

Original Research Article

Is China English Transforming into Nativization Stage? A Case Study of ‘modifying-modified’ Sequencing in China English

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ABSTRACT

As China English is gradually identified as a variety of world Englishes rather than an inauthentic deviant from the standard English, a number of research has focused on discussing the existence and codification of China English. Most of the studies concluded that China English is undergoing nativization process in mainland China. However, the previous studies mainly discussed the lexical features in China English. The study aims to discuss the extent to which the codified syntactic feature in China English is used and accepted. Therefore, the present study adopted a corpus-based approach to analyze the use of a codified syntactic feature, ‘modifying-modified’ sequence in China English. Over 1,685 sentences in two corpus were identified and compared. The result shows that despite the fact that the codified syntactic feature has been localized in Chinese context, it is not widely accepted as an appropriate variable, which may indicate that China English has not reached the nativization stage.

1. Introduction

As English has become a world lingua franca, the word ‘English’ began to be transformed into ‘Englishes’ in plural form to acknowledge the existence of global varieties of English. Different varieties of English become less associated with the impression of “lack of proficiency” but a rational choice to express cultural identities and an act to adapt to local contexts (Lowenberg, 1986). The debate over the existence and codification of China English (CE) has attracted much attention in the previous three decades. Considering the large number of Chinese English learners and the increasing inter-and-intra-cultural communications with English worldwide, many scholars argue that CE is an inevitable consequence (e.g. Kirkpatrick & Xu, 2002). What remains debatable is what phase are CE undergoing in the process of developing into a new variety of English.

A number of studies (e.g. Ai & You, 2017; Jiang, 2017; Xu, 2010) have provided evidence supporting the undergoing nativization process of English in China. Nevertheless, the studies primarily focus on lexical and morphological levels, leaving the syntactic structure under-explored. The main manifestations of nativization is the loanwords and loan translations from Chinese “culture words” (Pei & Chi, 1987, p. 20). Moreover, identifying features in Chinese English is only half a way to become a nativized English. What features can be considered as acceptable variables of English in China an equally if not more important factor in nativization phase. As Kachru (1982) suggests that attitudinal process is crucial to nativization. In other words, to what extent those codified syntactic features in CE are perceived as acceptable and appropriate in Chinese social contexts is essential for the argument of CE nativization. In order to fill the gap, the current study adopts a corpus-based approach to probe into one syntactic feature, ‘modifying-modified’ sequence in CE.

In order to contextualized the current study. I will first briefly review the development of CE and the previous studies on ‘modifying-modified’ sequence to provide the rationales of conducting the present study. Then the methodology and result of the collected data will be presented. The implications for current development of CH will be discussed in the end.

2. Literature Review

2.1 From Chinglish to China English

The English use in China is traditionally defined as 'Chinglish' (Jiang, 1995, p. 51), which, as its name suggests, is considered as a pidgin, or an inauthentic mixture combining Chinese thinking with English expressions (Li, 2007). In this sense, the norms to gauge Chinese English users' proficiency are based entirely on inner circle criteria. Ge (1980) is among the first researchers to argue that some English expressions only make sense in Chinese context, such as Four Books, *baihua wen*, Five Classics. Therefore, Ge argues that Chinese English should be regarded as a variety of English rather a deviant from the standard English.

With the increasing research on CE in the past three decades, there seems to be a general acceptance the China English should be regarded as a variety of English in the domain of Asian and World Englishes (Kirkpatrick and Xu, 2002; Xu, 2010). A number of researchers has defined CE with different emphases. The core of CE can be interpreted as "a normative English with Chinese characteristics" (Tian, 2010, p.114).

Based on Butler's five criteria for a native variety of English (1997) and Kachru's (1992a) "three-phase model", Kirkpatrick and Xu (2002) argue that CE should be considered as a developing variety and it is moving from phase one to phase two, which means that CE is a widely used local variety but remains socially unacceptable. Ma and Xu (2017) examine the functional uses of CE based on Kachru's (1992a) four functional uses for nativized English varieties. They argue that CE is transforming from a performance variety to fulfill more functional uses and is gradually moving on to the stage of nativization.

Schneider (2003) proposes five phases (foundation, exonormative stabilization, nativization, endonormative stabilization, and differentiation) for the development of a variety of English. "Nativization" or "indigenization" (Richard, 1983; Kachru, 1982) is defined as the phase when English develops new linguistic features that are so systematic and widely accepted among the users that it is distinct from the 'established' (Platt & Weber, 1980) native speaker varieties. Therefore, the key qualifications in the stage of nativization are systematic localized features and wide acceptance within and beyond the local society.

2.2 'Modifying-modified' sequence in CE

Kirkpatrick (1996) identifies that, in syntactic level, CE follows a modifying-modified sequence in the relationship between subordinate and main clauses. Xu (2010) examined 20 Chinese English newspapers and reports that "there is 'a tendency that written CE prefers initial subordinate clause position" (p. 97). Subordinate clauses in the initial position function as modifying clauses, whereas the main clauses, placed in the final position, function as the modified clauses.

A number of studies also found supporting evidence. For example, Chen (2004) examined Chinese ESL learners' written text and found that out of 50 sentences containing adverbial clauses of time, 49 of them follow the 'modifying-modified' sequence. Yin (2010) compared the positions of subordinate clause in CE and standard English based on 10 news articles in *China Daily* and *Times*. The result shows that "the average frequency of subordinate clauses which precede the main clause in CE is 2.5% higher than those in standard English" (p. 367). Likewise, Jiang (2017) shows that Chinese advanced English learners prefer to place when-, if-, although, and because-subordinate clauses in the initial position.

Although previous studies seem to be unanimous in the notion that CE exists preference to initial position of subordinate clause, we should still be cautious about the result and implications drawn from it due to following considerations. First, the majority of studies on 'modifying-modified' sequence are based on qualitative analysis on small amount of data or limited region in China. Considering that China is geographically vast, regional differences and uneven distribution of educational resources may result in huge difference in their English proficiency. Second, most of the previous studies focus on one particular group of Chinese English learners. Yet, studies comparing different group of Chinese English learners or across different contexts are seldom conducted when investigating the subordinate clause in CE. Third, what is more important is that despite the 'modifying-modified' sequencing is codified as a syntactic feature in CE, could it be an instantiation to support the syntactic nativization in CE is still questionable. In order to fill the obvious gap, the current study adopts a corpus-based approach to compare the positioning preference in when-, if- and although-subordinate clauses in educational settings and Chinese media English. To be more specific, the data collected in the present study include written texts among high school students and university undergraduate students and English news articles in Chinese English newspaper, *China Daily*. The questions the study aims to answer are: (i) will the three types of subordinate clause found in three data sets all follow the 'modifying-modified' sequence? (ii) Will the result support the notion that CE is undergoing nativization stage?

3. Methodology

3.1 Rationale of Selecting when, if and although

The rationale of choosing the subordinators, when, if and although are, firstly they are 'formal indicators of subordination' (Quirke et al. 1985: 997). In other word, they demonstrate clear semantic relationships between the subordinate and main clause, including concession, condition, and time; secondly, they are more frequently used than other complex subordinators, such as provided that, as long as. Therefore, more data could be available for further analysis; thirdly, the Chinese equivalents of although, if and when are all forward-linking elements (Xu, 2010). Hence, it could be presumed that the users of CE would be more inclined to function those subordinator clauses as a modifier to the main clauses (Xu, 2008).

3.2 Data Collection

The data of English texts written by Chinese students were drawn from the Ten-thousand English Compositions of Chinese Learners (TECCL) corpus (Xue, 2015), consisting of 9,864 compositions written by Chinese English learners ranging from elementary school students to postgraduate students between 2011 to 2015. The compositions were collected from 32 provinces in China and cover a wide range of topics.

The current study selected 997 compositions in the TECCL corpus. The key selection criteria are first, the writers had already learned the syntactic structure of subordinate clauses and are able to use the three subordinators with a certain degree of fluency in their own writing tasks; second, the writers should be as geographically separated as possible in order to be more representative of the current trend in China; third, the compositions are up-to-date. As a result, I selected 643 compositions written by high school students (thereafter HSs) and 354 compositions written by university undergraduate students (USs). They were all written in 2015. The total word tokens amount to 169,378 (84,638 from HSs and 84,740 from USs). After the data collection and classification, a number of 'concordance' searches were conducted using Antconc tools with the search-words although, if and when.

Another type of data used in the study is from a Chinese English newspaper, China Daily, which is one of the major English newspapers in China, encompassing various subjects including politics, business, domestic stories, cultural events, entertainment, sports and so on. Considering that China Daily is a state-owned major Chinese newspaper and have most of its branch offices in most major cities in China, the journalists and editors should be highly proficient English users rather than native English speakers.

However, due to the lack of access to Chinese media English corpus, I decided to search equivalent amount of target subordinate clauses in the latest news articles. Consequently, 574 sentences are identified from around 400 news articles posted from 12th to 20th October 2017. The problem in this data collection procedure that the precise word tokens of the total data set are uncertain. However, considering that the purpose of the current study is to compare the frequency and percentage of each position (initial, medial and final) in individual data set, as long as the size of each subordinate clauses in three data sets are comparable, the missing of total word tokens is unlikely to influence the result of the finding.

What should also be noted in the data collection process is that the target subordinate clauses which appear in the news reports' direct quote were excluded from the data for the reason that the sentence structure in the original utterances in regardless of Chinese or English, may influence writer's own syntactic choice.

4. Results and Discussion

Overall 1,685 sentences were identified. The number and percentage of each position of the three subordinators in three data sets are illustrated in Table 1, 2 and 3.

Table 1. Number and percentage of the positions of the three subordinators among high school students

Search word	Number of SC		Initial		Medial		Final
	N	%	N	%	N	%	
Although	43	36	83.7	0	0	7	16.3
If	176	144	81.8	1	0.6	31	17.6
When	338	214	63.3	0	0	124	36.7
Total	557	394	70.7	1	0.2	162	29.1

Table 2. Number and percentage of the positions of the three subordinators among undergraduate students

Search word	Number of SC		Initial		Medial		Final
	N	%	N	%	N	%	
Although	30	25	83.3	0	0	5	16.7
If 251	221	88.0	0	0	30	12.0	
When 273	146	53.4	1	0.4	126	46.2	
Total 554	392	70.8	1	0.1	161	29.1	

Table 3. Number and percentage of the positions of the three subordinators in China Daily

Search word	Number of SC		Initial		Medial		Final
	N	%	N	%	N	%	
Although	41	31	75.6	1	2.4	9	22
If 219	121	55.3	8	3.6	90	41.1	
When 314	116	36.9	1	0	197	62.7	
Total 574	268	46.7	10	1.7	296	51.6	

The result shows that HSs and CSs have strong preference to the initial position of all target subordinate clauses, which accounts for 70.7% and 70.8% of the total. On the contrary, the data collected from news articles shows only slight preference to final positions (51.6%) in total.

A close analysis of each type of subordinate clause reveals that the initial position preference of subordinator although does not change evidently in the three data sets, taking up 83.7%, 83.3% and 75.6% respectively. The inclination to initial position of if-subordinate clauses is also prominent among HSs and CSs. What is noticeable is that despite that CSs have higher proficiency in English comparing to HSs, CSs show stronger preference to initial position in if-subordinate clauses. In contrast, the preference to initial position decreased significantly in news articles, just slightly over half of if-subordinate clauses were placed in the initial position. Meanwhile, the medial position becomes more favored comparing to the HS and CS. The most salient contrast is in the positioning of when-subordinate clause. 63.3% of when-subordinate clauses among HSs took the initial position, which is lower than that in if and although subordinate clauses. The preference to initial position of when-subordinator among CSs also decreased to 53.4%, slightly higher than the final position (46.2%). What is interesting is that the final position of when-subordinate clause is evidently preferred in news articles, accounting for 62.7% of the total, whereas the percentage of the initial position is 36.9%.

According to Quirk et al. (1985:1037) "subordinate clause may be positioned initially, medially or at the end of their superordinate clauses". The current study shows the predominant preference to initial positioning in if, although, when subordinate clauses among HS and CS, which supports the "modifying-modified" sequencing in written form of Chinese English. However, the preference of positioning when initially decreases among CSs. It may due to their increased English proficiency which allows them to use structures with more flexibility and their growing knowledge of the norms from inner circle nations. What is also notable is that the initial position preference of if subordinate clause is even more salient among CS. The possible explanation is that HSs often use if subordinate clause in typical and short expressions such as 'if I'm in trouble', 'if I need help'. These final positioned subordinate clauses may reveal that the pedagogical standard in Chinese education is still based on exonormative models mainly from British or American English. Students, when they first learn a syntactic structure, tend to memorize the norms in order to avoid making 'errors'. As for undergraduate students, the use of if-subordinate clause is much more flexible and the initial positioning seems to be less conceived as errors or inappropriate. Overall, the data from educational settings shows that although students' overall English proficiency increases, which is manifested in their increased length of composition and word types, the 'modifying-modified' sequence is still largely preferred.

However, the data collected from news articles seems to contradict the previous findings. The possible reason is that the writers of news articles intentionally choose to avoid the 'modifying-modified' sequencing and write English sentences according to native English standard or centrist criteria. The result may indicate that in the more formal and official contexts, using 'standard' English is generally preferred or even required in order to show high degree of "professional".

The apparent distinction in the position of target subordinate clause may reflect the attitudinal differences on English in China. Chinese cultures put great emphasis on the role of standards (Kirkpatrick & Xu, 2002). Since China is one of the expanding circle (Kachru, 1992a) countries, China English is termed as "norm-dependent" (Kachru, 1992a). Therefore, the state-own publication company becomes one of the key media to implement the exonormative model of English. Second, despite the exonormative norms may be maintained in media and education settings (e.g. if subordinate clause taught as collocation in final position), there is apparently a prevalence of localizing English to meet pragmatic needs.

Kachru(1982) highlights the simultaneous existence of two processes in development of a non-native variety, an attitudinal process which is crucial for indigenization or nativization and a linguistic process which is essential for localization. Most of the previous studies on the 'modifying-modified' sequence may provide ample evidence for the localization of CE rather than nativization. The current study in concordance with the findings in other studies in the sense that the 'modifying-modified' syntactic structure is widely used in localized register. Nevertheless, the study also reveals that there is a still a strong preference to centrist standards, that is the 'norm' generated by "inner circle" (Kachru, 1992a) nations. The exonormative attitudes (Schneider, 2011, p. 117) is still prevalent at least in more formal communications or more professional contexts. As Kachru (1982) notes that "the local model is still low on the attitudinal scale, though it may be widely used in various functions" (p. 56). From the above findings in current study, it might be too haste to state that Chinese English is transforming into the nativization phase.

5. Conclusion

The current study adopts a corpus-based approach to investigate the extent to which the 'modifying-modified' sequence is used and accepted in Chinese English. The study selected three frequently subordinators, if, although, when to see if the initial position of subordinate clauses is preferred in order to function as a modifier of the main clauses. Based on 1000 compositions written by Chinese high school students and university undergraduate students and over 500 news articles in China Daily, the result shows that Chinese English learners generally have a preference on the initial position, which indicate that English in China has been localized to a large extent. However, in the Chinese media English, the strong preference of final position in when-subordinate clause and the decreased preferences in overall initial positioning indicate that features in CE has not widely accepted as appropriate variables and English in China still adopts an exonormative model to assess people's English proficiency. The present study may indicate a number of areas that are worthy of future research. First, since the nativization stage is related more to appropriateness and acceptance of certain codified features, it would be fruitful investigating people's attitudes towards certain features or comparing different frequency of lexical and syntactic features in various contexts. Second, the current study limits to one syntactic feature. More studies on syntactic or semantic features would provide more evidence on the extent of codification of China English.

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