

An Analysis of the Origin and Development of Chinese English Variants from the Perspective of Eco-linguistics

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Abstract

With the integration of the English language with Chinese culture, all aspects of the English language have a variant of Chinese characteristics, and although it has not yet become an institutionalized English variant, it has been developing. This article discusses the origin of Chinese English variants, and analyzes the rationality and development direction of English variants in China from the ecological perspectives of “biological information transmission and language communication”, “competitive and cooperative coevolution” and “stability and mutagenicity”, so as to reveal the cultural confidence contained in them.

Keywords: English variety; Chinese varieties of English; eco-linguistics; developing foreground; cultural confidence

1. Introduction

As the economic globalization has been an inexorable trend, English, which is no longer just about native British culture, has gradually developed into a language that embodies a multi-ethnic culture, bringing about many varieties of English. But it is worth noting that although English is an international lingua franca, English culture isn't an international culture. As one of the members of world English, Chinese varieties of English are the result of the indigenization of English in Chinese social ecology and cultural environment, and the expression of Chinese cultural spirit in the world. According to knowledge of traditional linguistics, Chinese English variant, which is also known as “Chinglish”, is defined as “words, sentence patterns and discourses with Chinese characters that express the unique thing in various fields of Chinese society and culture with normative English as the core, are not disturbed by their mother tongue, which enter Chinese communication system through English translation, borrowed translation and semantic regeneration” (Wenzhong, L., 1993). At present, the academic community has basically reached a consensus on the definition of Chinglish.

In the view of the fact “language, as a sub-ecology in the total ecology of the earth, also possesses the same biological life dynamics and biological diversity as other animals and plants” (Yingmei, S., 2008), Sali Koko S. Mufwene(2012: 361), a sociolinguist from the University of Chicago, commented on the process of language evolution in his book *Evolutionary Ecology of Language*, and explored in detail the relationship between various aspects of language and the environment. Based on this, many domestic scholars also study the significance of the existence of Chinese varieties of English (Junjun, F., 2005), which inject new vitality into the development of Chinese English. However, there are few discussions about the development prospects of Chinese English and the confidence of Chinese culture contained in it. Therefore, this article will

explore the origin of Chinese English variant, and then, under the framework of eco-linguistics, analyze the rationality and development trend of it from three aspects of “biological information transmission and language communication”, “competitive and cooperative coevolution” and “stability and mutagenicity”, so as to explore its core—Chinese culture, which is the unique cultural confidence of the Chinese nation.

2. The origin of Chinese English variants

Language variety, also known as speech variation, refers to the internal differences that occur in real life at the level of pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary and so on, which can be divided into regional variation, social variation and stylistic variation. Richard Hudson defined a language variety as “a set of terms with similar social distribution”, in order to mean that a certain linguistic expression is commonly used by people with the same social characteristics in the same social environment. Moreover, language varieties range from the multifarious dialects of a language to a specific phonetic, lexical, or syntactic feature of a dialect. World varieties of English refer to the phonetic, grammatical, semantic and pragmatic varieties of standard English.

As Professor Zhou Haizhong(1994:13), a well-known Chinese linguist, predicted in his article *Features of English in the 21st Century*, “In the 21st century, there will be various varieties of English. In addition to the existing two major regional varieties of American English and British English, there are also Canadian English, Irish English, New Zealand English, Australian English, Indian English, South African English and so on. Some of them will be further differentiated into new regional varieties, such as Western Australian English and Northern Australian English which may be separated from Australian English.” Until now, the widely existing English in the world includes British English, American English, Canadian English, Australian English, Indian English, South African English, Singaporean English, etc. Actually, there are two main processes of English transmissions around the world. One happened in the 16th and 17th centuries, when a large number of British immigrants migrated to the Americas and Oceania, bringing English to what came to be considered as “the New World”—the United States, Australia, New Zealand, etc.; which result in English variants such as North American English and Australian English. Besides, another time occurred in the 17th and 18th centuries. Relying on the achievements of the Industrial Revolution, British gradually became a “empire that never sets”, and continued colonial expansion, especially in some Asian and African countries. And English, as a tool, is used by the British to control the local people’s thoughts and penetrate British culture, bringing about Indian English, South African English and other English variants.

However, whether a variety of English can be recognized and established depends on whether it meets the standard of language variety. Schneider (2007) proposed a simple and pellucid Dynamic Model, which divided the development of English varieties into five stages: (1) the basic stage, (2) the stable stage of external standardization, (3) localization stage, (4) the stable stage of internal standardization, (5) variation stage. According to this, Kirkpatrick (2007) believes that Chinese English variant is between the second and third stages, namely the stable stage of external standardization and the localization stage. At this moment, the standard English develops in parallel with the Chinglish variety, with Chinese changes in vocabulary and grammar, but it has not yet reached the stage of internal standardization stability, because Chinglish variety has not become an official language and has not been used in various formal situations.

The concept of “Chinglish” was first put forward by Mr. Ge Chuangui in his article “A Casual Discussion on Translation from Chinese to English” (1980) published in *Chinese Translation*. Mr. Ge elaborated the concept of “Chinese English variants” from the perspective of translation, in order to facilitate the translation of some specific domestic affairs. Therefore, the academic community has launched a heated

discussion on Chinglish, Chinglish varieties, especially whether there is national English in China and so on.

3. Ecological analysis of Chinese English variants

In the end of 19th century, the famous German philosopher Haeckel mentioned “Ecology” for the first time on the basis of Darwinian theory of evolution, and defined “Ecology” as: the study of the complex relationship among all organic substances in nature as ecological competition conditions, as well as between them and the natural environment. This has also caused scientists and scholars in different fields to make a new elaboration of “Ecology” from different disciplinary perspectives.

The first to combine ecological analysis with linguistic research was by Terim of Cambridge University (1959), who published “*Historical, Descriptive and Active Linguistics*” in the journal *Language and Speech*, and it explained the history and transformation of linguistics from an ecological perspective. As a newly emerging interdisciplinary discipline, Eco-linguistics reveals the interaction between language and environment through the study of language ecology and relationship between language and natural ecology and social ecology.

From the perspective of eco-linguistics, the emergence of language varieties is due to the change of the language environment in which the language is located. And Chinese English variant is a special kind of English that has been bred from the Chinese social and cultural environment. In other words, the entry of English into China is like a creature entering a new environment, which is inevitably affected by the new environment—the unique environment of China. As a result, the formation of Chinese varieties of English are just like the development of organisms in an ecosystem, becoming one of the many varieties of English. The evolution of Chinese varieties of English can reflect in the aspects of “biological information transmission and language communication”, “competitive and cooperative coevolution” and “stability and mutagenicity”, etc.

3.1 Biological information transmission and language communication

According to ecological knowledge, the ecosystem has three main functions: material circulation, energy flow and information transmission. Among them, information transmission plays an important role, because the normal progress of life activities cannot be separated from information transmission, and the reproduction of biological populations is also inseparable from the transmission of information. What’s more, information can also regulate the interspecific relationships of organisms, in order to maintain the stability of ecosystems. The information transmission of the ecosystem is also called “information flow”. Although this process also needs to consume a certain amount of substance and energy, it is not as circular as the material flow, nor is it a one-way flow like the energy flow. It tends to be bidirectional, with information transmission from input to output and feedback from output to input.

There is also interactivity between different languages. Language is the main medium and effective tool for human to exchange thoughts and feelings, and it’s also the key to achieve deep integration with each other, but all these are based on communication. Though all kinds of English varieties have different local characteristics, they are all changed from English and still carry out two-way transmission of information between themselves. There is also a constant flow of messages between the Chinglish variant and Standard English, which began when British merchants first landed on Chinese soil. Of course, it’s not immediately effective, but need the accumulation of time. Foreign languages gradually penetrate into the native language, and the native language will in turn affect the foreign language, so Chinglish is a mixture of Chinese and English. Additionally, language communication, similar to information transmission between organisms in an

ecosystem, is often misplaced. For example, “propaganda” is a derogatory word in Standard English, but Chinese English variant allow it to be used as a common meaning of “publicize”; the word “face” originally means the part of body. However, it’s often associated with “Face Culture” and the concept of honor in China, which is that information has altered accordingly while being transmitted.

Standard English can continue to standardize Chinese varieties of English, and Chinese English variant have access to provide a rich vocabulary and expressions of standard English. Standard English enhances its vigorous vitality by absorbing and including the characteristics of Chinese language system. Up to now, about 1000 words with Chinese origin have been included in *Oxford English Dictionary*. For instance, “Oolong Tea” enjoys worldwide fame in “Oriental Leaves”, which is transliterated from Chinese; Or the world-famous “The Silk Road” contains a Chinese word— “silk”. At the same time, China also has an urgent need to export culture and eliminate the stereotypes, including some prejudices about China in the world. Due to language inequality, the original blank field and other factors, when China presents its unique business card to the world, it also needs to create some new English expressions and uses them to communicate and interact with standard English users to avoid misunderstanding and conflict. For example, in the early days of the COVID-19 outbreak in 2019, many foreign netizens misinterpreted the novel coronavirus as “China virus”. Faced with such a misinterpretation, Chinese netizens immediately coined a new word— “funny mud pee”, which is full of Chinese style and instantly countered such untrue remarks with enough grace and great power.

3.2 Competitive and cooperative coevolution

In accordance with ecological knowledge, there is a complete mechanism of competitive and cooperative coevolution in ecosystem, which is conducive to maintaining the stability and diversity of ecosystem. On one hand, the function of competition dominating biological evolution can be traced back to the biological evolution law of “natural selection; survival of the fittest” proposed by Charles Darwin in 1895 in the book on *the Origin of Species*. It means that species in the same environment are constantly competing for limited resources, and the dominant species often has a strong fitness, with the consequence that its competitive ability is much higher than that of the inferior species until the elimination or suppression of other species. On the other hand, the mechanism of cooperative coevolution can be classified into two types: spatial coevolution and functional coevolution. With the help of this coevolution, all kinds of species in the environment of mutual cooperation continuously evolve and alter, aimed at better using natural resources respectively and finishing the corresponding survival and reproduction tasks efficiently. In other words, in biological populations, various species compete with each other for limited resources, and their competition is mitigated by the differentiation of biological characteristics. On the surface, competition and coordination are a pair of ubiquitous and irreconcilable contradictions; In fact, both of them are united, which are manifested as complementarity and mutual conditions. Under certain conditions, they can be transformed into each other and jointly promote the evolution of organisms, so that the relationship between mutual competition and coordination can maintain a stable balance of biological systems.

In the language system, the same mechanism is followed. Standard English also has competitive and cooperative coevolution with many English varieties. Not only do all varieties compete with their own body (Standard English), but there is also competition between different English varieties in the world. Superior language is capable of occupying the top part of language system, which serves as a communication tool used by the vast majority of people; On the contrary, disadvantaged languages are likely to be used by only a small number of people, and to some extent, they may even disappear due to a lack of use. As one of many English varieties, China English variety has been in competitive and cooperative coevolution with Standard English in its development stage.

The history of Chinese English variants' evolution can be mainly divided into three stages. The first stage began as early as the 17th century in the coastal area of Guangdong, China. When the first batch of British merchants came here to do business with the Chinese, with a view to successfully carrying out the business, the Cantonese communicated with them in what the British believed to be "non-standard but understandable" English, which was later known as "Canton English". In the 18th century, Britain and other imperialist forces established many trade ports along China's coast, followed by Chinese Pidgin English (CPE), which contributed to the basic exchanges between foreign businessmen and local residents. Simply put, CPE acts as a "bridge", temporarily serving people of different native languages. In the cognition of English varieties, Chinese Pidgin English can be called "Pidgin English" too. After the Opium War launched by Britain against China in 1840, Shanghai gradually became the window of China's opening up, and then Shanghai Chinese Pidgin English came into being. Simultaneously, with the gradual opening up of other coastal cities, all sorts of "China Coast English" with local dialect characteristics have emerged in some port cities in China. These Coast English have the same idiosyncrasy as Canton English and Shanghai Pidgin English in essence. They, as the products of a simplified language system designed to meet the needs of business transactions, do not fully follow the rules of English pronunciation, grammar, semantics, and pragmatics. Consequently, Chinese Pidgin English at that time was just the predecessor of the Chinese English variety, and had not yet become the real Chinese English.

The second stage took place from the end of the 19th century to the 20th century. With English becoming the international language, a wave of English studying has appeared in China, and official English teaching has also been comprehensively carried out accordingly. Especially during the period of opening up to the outside world, more and more Chinese have realized that English, as an international language, is a necessary tool and an important way for China to carry out communications and cooperation with foreign countries. At this time, the development of Chinese English varieties mainly relied on the mechanism of cooperative coevolution. Chinese English learners actively moved closer to the core Anglosphere and tried their best to imitate British or American standard pronunciation. When China entered the world stage, the environment in which Chinese English variants were located was not limited to the domestic coastal areas mentioned in the first stage; Chinglish faced a global language system. Needless to say, Chinese English variants must be developed together with Standard English, and the competition between them is not obvious, because Standard English is apparently a superior "species" over the Chinese English variants at this time.

Subsequently, the third stage is from the end of the 20th century until today, when Chinese English learners are constantly transitioning from the standard mode of using English as their mother tongue to the local mode in China. They gradually no longer adhere to "Standard English", but flexibly use "Chinese English variant" with local characteristics. Paul JJ Payack (2007), the president of the "Global Language Monitor Association", once said: "It is surprising that due to the impact of China's economic growth, Chinese has a greater effect on international English than English-speaking countries." For the moment, the Chinese English variant has become a more effective communication tool in Asia, where English speakers have reached 3.5 billion (Hu, 2004). It can more accurately meet their needs in both cultural and trade exchanges. As China plays an increasingly significant role in Asia and even the world, it is highly likely to become a language capital that more people aspire to, which turns into the main source of wealth creation for them. For example, in the "the Belt and Road Initiative" led by China, Chinese varieties of English has become the most convenient language tool for many countries to establish trade relations with China. According to the famous American linguist Kachru's (1985) theory of concentric circle, global English can be segmented into inner circles, outer circles, and extended circles. Our country belongs to the extended circles, taking English as the

foreign language. Therefore, English learners in our country have always been unable to isolate the influence of the Chinese language system, which has also led to differences in pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar and pragmatics between Chinese English variants and Standard English, thus forming a competitive relationship. Taking grammar as an example, Chinese varieties of English has the following grammatical features: (1) tense confusion; (2) No subject or object; (3) Mismatch conjunctions, such as “although” and “but” sharing (Xu, 2004); (4) Use fewer articles, especially definite articles. Furthermore, in terms of pragmatics, Chinglish tends to summarize and provide a large amount of background information before presenting core arguments, which is completely opposite to the Western habit of deductive reasoning. These will inevitably lead to competition between Chinglish and Standard English, but competition does not mean a lose-lose situation. In the process of competition, the winners replace the losers, and constantly play the role of promoting the renewal and improvement of English’s huge language system. Compared with American English, Canadian English, Australian English and other mainstream English varieties, Chinglish is like a sub life in the system, belonging to a subordinate position in the English system, but this does not mean that we can ignore the existence of China English varieties. It has always maintained a competitive and cooperative coevolution with Standard English, and ignoring any “creature” will unavoidably destroy the “stability and balance” of the world’s “ecosystem”.

3.3 Stability and mutagenicity

Haugen (1972) once compared the language environment with the biological environment, both of which have strong stability. The living environment of organisms determines their diversity, while the multifariousness of language living environment identifies the variability of language. The reason why language systems have vitality and strong self-regulation functions like ecosystems is because language system is not limited to one language, but has multiple languages and language variants, just like the existence of biodiversity can stabilize ecosystems.

At the beginning of the 20th century, Dutch botanist Vries put forward the mutation theory— “species are produced by mutation” by observing and studying the variation of *Oenothera*, which overthrew the previous Gradualism and became a new evolutionary theory. Mutagenicity can be defined as the phenomenon of damages and various genetic variations in organisms under the influence of environmental and genetic factors. Changes in organisms often have an instantaneous nature, and under certain environmental conditions, individual mutations of a certain genotype can survive better. It’s random, with no definite direction, which is more conducive to the “muti-stability” state of the ecosystem.

The openness of language is similar to the mutagenicity of organisms, which is often blind and open in all directions. Regardless of the direction of mutation, it can be divided into two categories— favourable mutations and unfavourable mutations. Language mutations that are easily accepted by humans are equivalent to favourable mutations in ecosystems, which can cause language evolution and transformation. Many English vocabulary transliterated or borrowed from Chinese are favourable mutations, such as “One country, two systems”, “Four books”, “Five classics” or “Dama”. At the same time, the language mutation that has been accepted and used by humans for a long time can lead to differences between it and the original language species, making it a language variant with strong local characteristics; On the contrary, language mutations that are not easily accepted by humans are similar to unfavourable mutations that are not conducive to the stability of the ecosystem. These mutations usually are not in line with the laws of the language system, and even gradually disappear without attention. For example, many netizens imitate the English slang “no pains, no gains” to create the internet buzzword— “no zuo, no die”. Although the language is open, this unstable vocabulary clearly cannot persist in the language system.

In the process of the spread and development of Standard English around the world, there are opposite directions—the centripetal force of convergence and the centrifugal force of divorce. Under the effect of centripetal force, English speakers in various countries and regions will gradually approach to the unified standards of traditional core English models such as British and American, so that people from different mother tongue backgrounds can reach mutual understanding and recognition when communicating. However, under the centrifugal force, the language itself has a strong openness. In order to retain their national cultural roots, English users will localize and transform Standard English, produce mutations, inject their own unique cultural elements, thus forming unique English varieties. The diversity of languages ensures the stability of the language system. The Chinese English varieties come from mutations full of Chinese flavour.

4. Conclusion

Based on the ecological analysis of the three aspects mentioned above, it is not difficult to find that the formation of Chinese English variants is essentially a confident declaration of Chinese culture towards the world. In 2000, Professor Cong Cong of Nanjing University published an article entitled “‘Chinese Culture Aphasia’: the Defect of English Teaching in China” in *Guang Ming Daily*, and sadly pointed out that many young Chinese scholars could not express their native language culture in English when communicating with Westerners. With the continuous progress of Chinese English varieties, “Chinese cultural Aphasia” is gradually being cured nowadays.

The “localization” of English in China is basically achieved through two ways: the first is to directly spell Mandarin Pinyin according to the English alphabet system, abbreviated as “Chinese borrowings”, such as “tai chi”, “kung fu”, “fu wa”; The second method is to directly state the language expression and meaning in Chinese, abbreviated as “translation borrowings”, such as “iron rice bowl”, “Long March”, “Chinese herbal medicine”, etc. In addition, in today’s high-speed development of the Internet Age, the vocabulary of Chinese English variants is more colorful. Chinese netizens have created a large number of novel and interesting new words, such as “niubility” and “smilence”. It is easy to see that these words conform to the rules of English word formation, but add some Chinese characteristics.

In summary, language communication is not only about literal meaning, but also about the cultural transmission behind it (Kirkpatrick and Xu, 2002). Chinese English variants are not only influenced by the Chinese language, but also deeply affected by contemporary Chinese culture and society. Due to the large population of Chinese speakers, like English, Chinese is also a dominant language, so varieties of English with Chinese characteristics carry a very strong Chinese cultural gene, demonstrating China's cultural confidence.

The Chinese English variant, which embodies China’s politics, economy, and culture, is showcasing a rising “sun” in the east on the world stage.

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