Internet Chinglish as a Manifestation of FL/SL Learners’ Language and Conceptual Socialization

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Abstract. Internet Chinglish (IC) is a unique way of expression which was purposely and creatively invented by Chinese Internet users in intercultural communication between the Chinese speech community and the English-speaking community. This phenomenon has gathered much attention from English learners, teachers and researchers. Little research, however, has been done to reveal its true nature, features, and pedagogical implications. This study first examines how Chinese Internet users, who learn English as a foreign language (EFL), have appropriated English lexical and syntactic systems to set the labels for the mindsets of Chinese speech communities on contemporary issues in China when their English counterparts are not available. The study then analyzes the features of IC from the perspectives of its users, special ways of formation, history and social acceptability. Finally, this study explores the pedagogical implications based on the analysis of a structured questionnaire. The results show that Chinese as a Second Language (CSL) learner are increasingly aware of the features of IC and its role in facilitating the conceptual socialization in the target language.

Introduction

Chinglish, being an irregular, crooked English with Chinese characteristics, has been strongly opposed to by a great many researchers and language teachers in China. This kind of word-for-word translation, such as 自动取款机 (ATM) translated into Cash Recycling Machine, may result in unintelligible or imprecise expressions in English. Compared to Chinglish, Chinese English or China English, a variety of English has been modified to fit into the Chinese context, is a better Chinese way of speaking English. More specifically, native Chinese speakers are using this way to speak Chinese in a grammatically-correct English way. The lack of English counterparts for these Chinese concepts gives rise to its emergence by means of code-switching, loan words and loan translations. Therefore, the difference between Chinglish and Chinese/China English seems to be on the divergence of literal vs. a non-literal translation, grammatically incorrect and correct forms. Though “Chinglish” as it is called, Internet Chinglish (henceforth IC), has been known as a novel and direct outcome of the culture and language fusion, and has been thought of more positively by worldwide language researchers in recent years. Just as its name suggests, it is a combination of Chinese and English, which has mostly been generated on the Internet. IC has been purposefully and creatively invented by Chinese Internet users who have appropriated the existing English language system to label the Chinese mindsets to meet the need for smooth and succinct interaction. In short, it is a unique way of expressing Chinese thinking just in the form of English.

Take as an example the IC word gelivable (给力). The morpheme Ge (the Chinese gei 给) means “give”, and li (力) “strength” or “power”. The two morphemes combine to mean “give strength” literally. It is coined by Chinese Internet users to describe their feeling that something is as good as expected and giving you the moment of “YES! THIS IS IT!”. Its negated form can be seen in the following utterance.

(1) WTF? The Chinese soccer team lost again? Against Japan? 0:8? That’s too ungelivable! (Urban Dictionary 2010)
The word is clearly a lexical innovation, in which the prefix -un and the suffix -able are attached to a Chinese verb phrase gěli to form an adjective-like English word. It is used to express the feeling of being unsatisfied, lousy, unpleasant, unfavorable, and terrible. Although this coinage is somewhat strange, it makes sense not only to native Chinese speakers who know English, but to native English speakers who may have limited familiarity with the Chinese language if some specific context is provided. With the help of their encyclopedic knowledge and the situational context, the hearers can infer the meaning of the word without difficulty. This kind of usage can be accounted for in the light of the Relevance Theory. According to Sperber and Wilson (1995[1986]: 260), “human cognition tends to be geared to the maximization of relevance, and every utterance communicates a presumption of its own relevance”. The encyclopedic knowledge that the Chinese soccer team sucks and the situational context that the Chinese soccer team was beaten by the Japanese team at 0:8, provides the IC word ungelivable relevant enough for the hearer to make sufficient processing efforts to figure out the possible interpretation.

From the perspective of language development and contact, this paper first clarifies some confusing terms, distinguishing the topic at issue “Internet Chinglish” from the inter-language “Chinglish”. It further analyzes the features of IC and explores the pedagogical implications based on the analysis of a structured questionnaire.

Chinglish and Internet Chinglish

Chinglish has long been considered an irregular and crooked English, since it is uninterpretable and unacceptable for English speakers. Chinglish, being half-English half-Chinese, or non-English non-Chinese, was defined as “English with Chinese characteristics” by the author of The Translator’s Guide on Chinglish (Pinkham 2000). However, Todd and Hancock (1990) categorized Chinglish as one of the global English usages, and elaborated on it from the phonetic, lexical and grammatical aspects. During the Beijing Olympic Games in 2008 and the Shanghai World Expo in 2010, the Chinese government spared no efforts in the movement of eliminating or at least reducing the occurrences of Chinglish on the menu’s and signage in China, trying to “untangle the mangled English of Chinglish” (The New York Times 2010). A series of related studies on Chinglish (Deng and Liu 1989, Zhuang 2000, Yang 2005, He 2009) has criticized the potential risks of Chinglish from different aspects, concluding that “wiping out Chinglish is a necessity to be on the road to learning English and communicating with different cultural backgrounds” (Wang 2009: 183).

Nevertheless, there are a growing number of people willing to accept Chinglish. To a certain extent, some of the Chinglish expressions are taken for granted by both English learners and Chinese learners from all over the world. The most famous Chinglish expression is perhaps long time no see, which used to be a joke, but now it’s listed in authoritative dictionaries and daily encounters as Standard English. In the Information Age nowadays, with the acceleration of social networking services and the surge of the number of Chinese Internet users, IC is now becoming one of the largest sources of the newly-created words in English, contributing to 5%-20% of the loan words to the English vocabulary since 1994 (Global Language Monitor 2013). This opens a new era for Chinglish. The most popular word on the Internet in 2010 was the example above - ungelivable, which had been reposted thousands of times in a few hours since it was created. IC reflects Chinese people’s intelligence and creativity, as in the word togayther. With the form and pronunciation similar to “together”, it expresses explicitly the gay couple’s physical status of being together, and implicitly the emotional status of being happy (because the adjective meaning of gay is happy and cheerful). Consequently, Chinese people’s attitude of approval towards homosexuals might be recovered from the word usage. This process of encoding and decoding can be regarded as a kind of mystery-solving, which creates a sense of satisfaction for both parties — the speaker and the hearer.

Clearly, IC reminds us of “inter-language”, which was coined by Larry Selinker, “in recognition of the fact that L2 learners construct a linguistic system that draws, in part, on the learner’s L1 but is also different from it and also from the target language” (Ellis 2003[1997]: 33). Actually, it is a dynamic linguistic system developed by an L2 learner who has not become fully proficient yet but is
approximating the target language. In spite of the ill-formatted structure in both cases, IC in this study is nothing like the inter-language of English learners, because the ill-formatted structure is created on purpose in the former, but unconsciously in the latter. The main distinction between the two is variability: Inter-language often varies even between speakers of the same language seeking to learn the same target language. It is highly individualized, whereas IC is generally the product and development that has been conventionalized by groups of Internet users.

Features

Users. The number of Chinese Internet users, it has been statistically reported in 2014 that it had reached 0.59 billion, 44% of China’s population of 1.3 billion, some of whom have contributed extensively to the IC vocabulary. Most people who create IC have a certain proficiency of English. These Chinese Internet users tend to encode something unique in English, thus creating an environment of privacy and intimacy within the inner circle. For example, on someone’s birthday, it is normal and a habitual way to say Happy Birthday in English to the person. However, these people would type Birthfast to the person on a Micro-blog or on Wechat, which is shortened from the four-character Chinese phrase of Happy Birthday — sheng ri kuai le (生日快乐). In the phrase, the literal translation of the four characters respectively are “birth”, “day”, “fast” and “happy”, but these people choose two of which to coin it into one word - Birthfast (生快), somewhat like Happy B Day in English, but much more succinct and implicit. No matter how high the proficiency of English they have, one thing in common is that they invent in these bizarre expressions on purpose knowing that the existence of those inter-lingual errors in IC.

Ways in which the IC words are linguistically created. Meanwhile, the lack of English counterparts for some particular issues with Chinese characteristics is a major cause for the emergence of Chinese English. Consequently, traditional Chinese English words are mainly formed in three different ways: code-switching, loanwords, and loan translation. IC words are formed in the same ways, however, borrowing only contributes to a small portion of IC words; instead, they are formed more creatively by the third method — loan translation. More specifically, they are translated by the modification inside words, not between the words.

Loan translations involve “rearranging words in the base language along a pattern provided by the other language and thus create a new meaning” (Romaine 1995: 57). In Chinese English, loan translations are just “lexical borrowing in English in the Chinese context” (Yang 2005: 430) to compensate for the lack of counterparts, such as Four Modernizations (the need to modernize agriculture, industry, national defense, and science and technology). Those English expressions are awkward in the rearrangements with inter-lexical changes, but the lexical items have remained intact. In comparison, IC words are more creative, in which Chinese Internet users have made intra-lexical modifications to the original word. For example, stockmarket, which is similar in form and pronunciation to stockmarket, reveals the current depression of Chinese stock market. Similarly, innernet, derived from the word internet, shows the partially blocked condition of the Chinese Internet. Therefore, the loan translations in IC are not the rearrangements between words, but the ones inside words, which sometimes are too subtle to notice, but full of connotation when detected.

History. For the low frequency of IC words in the English-speaking world, it is more of significance to look into them on the Internet within the coverage of China. Baidu is the biggest search engine in China therefore the authors searched five IC expressions on the Baidu Index. The table of the comparison is as follows.
Table 1. IC Expressions on Baidu Index.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>IC expressions</th>
<th>Hits of the emergence</th>
<th>Time of the emergence</th>
<th>Hits of the peak</th>
<th>Time of the peak</th>
<th>Median per week</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ungelivable</td>
<td>9595</td>
<td>11/7/2010</td>
<td>9595</td>
<td>11/7/2010</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>niubility</td>
<td>520</td>
<td>11/7/2010</td>
<td>520</td>
<td>11/7/2010</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linsanity</td>
<td>194</td>
<td>2/5/2012</td>
<td>4187</td>
<td>2/12/2012</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>good good study, day day up</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>8/9/2009</td>
<td>147</td>
<td>10/10/2010</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>no zuo no die</td>
<td>126</td>
<td>3/9/2014</td>
<td>6119</td>
<td>5/18/2014</td>
<td>221</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The searching range is from 2006 to the present. It takes little time for an IC expression to become a hit on a searching engine. For example, *ungelivable* was first contributed on the Urban Dictionary on Nov. 8, 2010, and also included in the Baidu Index almost at the same time, when it reaches the peak of searching frequency. And the rest of the expressions in the table all went viral in a short period of time or even in no time. This indicates the history of IC lexicon is very short, to be specific, less than 7 years. They easily reach the climax of hits, and then went down as quickly as they went up. The frequency of the use has become stable after the glorious record in the history. The craze for one IC words is shortly-lived, easily fading away and transferred to another more emergent IC word. With ebbs and flows, new IC expressions spring up all the time. New ones are given way by the old ones, among which some settled down and became fully recognized by authoritative organizations, whereas some disappeared for good but the majority in the middle was still in the transient stage, unable to earn the full recognition by the mainstream of the English-speaking countries.

Social Acceptability. The phenomenon of IC words has shown a bi-directional transfer between English and Chinese. On the one hand, influenced by English word formation rules, EFL learners have shown certain linguistic changes in creating IC words. On the other hand, the IC words in the form of English express certain Chinese social concepts which in turn have effects on the conceptual socialization of English speakers. These English→Chinese linguistic changes and Chinese→English conceptual changes in IC are all manifestations of language learning.

It was generally considered negative that many grammatically incorrect words and expressions are mainly caused by L1→L2 transfers, or even those that are grammatically correct are not intelligible by native speakers. However, the positive effect of IC can be investigated among the learners who study Chinese as a second or foreign language. To investigate their knowledge of and attitude towards IC, the authors piloted a questionnaire among the foreign students who studied Chinese. 78 CSL learners in two universities in Hangzhou, Hangzhou Normal University and Zhejiang University of Technology both took part in the investigation.

The questionnaire was designed to look into three aspects: personal information, knowledge of IC and attitudes towards IC. Besides basic information such as gender, age, native language, personal information, it also included certain aspects related to Chinese learning, such as time for learning Chinese (TLC), proficiency in Chinese (PC), proficiency in Pinyin (PP), proficiency in English (PE), interest in Chinese (IC), reasons for learning Chinese (RLC). The second part is a small test for IC knowledge, which are selected from IC expressions at the lexical and syntactic levels. The last part contains five questions about the acceptability for these IC words or phrases from the perspectives of language learning, culture learning and language creativity. The author’s correlated variables in the first part to the total score (TOTAL) that all 78 subjects got from the small test in the second part on the one hand, and to the average degree of acceptability (ACCEPTABILITY) in the third part on the other. The statistics have been presented in the following table.

From the statistics run by SPSS 16.0, there are three pairs of correlations that stand out, i.e. the correlations between TLC and TOTAL, PC and ACCEPTABILITY, PE and TOTAL. They are not only positively but are significantly correlated. The first pair indicates that the longer the subjects learn Chinese, the better they could figure out the meaning of IC expressions. The highest score, i.e. 16/20, was achieved by one student who had learned Chinese for more than one year while the lowest score, i.e. 3/20, was by a student who had only learned Chinese for two months. The second
pair suggests that the higher the proficiency in Chinese the subjects have, the more acceptable they may think of IC expressions. According to the previous research conducted (Kecskes and Papp 2000), during foreign language learning, learners would gradually form a CUCB (Common Underlying Conceptual Base), which is responsible for the operation of two or more languages, which can only be developed “when a certain hypothetical threshold of the foreign or/and second language is reached”. The proficiency in Chinese contributes to the formation of this bilingual conceptual base, which makes people more tolerant with the ill-formed words in IC expressions. What’s more, apart from all the variables in the first part, the degree of acceptability of all the subjects was quite high, an average of 2.74, which reached 68.5% if divided by the highest degree of acceptability. The third pair shows that language ability, whether Chinese or English, facilitates the understanding of IC expressions. The result not only proves that IC is a combination of Chinese and English, but also illustrates that the formation of a CUCB needs an adequate language ability of L1 and L2.

Conclusion

This paper presents an analysis of Internet Chinglish, a particular phenomenon in today’s China. This study first tries to give a proper definition and neutral attitude towards IC, it then analyzes the features of IC from the perspectives of its ways of formation, and social acceptability. At last, a structured questionnaire was carried out among the students who studied Chinese as a second language (CSL). The results show that as the time of learning Chinese goes by, the learners are increasingly aware of the linguistics and pragmatic features of IC on the one hand, and that their language ability in both Chinese and English facilitates the conceptual socialization in the target language on the other.

Chinglish and L1→L2 transfers were generally considered negative, but this paper attempts to look into the language phenomenon from another perspective and proves they could be both positive and negative. The positive effect of IC can be investigated among the learners who are studying Chinese as a second or foreign language. The results conclude that almost all the students who had learned Chinese for more than one year have better interpretations of IC, which in turn might have positive effects on learning Chinese. The results also reaffirms that a certain proficiency in Chinese contributes to a positive attitude towards IC. More interestingly, a higher proficiency in English leads to a better understanding of IC. This also proves the existence and development of CUCB in the mind of language learners who have been exposed to Chinese and its socio-cultural environment for a certain period of time seem to be of some help to the learners.

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References