdon,” and wonder becomes “wongder.” Last but not least, some Chinese people are likely to take the short *i* sound and turn it into an *ee* sound. For instance, fish becomes “feesh,” and bin becomes “been.” Since communication depends on the combination of sounds and phrases, sentences, and assignment of meaning, it is apparent that poor pronunciation of English words creates the special characteristics of Chinglish pronunciation, which then distorts the interpretation of listeners.



At the lexical level, Chinglish expresses itself by the use of many approaches for example, transliteration and loan translations. The former has brought several stimulating words from the Chinese into English. Speakers know how to combine the two because of pinyin (the standard system of Romanized spelling for transliterating Chinese). Today, It can be considered that several words and phrases in Chinglish may be known among English speakers; for example, gongfu (功夫) means skill; jiaozi (饺子) means dumpling; wushu (武术) means self-defense; yuan (元) means currency unit; doufu (豆腐) means bean curd; and guanxi (关系) means relations. In terms of loan translations, some Chinese words have been interpreted directly into English. This occurrence can be found in several compound words, including bean curd, red bean, and teacup.

At the syntactic level, Chinglish speakers use a different structure and order to make sentences. For English speakers, a

typical sequence is subject → predicate → object → adverbial. Conversely, the Chinese sequence is subject → adverbial → predicate → object. As a result, Chinese speakers have a tendency to leave the most significant information at the back of the sentence, whereas English speakers express it at the front.

On top of that, in English, there are many English sentences with the pronoun “it” as empty subjects, but this kind of pronoun does not occur in Chinese. For example, “It struck twelve o’clock just now” would be, in Chinglish, “The clock struck twelve o’clock just now.” It can be said that Chinese has a habit of presenting an idea in the indirect way. On the other hand, English is much more frequently made up with three steps: first, say what you are going to say; then, say it; and lastly, say what you have said. It is called a linear thinking pattern (Meng, 2007, p. 19).

Chinese culture has its distinct norms and conduct, for example, ways of greeting,



making an apology, showing appreciation, and responses to compliments. These noticeable elements reflect the conventional style of language in Chinglish, as it grows and spreads around the globe (Zhang, 2008, p. 95).

Chinglish from the Perspective of Outsiders

Some of the most obvious examples were on display when Chinglish was used in the 2008 Olympic Games hosted by China. The mistranslated expressions could be seen on Chinese street signs and product labels; for instance, an emergency exit at Beijing airport read “No entry on peacetime” and the Ethnic Minorities Gardens is titled “Racist Park.” Because meanings are concepts and words are meant to refer to things in the world, tourists regularly perceive the wrong meaning since Chinglish conveys the wrong message. Moreover, Chinglish appeared on brochures handed out in hotels and shopping centers, on public transport, and at tourist

spots. There is no doubt why Chinglish became a running joke among numerous foreigners in China, and several websites have been set up listing funny examples of mistranslation (Elbourne, 2011, p. 156).

Regarding the restaurant menus in China, several Chinglish words are used to name various dishes, and tourists were stunned by the language, especially during the Olympics. The name of one dish is mala quanjiafu (麻辣全家福); mala (麻辣) often means “spicy”; however, it more precisely refers to the “numbing” effect of Szechwan peppercorn and the “hot” quality of chili peppers. Quanjiafu (全家福) signifies “whole family welfare or happiness,” which is a colloquial term denoting either a “portrait of a whole family” or something quite different, “a hodgepodge.” Awkwardly, the person who drew up this menu made the wrong select between the two meanings. The correct translation should be “Spicy Combo,” but it came out as “Hot family photo.” Some other weird translations of dishes include haixia



(海虾) “sea lobster,” not “crayfish,” and bazhuayu (八抓鱼) literally means “eight claw fish,” but refers to “octopus” (Untour 2011, 2011).



Figure 2: Chinglish menu

Source: <https://blogs.transparent.com/chinese/chinglish-menu-part-ii/>

The above picture presents a good example of the descriptive style of Chinese such as the name of the food “Everything goes well” conveying nothing dealing with the food; that is to say, countless words are formed by mixing and matching diasylolobic words. On the other hand, English is more definitional, so its words are more terminological than expressive. For instance,

a “spider” is a spider – the word in itself tells us nothing about what it signifies. Nevertheless, the Chinese term for spider (蜘蛛: zhizhu) literally translates as “clever insect” (a description it earns in Chinese by spinning complicated webs to catch prey). Moreover, there are several classic examples; for instance, in Chinese one doesn’t ride a bike, bus, or train but rides a “self-walk vehicle” (自行车: zixinche), a “public all-together gas vehicle” (公共汽车 gonggongqiche) or a “fire vehicle” (火车: huoche), instead. Likewise, a massage in Chinese is a “press and touch” (按摩: anmo). A pimple is a “youth bean” (青春痘: qingdou). Investing is to “throw funds” (投资: touzi) (Global Language Monitor, 2008).

Apart from Chinglish menus, several Chinglish signs created a big surprise for foreigners as well, because of their bizarre meanings and wrong grammatical patterns, especially signs put up during the Olympics. Some popular examples of Chinglish signs are presented below.



Figure 3: Weird Chinglish sign in the supermarket

Source: <https://www.boredpanda.com/funny-chinese-translation-fails/>

According to the sign in Figure 3, 干菜 (*gāncài*) means dried vegetables and 类 (*lèi*) means type. In general, these words literally mean “the dried vegetables section.” However, the translator was probably too concerned about the Chinese character “干” which is also slang for the “f- word.” It is likely that the translation was quite a shock to everyone who passed through that store.



Figure 4: Weird Chinglish sign in the restroom

Source: <http://www.beckyances.net/wp-content/uploads/2010/02/SignBath2.jpg>

The warning sign in Figure 4 is for males who use restrooms in China, but some men behave inappropriately when answering the call of nature. According to the sign, instead of expressing “It’s so civilized to move a little further step to urinate,” the sentence “One small step for man, one huge step for civilization” should be stated. Literally translated, 上前 (*shàng mian*) means step forward and 一小步 (*yīxiǎobù*) means small walk. In addition, 文明 (*wén míng*) means civilization and 一大步 (*yīdàbù*) means big walk. It should be noted that there is no

single word that signifies “urinate.”



Figure 5: Weird Chinglish sign in the park

Source: <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/society/article/2099518/slippery-will-no-longer-be-crafty-china-cracks-down-bad-english>

The third example of Chinglish signs, Figure 5, is a warning statement. It says “Beware of safety” but the meaning apparently reflects a sense of danger rather than a sense of security. In the sign, 注意 (zhùyì) means to pay attention to something, whereas 安全 (ānquán) means safety. The correct translation should be “Beware! Safety first!” which would sound more sensible and expressive.



Figure 6: Weird Chinglish sign in the restroom

Source: <http://www.exploringenglish.pl/en/chinglish>

The last example of Chinglish sign, Figure 6, is a very important one, since it can be found at tourist attractions. The sign says “The male sex toilet”; however, there is no Chinese character indicating the meaning of sex. In the sign, 男 (nán) means male and 性 (xìng) means gender, while 卫生间 (wèishēngjiān) means toilet. Regarding to this case, the translator literally translated every single word and when all the translated words are combined, they become very ambiguous.



In practice, it should be translated as “Men’s toilet.”

To explain the above situations, there could be two significant reasons for the mistranslations of signs. First, online translation software, which is widely available, is applied by many Chinese people, because it is a very useful tool to translate a sentence or to find the word we are looking for. Today, small firms in China that cannot afford a real translator possibly do not have any other options than to consult the Internet. However, when slogans, poems, very complex sentences, or difficult terminology are translated, it is hard for the context of the words and the connotations to be correct. It is accepted that this can be certified only by a human translator. Second, Chinese translators who are specialists would be called upon by a Chinese business to translate for them. However, they may not be genuine professional translators, and even the better translators would most likely use a pocket translator. As a result, their language is not

considered standard English and their translation may be peculiar or unidiomatic (Fairhead, 2013).

In general, machine translation is of most use when it is used for “gisting,” which means an unrefined translation of the source text allowing the reader to understand the heart or general meaning of the source text even though the sentence structure, grammatical agreement, parts of speech, or word meanings are not correct (Brazill, 2016).

Huang (2018) claimed that Chinglish could be considered Chinese mixed with English as the so-called superstratum and Chinese as the substratum, with a limited vocabulary, a reduced grammar, and simplified phonology, as compared with native varieties of English (Native and Non-Native English Speaking Teachers in China, 2018).



The Future of Chinglish

There have been discussions among scholars and in the media as to whether Chinglish would survive or be eradicated by the Chinese government. According to the study by the Global Language Monitor, it is suggested that Chinglish may persist in the future, since over 250 million Chinese people are now studying English as a business language. Additionally, this will be an opportunity for Chinese people to develop their Chinglish because both of these two international languages, English and Mandarin, are complex and rich. Moreover, it is sufficient to state that as long as English is an international language used in China, Chinese people can possibly mix Mandarin and English, especially when the English language plays a major role in media in China (Global Language Monitor, 2008).

Scotton and Hachten claimed that there are three trends for English-language media development in China. First, English-language media will continue to make an

effort to function in commercial media instead of as a tool of government propaganda. Second, English-language media will continue to be centered in major cities such as Shanghai, Beijing, and Guangzhou, relating much to politics and economy. Third, internet technology will continue to apply its influence as it allows uncontrolled exchange of information. As a result, English-language media could become more professional and market-oriented. This will create an opportunity for Chinese people to be exposed to English language in the Chinese environment, thus supporting the development of Chinglish used in daily life. Undoubtedly, Chinglish will continually grow and increase each day; for instance, the Global Language Monitor, mentioned above, declared that some favorite Chinglish words and phrases included “deformed man toilet” (handicapped restroom), “airline pulp” (food served aboard airlines) and “rocketry” (rock wall) (Scotton & Hachten, 2010, p. 196).



According to the *China Daily* (US edition), linguists stated that Chinglish is being accepted by the world and has been integrated in daily life, especially some Hanyu Pinyin words and phrases that have spread beyond websites. An article, for example, published by *The Economist* cited the term “guanggun,” referring to the “overaged male.” In addition, the words “dama” (大妈) is found in the *Wall Street Journal* and has been used by the BBC. Last but not least, the words “feng shui (风水)” and “Maotai” (茅台) have been admitted to the *Oxford English Dictionary*. (English gains Popularity Overseas, 2014) Due to the easy access of machine or Internet translation in China, many Chinese people use this tool instead of human translation, but occasionally this machine produces a low quality of translation (Quah, 2006, p. 90). So machine translation is possibly one of the most important reasons that make Chinglish faulty yet humorous. To improve the translation of Chinglish, the output produced by machine translation requires

humans to do the task of post-editing, as translating is not only a linguistic act but it is also a cultural one. Language and culture cannot be separated because the words can be understood most truly when considered in the cultural context in which these linguistic items are used (Hewings & Tagg, 2012, pp. 290-294).

In conclusion, Chinglish has long been developed through the fields of business and politics. It is now considered a variety of world English, with specific language elements. Because of the richness and complexity of both English and Chinese, Chinglish comprises a special blend of both languages in various approaches. Chinglish was able to stun foreigners during the Olympic Games in 2008, yet many Chinglish terms are recognized by the world. It is possible that, if China becomes the most powerful country in terms of economics, Chinglish has the potential to be promoted and be recognized as the principal variety used in the country.



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