

# Proposing Chinese English as a lingua franca (ChELF)

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A means to address terminological puzzles in researching English and Chinese speakers in international communication

## Introduction

Scholarly attention to English in relation to L1 Chinese speakers in China<sup>1</sup> has yielded fruitful research insights and publications, which present us with various names, such as Chinglish, Chinese English, China English and a few more, leading to terminological controversies (e.g. Eaves, 2011; Y. Li, 2018; Zhang, 1997). A review of different theoretical stances illuminates that recent research under different names converges toward an attempt to reflect the role of English as a lingua franca (ELF) for Chinese individuals, given the context of globalisation and digitalisation. The article proposes to address terminological puzzles by adopting the notion of Chinese English as a lingua franca (ChELF) to elucidate the role of ELF and acknowledge Chinese ownership of English, hoping for collaborations among researchers interested in Chinese legitimacy in English creativity emerging in intercultural practices.

## Diverging theoretical stances

Different terms have been adopted to represent five major theoretical stances and address different aspects of English in relation to China and Chinese individuals, namely, Chinese Pidgin English, Chinese learner English, Chinese variety of English, New Chinglish, and ChELF (see Wang, 2020). Aside from New Chinglish, which sets itself apart from Chinglish and emerges with the research of translanguaging, other names explicitly index the theoretical stances along with

historical sociolinguistics, second language acquisition, World Englishes and English as a lingua franca, by including the notions of pidgin, learner, variety and ELF as the focal points of research oriented towards L1 Chinese speakers. A few more names given to English relevant to Chinese speakers' language practice and learning experience can be categorised into the above-mentioned research stances, as to be discussed in what follows.

Chinese Pidgin English, often known as Chinglish, emerged from a need for English as a means of communication for business and trade in China's Qing dynasty when the closed-door policy was adopted. It then faded after the introduction of formal English education to inscribe itself in colonial history (Bolton, 2003). As a 'minimum language' in use between Chinese low-class groups and foreigners, Chinese Pidgin English was often



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condemned as a form of ‘illiteracy’, ‘stylistics of caricature’, and ‘corrupt’ English (Bolton & Lim, 2000: 437; Hall, 1944: 95; Li, 2016: 9). For sociolinguists, however, Chinese Pidgin English provides a window into the historical development of English in China and serves as the linguistic fossil offering evidence of sociohistorical lives (e.g. Hall, 1944; Reinecke, 1964).

Chinese learner English, which is sometimes conflated with the label of Chinese English (e.g. Hu, 2004; Zhang, 1997), refers to linguistic performance as a result of ‘unsuccessful’ attempts made by Chinese learners to model native English competence. With the theoretical underpinnings focused on mainstream second language acquisition, the notion of Chinese learner English became established along with the development of corpus projects in China (e.g. Lu, 2016).

Chinese variety of English, often labelled as China English or Chinese English, aligns with the World Englishes (WE) paradigm (see e.g. Hu, 2004, 2005; Xu, 2010; Xu, Deterding & He, 2018). Positioning the variety at the ‘developing’ stage, Xu et al. (2018: 12) are optimistic that Chinese English ‘will become more widely used in China and therefore nativised in different aspects of the Chinese society’. Their hypothesis that ‘in 50 years or even less than 50 years, Chinese English will be duly codified, and it will be differentiated within the variety itself’ (ibid.) reminds us of the term Chinese Englishes in Bolton’s (2003) work.

New Chinglish is a term introduced in the work on translanguaging to blanket a distinctive variety created by Chinese netizens who appropriate English in the online environment by transcending linguistic boundaries and through enregisterment (W. Li, 2016, 2018). It bears the potential to be categorised into ‘World Englishes designed primarily for intra-national use’ and illustrating ‘an ELF phenomenon’ that ‘can be understood by speakers of other languages’ (Li, 2016, pp. 12–13). The data on which New Chinglish is developed often focus on translanguaging practices of those who perform otherness or weakness in China’s social capital and operate with anonymity and criticality (Lee & Li, 2020). New Chinglish is thus sometimes labelled as ‘Shitizen Chinglish’ (Lee & Li, 2020: 559), leaving a gap in explaining how Chinese speakers appropriate English in real-life social encounters such as everyday talk, business negotiation, and academic discussion.

Stemming from the ELF research, the concept of Chinese English as a lingua franca (ChELF) was developed in my previous work (see Wang, 2012, 2018, 2020) to capture the phenomenon that

Chinese speakers engage in international communication by creatively using English as a primary means of communication and to address Chinese speakers’ ownership of English. Locating Chinese speakers and English in the era of globalisation (in comparison with Chinese Pidgin English in the context of colonisation), ChELF encapsulates Chinese speakers’ English practice in intercultural encounters increasingly evident in everyday activities, business negotiation, and academic discussion. The conceptualisation counters the view of native English models as default for Chinese speakers to follow and acknowledges the endonormativity of Chinese speakers’ English performance. As Jenkins (2015a) rightly points out, the same linguistic outcome might be a variant in ELF embedded with a difference perspective but an error in English as a foreign language (EFL) inherent with a deficit perspective. In this sense, what is regarded as an error in Chinese learner English with reference to EFL might be an innovation in ChELF that a Chinese speaker creates to cope with an intercultural encounter. Seeing language as fluid, dynamic, emergent, and complex, which has been widely discussed in ELF research (e.g. Jenkins, 2015a, 2015b; Jenkins, Baker & Dewey, 2018; Seidlhofer, 2011), ChELF departs from a perspective of variety but attends to variations in English language practice formed in Chinese speakers’ engagement in intercultural communication. Following the ELF research, which shifts the focus from linguistic outcomes to languaging processes, ChELF diverges from the vision of possible codification that aligns with Chinese variety of English.

In short, a range of names points to different aspects of English in relation to Chinese speakers situated in different spatiotemporal frames that intersect with Chinese individuals’ needs for communication or expression. A line can be drawn roughly between Chinese learner variety of English, which is underscored by an exonormative orientation, and other research strands, which have different research agendas but share an endonormative orientation to embrace Chinese ownership of English and explain Chinese speakers’ creativities in English.

## Converging directions

Current times spotlight Chinese speakers’ increasing needs for international communication, motivating shared interests in justifying Chinese speakers’ ownership of English and exploring the role of English for Chinese speakers in international communication. Three research stands, marked as Chinese variety of English, New

Chinglish, and ChELF, appear to converge in these directions. Extending from his earlier work on Chinese English from a WE perspective (Xu, 2010), Xu (2022) presents an interest in Chinese English from an ELF perspective and explains how some Chinese pragmatic norms go beyond intracultural communication and find their way into intercultural communication. The research adds to our understanding of how Chineseness is retained in Chinese speakers' language practice in intercultural communication. New Chinglish, while focusing on online expressions created by Chinese speakers, includes some examples which have the potential for an international audience to make sense (Lee & Li, 2020; W. Li, 2016, 2018). With transculturalism taken up in ELF research (Baker & Sangiamchit, 2019), New Chinglish, which illustrates translanguaging, has the potential to further the conceptualisation of ELF in relation to Chinese speakers. ChELF extends from the research on ELF in general. As a new research initiative, ChELF helps conceptualise how Chinese speakers engage in 'unbounded' communities of practice in interculturality and connect with a 'bounded' imagined community tied to China. Wang (2018, 2020) focuses on language ideologies and identities in defining ChELF, in that the ownership of English is often an ideological issue. Although a ChELF-oriented analysis of language practice is rare, ELF research data where Chinese speakers are involved offer sporadic insights into ChELF as social practice, which often reveal the 'Chineseness' or the connection with China.

Focusing on ELF for Chinese speakers, the concept of ChELF, expands our understanding of ELF in four aspects: (1) ChELF foregrounds the role of L1 in ELF; (2) it acknowledges the value of national identities associated with the notion of imagined community (Anderson, 1983) among ELF speakers' multiple identities; (3) it readdresses the issue of boundary for ELF speakers in ideological terms; and (4) it reconsiders the issue of territoriality in defining ELF practice in relation to language speakers (see Wang, 2020 for details).

## Conclusion

The article proposes to adopt the name ChELF for the convenience of scholarly communication and tackle terminological puzzles. ChELF, as the acronym spells out, explicates the role of ELF and acknowledges Chinese ownership of English through the 'Ch-' prefix. Researching the particularity of Chinese speakers of ELF among general ELF speakers sets itself as an interrogating topic,

which deserves a notion foregrounding the ELF perspective, celebrating Chinese ownership of English, and reflecting the role of ELF for Chinese individuals in the current times. Rather than merely focusing on the adoption of ELF by Chinese speakers, the construct of ChELF regards Chinese speakers as contributors to ELF both empirically and conceptually. The proposal calls for collaborations among researchers dedicated to Chinese speakers' ownership of English and interested in studying Chinese speakers' creativity in intercultural practices and translanguaging scenarios foregrounded by globalisation and digitalisation today.

## Note

1 While L1 Chinese speakers are distributed worldwide, this article limits the scope of discussion to focus on L1 Chinese speakers permanently based in China, being aware of the complexity of L1 Chinese speakers' use of English in different socio-cultural and socio-political contexts.

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