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Interpretations of "Chinglish": Native Speakers, Language Learners and the Enregisterment of a Stigmatized Code

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ABSTRACT

As a linguistic curiosity, Chinglish has long fascinated native speakers of English, prompting numerous studies that analyze its form with a view towards either eliminating it or accepting it as a viable Standard English variant. In this article, I examine how various social groups involved in foreign language education in China, including Chinese students, foreign teachers and linguists, enregister Chinglish as a linguistic variety. I argue that Chinglish is not distinguished by the presence or absence of any particular linguistic feature, but a label produced in the intersubjective engagements between language learners and native speakers. Chinglish is structured by and reinforces the relations of expertise within the Chinese English language speech community, thus representing larger anxieties about nationalism and modernization in a global context.*

INTRODUCTION: THE METADISCURSIVE CONSTRUCTION OF "CHINGLISH"

> Plain English is a language based on verbs. It is simple, concise, vigorous and, above all, clear. Chinglish is a language based on nouns – vague, general, abstract nouns. It is complicated, long-winded, ponderous, and obscure (Pinkham 2000:170).

"Chinglish," a perceived incorrect or deformed version of Standard English, came to international prominence during the recent 2008 Summer Olympics and Paralympics in Beijing.[1] For many years now, foreign visitors to China have been capturing and circulating examples of nonstandard English, often of a nonsensical or humorous quality (Radtke 2007, 2009). With the imminent arrival of thousands of international tourists, the Beijing city government and the Beijing Organizing Committee for the Olympic Games initiated several projects to eliminate Chinglish in the city before international tourists arrived. These included: training taxi drivers, both through classroom English instruction and the use of recorded

lessons on cassette; recruiting over 100,000 foreign language-proficient volunteers to offer information, assistance and translation to international tourists for the Games (giving priority to applicants fluent in both English and Chinese); and establishing a language hotline for Beijing residents to notify authorities about public displays of Chinglish (BBC 2006; Jiang 2003:4). As several stories in the state media made clear, Chinglish would be subjected to the same kind of mass campaign that had marked the socialist era (China Daily 2002; Xinhua 2007). The consequences of ignoring Chinglish, according to the logic of these official pronouncements, would be utter confusion and ridicule from foreign visitors. As Chen Lin, a retired foreign language professor and consultant to the Beijing Speaks Foreign Languages Program, was quoted in a China Daily news story, "We want everything to be correct. Grammar, words, culture, everything… Beijing will have thousands of visitors coming. We don't want anyone laughing at us" (China Daily 2007).

Ridding Beijing of Chinglish during the Olympics may have ostensibly been a precaution against misunderstandings by foreign visitors, but as Chen's words make clear, it was also about the potential of foreigners "laughing at us." The explicit interpretation of Chinglish as a barrier to understanding (a communicative issue) overshadows the implicit negative valuation of its speakers (a symbolic issue), and the extension of this evaluation to the social group, and nation, as a whole. The anxieties of modernity in China and the question of whether a person can be both properly Asian and properly modern at the same time are thus enacted through the issue of foreign languages and their proper use in context. The discourse of Chinglish, in other words, is a discourse on modern Chinese identity. In this article, I examine both how particular forms of English language speech in China are labeled as Chinglish, and the related politics of language learner-native speaker interactions which structure these speech events. Rather than attempting to provide a universal definition of Chinglish, based on syntactic, pragmatic or lexical variation from a native speaker norm, I document what Chinglish means to various stakeholders in China's English as a Second Language (ESL) industry, and how Chinglish is subsequently enregistered as a stigmatized linguistic code.

The data for this article are drawn from twelve months of ethnographic research conducted in the northeastern Chinese city of Shenyang, including interviews I conducted with English language teachers (both foreign and Chinese), school administrators, parents and students. Over the course of my research I visited 17 different educational institutions, both public and private, five of which I chose to focus on for the bulk of my research. Aside from the unstructured interviews, I also observed English languages classes, attended promotional events, and participated in informal conversations in school offices and cafeterias.

Among all of the groups I interviewed, Chinglish was a prevalent concern. The term was employed by Chinese teachers (ethnic Chinese non-native speakers of English), foreign teachers (native speakers of English teaching in China), and the students themselves to derogatively label English considered to be non-standard

or inflected with Chinese. I draw upon Agha's (2003) concept of enregisterment, whereby particular variants are linked to ideological schemes through a constant process of metadiscursive commentary and regimentation, to understand this process. The social value of the register derives not from the substantive linguistic form of the utterances themselves, but from pre-existing schemas of metalinguistic interpretation. In other words, the labeling of a particular utterance as Chinglish may have some relation to the code features of the utterance itself (many of which I will discuss below), but there is no definitive diagnostic or exhaustive list of code features which can account for all of these attributions. Even when such a treatment is attempted, the features which are used to identify an utterance as Chinglish differ among the various social and professional groupings in the ESL community, and indeed those features may even overlap with the speech of native speakers.

For example, as Joan Pinkham, author of *The Translator's Guide to Chinglish* (2000), argues in the quote at the beginning of this article, Chinglish is a form of English based on nouns while "plain" English is one based on verbs. Pinkham offers some consideration of how Chinglish is produced – namely, through the transfer of Chinese semantic and pragmatic norms into English – but many of her examples would not look out of place in a native speaker corpus. The admonition to write with verbs is a standard of writing advice for native speakers and not simply ESL learners. Indeed, several of Pinkham's Chinglish examples are explicitly drawn from English native-speaker produced texts, and advise Chinese translators to avoid phrases such as "image packaging" and "impression management" (Pinkham 2000:174). While these may violate prescriptive directives for clear writing, they would at the same time be familiar to a current generation of Western management consultants and publicists – and no one is arguing that they speak Chinglish. While Chinese translators do occasionally use awkward or nonsensical phrasings in their translations of English texts, the problem that remains is one of determining where "plain" or "real" English ends and Chinglish begins.

Such definitive distinctions between Chinglish and English are, as I will show, impossible. Chinglish can only be given a measure of structural coherence by its incorporation into prescriptive – and thus ideological – systems of value. However, judgments about Chinglish, no matter the basis on which the ascription to this category is made, relate not to the content of the utterance but to the intersubjective relations between interactants, specifically their relative levels of authority, expertise, and social capital. As Michael Silverstein argues in his seminal article on ideologies of Standard English, forms of English marked by variation from native speaker norms are portrayed as "denotationally impoverished with respect to the more 'truth-full' Standard" (1996:9). Speech which departs from the accepted value of plain and clear English is stigmatized by listeners as incorrect and obfuscating, thus faulting the speaker's inability to express things logically. Such stigmatization is often coincident, as though to lessen its effect, with an

underlying hint of charm and humor at the speaker's apparent confusion. Silverstein argues that such arguments about language are really arguments about people and their respective class and status relations. The value of a language variety comes to metonymically represent the social value of the speakers themselves.

The standardization of an international variety of English – often called global English (Crystal 2007) – informs this process of enregistering Chinglish as a stigmatized variant. English in China is mediated by distinct relations of power by which some individuals (teachers, native speakers, language experts) possess the social authority to judge the discourse of others. The social valuations of various registers may be shared, but the right to label certain utterances as belonging to one or another register is reserved for those "in-the-know," who through the proper deployment of semiotic resources (university degrees, time spent abroad, clothing, mannerisms, highlighting of friendships or foreign links) can assert their authority to interpret the words of others. All of these indexical associations tie individuals to a notion of foreignness, thus metonymically reproducing the perceived "natural" order of international relations where the West serves as a linguistic model for developing regions (Phillipson 1992). It is no coincidence, I argue, that Chinglish is circulated for both humorous and prescriptive effect at the very time when Western economic dominance in Asia is ebbing. Chinglish is a representation both of attempts to reinforce Western dominance in the linguistic sphere and of Chinese ambivalence about the perceived inequalities of contemporary modernization and globalization.

I begin with a summary of the structural and linguistic factors which affect the production of target language utterances in the Chinese ESL context. In the subsequent two sections, I examine how native speakers of English and Chinese speakers of English, respectively, understand Chinglish and how it is enregistered as a stigmatized variant of Standard English. Finally, based on the variable character of such definitions, I propose a new model for understanding Chinglish which draws upon the intersubjective and dialogic nature of discourse rather than the features of the utterance itself.

CHINGLISH AS A PRODUCT OF CROSS-LINGUISTIC INFLUENCE

Undoubtedly, English production by Chinese speakers is marked by several features of grammatical transfer, also called cross-linguistic influence (Odlin 2003). This is especially so in the case of speakers who learn the language in Chinese schools rather than abroad. Developing fluency in a foreign language is extremely difficult without high-quality linguistic input from the surrounding environment or from native-speaking teachers and associates (Gass & Varonis 1994; Krashen 1985). One dimension of transfer is phonetic: the lack of [ð] and [θ] phonemes in Chinese leads to their replacement by the more familiar [z] and [s] (thus

saying "muzzer" instead of "mother" and "sroo" instead of "through") in the speech of Chinese learners (Jiang 1995).

Language learners are also forced to fall back on the grammatical patterns of their mother language to fill in the gaps in their knowledge of the target, leading to, in the case of a large group of speakers, a common "interlanguage" which combines the basic form of English with some grammatical characteristics of Chinese (Corder 1981; Selinker 1972). Drawing upon a vast body of spoken and written data produced by Chinese students, Yip (1995) examines the features of Chinese English and the syntactic pathways which have led to the unique utterances of language learners. One of the key differences, she argues, between Chinese and English is the prominence of 'topic' and 'subject' respectively in sentence construction.

Zhe ke shu yezi hen da.
this CLSF tree leaf very big
'This tree, (its) leaves are very big.' (adapted from Yip 1995:75)

This is but one example of the way in which Chinese tends to foreground topic information (the tree) rather than subject information (the leaves). In speaking English, Chinese students often produce sentences constructed on a similar basis, such as "My aunt, everybody likes her" (Yip 1995:89; see also Young 1982). In addition, there is also a marked tendency to place adverbial phrases after the subject of a sentence.[2] The following utterances, drawn from classroom discourse during my research, are direct transpositions of Chinese syntax into English:

'I very much like your clothes.'
'*Wo ting xihuan ni de yifu*.'

'Mary yesterday go to the store.'
'*Mali zuotian qu le shangdian*.'

Sociolinguistic studies have also attempted to delineate the production of Chinglish as a matter of pragmatic difference from English language speech norms. Vittachi (2002), in a humorous article meant to identify styles of speech indigenous to Hong Kong English, argues that some Chinglish phrases are not only acceptable within the Chinese linguistic repertoire, but even expected in certain cases. He offers the phrase "How to spell?" as an example of an ungrammatical English sentence which, nonetheless, is often used to elicit vital information in conversation; the request is particularly useful in a linguistic context where, unlike the Chinese *pinyin* form of romanization, English spelling and phonology often do not match. Likewise, Bolton (2003) places Chinglish (and in particular, its Hong Kong variant) within a broader historical context originating in the first British contacts with the Chinese mainland. He argues that the distinctiveness of Hong Kong English acts as a vehicle for the maintenance of a distinct Hong Kong identity – particularly in the face of Hong Kong's recent return to mainland Chinese

control. His description of Hong Kong English pragmatic norms is directed towards the provision of a "space" for this variety. "Is it possible to argue that the conditions now exist for a recognition of the autonomy of Hong Kong English on a par with other Englishes in the Asian region?" (Bolton 2002:31).

Analysis of the cross-linguistic influence of Chinese upon English raises the question of what the presence or absence of Chinese grammatical forms in English might indicate about the speaker. The objective descriptions of the sources of Chinese influence cannot be divorced from evaluative judgments about the speakers. Yip, for instance, uses the phrase "Chinese-English Interlanguage," a technical term she prefers to the more haphazard Chinglish, to indicate that these forms are fleeting linguistic expressions produced by speakers on the road to fluency, rather than permanent features of a linguistic repertoire. Others see them as relatively stable features of a Chinese variety of English (often called China English) which can stand on its own as a viable vernacular, a local instantiation of a global linguistic form (Hu 2004; Wei & Fei 2003). They reject the term Chinglish, or confine its application to the overtly political Maoist forms of English popular during the height of socialism. Finally, Bolton and others argue that Chinglish can be seen as a vehicle for new forms of sociolinguistic identity in changing political contexts. My aim here is not to list the inconsistencies in how linguists and other language professionals discuss cross-linguistic influence, but to point out that such discussions include implicit evaluations about those forms of speech.

I turn now to the interpretations of native speakers of English who encounter Chinese English speakers or Chinese-produced English texts, including foreign teachers in Chinese English language schools, university-based linguists and people observing Chinglish in the news or over the internet. In particular, I argue that, unlike linguistic studies, judgments concerning the constitution of utterances by Chinese speakers of English as Chinglish, or not, are not simply dependent upon the code features of the language. Rather, these judgments are predicated upon the intersubjective dynamic between the Chinese speaker and foreign listener. The "Chinglish" label can be attached to utterances in multiple ways, and in turn, imply multiple consequences and meanings.

FOREIGN PERSPECTIVES ON CHINGLISH

In this section I consider multiple constructions of Chinglish as a meaningful linguistic category by diverse groups of foreign participants in the Chinese English language speech community. This community is constituted through multiple conversational interactions both within the classroom and outside between Chinese English language students and foreigners, primarily their language teachers but also linguists, foreign businesspeople and other expatriates. It is set off both from the surrounding monolingual Chinese environment (an association many Chinese foreign language speakers actively cultivate through symbolic associations

of dress, consumption and habit with Western culture) and from native English speech communities in foreign countries. Chinese and foreign members of this speech community, however, are also divided by differing levels of expertise in relation to English.

An example of this dynamic arose during an intermediate English class at a large private language school that I observed in 2005. Lily, a young female Chinese student, responded to a question by her foreign English teacher, Gary, an American in his mid-20s who had been teaching in China for about a year.[3] On this occasion he was soliciting responses from his students to the question, "What did you do last night?" as part of an exercise in the use of past-tense verb forms. Following upon the responses of some of her classmates, Lily told him that she and her friend had eaten at a restaurant, and after some further prompting about the content of her meal, volunteered to Gary: "We go to restaurant. We eat cock." Taken aback, Gary fumbled for several seconds before asking Lily to repeat herself. Lily, apparently aware of his confusion, turned to the student beside her and whispered in Chinese, "Zenme shuo 'jirou' [How do you say 'chicken']?" At this point, Gary, who had studied some Chinese, was able to offer a correction to Lily. "For that, we… yeah, we usually say 'chicken.' Cock is… well it's kind of like the same thing but you shouldn't use it that way. It's a, you know, it's a boy chicken. But the word is a little bit huangde [yellow]." Note here how Gary codeswitches into Chinese to punctuate his explanation, using a bit of Chinese slang that his students would understand; the word 'yellow' is a Chinese euphemism for off-color or pornographic. His final comment provoked a great deal of amusement from the class, who probably recognized the nature of the linguistic confusion, in that Chinese contains a similar metonymy between chickens (*ji*) and the male genitalia (*jiba* – but also shortened, often jokingly, as *ji*). Lily laughed too, but covered her mouth as she did so in a typical expression of embarrassment. After the class, I sat with Gary in the school's teachers' office as he prepared for his later classes, and brought up the incident. "Oh god, wasn't that funny. I didn't know what to say. That's China for you."

Gary implicitly enregisters Lily's statement, by highlighting the metonymic association between the utterance and China itself, as an example of Chinglish. Chinglish was a designation used by Gary and other foreign educators to differentiate what their students sometimes said, or wrote, from Standard English. As his comment indicates ("That's China for you") Chinglish both frustrated teachers – in their attempts to inculcate native speaker-like fluency in their students – and amused them. It was discourse unique to the Chinese context and their experience teaching in a foreign country. Stories of this sort circulated throughout the community of foreign teachers, who numbered several hundred in Shenyang, and typically focused on the unintentionally embarrassing or humorous particulars of Chinese students' linguistic production. After his class that evening, I joined Gary and several other foreign teachers at an expat bar down the street from their school. Over cold pints of imported beer, Gary repeated the incident with Lily from his

perspective, drawing particular attention to her word choice. "I asked, you know, 'What'd you guys eat?' And she's just, 'Cock'… just like that," he told the others, acting out her response and expression. Another widely circulated example derived from a Chinese teacher of oral English who had conducted a seminar at a local English school. While giving a lesson on English phonetics, he had translated the Chinese *baoman zui* (meaning to round the lips for the production of certain English phonemes) as "plump-mouth." His lesson led to this calque being widely repeated by Chinese students and teachers at the school. Many of the foreign teachers found both the word and the attendant facial expression (lips pursed widely open) comical, and both were imitated and laughed at during moments of socializing. Shared in this way, stories of Chinglish serve to reinforce claims to the linguistic hegemony of native speakers (Davies 2003). Foreigners incorporate themselves into a knowing public who are capable of interpreting of the speech of others.

Examples of Chinglish also circulate in online communities; in fact, most native speakers of English initially encounter Chinglish, not in its ephemeral oral quality, but in the form of pictures. Such visual forms of Chinglish are images which can be readily disseminated in virtual space. There are numerous sites and blogs devoted to recording and documenting bilingual signage from China (and other regions of Asia), whether of eclectic items taken from printed menus, washroom instructions or obscure directives on public announcement boards.[4] Signs that I observed during my research, such as one at the Shenyang airport directing passengers to "Civil Arrivals" ("Where," asked one of my foreign informants, "do the 'uncivil' arrivals go?") or those planted in ornamental lawns advising the reader "Protecting the green color is our shared wish," would find themselves at home in such collections. As material artifacts (although often virtually presented) such examples can be attributed to human error on the behalf of Chinese translators or the result of idiosyncrasies in machine translation. One example which I observed during my research, but which has also made numerous appearances in online collections, is the translation of "dry goods" (*ganhuo*) signs in Chinese supermarkets as "fuck goods." This confusion has been attributed, by the linguist Victor Mair, in a 31 May 2006 post to the weblog Language Log, to the semantic range of the Chinese character for "dry" (*gan*) which, after the character simplification efforts of the 1950s, includes the verb "to do." As in English, "do" also exists as slang for sex, and by way of translation software, "dry" becomes "fuck."

In a recent published collection of Chinglish photographs, the long-time German resident of Beijing, Oliver Radtke, weighs the possibility of ridiculing Chinglish, and by extension Chinese English speakers, against the benefits of recording it: "I am more convinced than ever that Chinglish *has* to stay. It's a window into the Chinese mind, a phenomenon that goes beyond cheap jokes and finger pointing" (Radtke 2009:5). His book is intended partly as a tribute to Chinglish and partly as a historical document, insofar as it attempts to preserve a linguistic form he feels is endangered by overzealous public officials. Radtke's book also

features an interview with Mair, who maintains that Chinglish is valuable, not because it is humorous, but because it is revealing.

> As a scholar of Chinese language, one wants to get beyond the humor of a particular instance of Chinglish and figure out what caused it to happen in the first place. This is what I refer to as the *etiology* of a particular mistranslation. I don't think this kind of research is at all shallow. It frequently requires a great deal of effort and ingenuity to come up with a satisfactory, convincing answer. For the pure linguist, research on Chinglish is its own reward." [Mair, interviewed in Radtke 2009:10; emphasis in original]

The significance of Chinglish, for Mair, is that it can reveal to the scholar the relationship between languages. By understanding the etiology of how Chinglish is produced – in other words, by excavating its linguistic origins – the linguist can better understand the process of English acquisition in Chinese students. But one is also struck by the evident pleasure derived from this process – it is, after all, "its own reward" – and the sense that Chinglish is less a problem of translation than an intellectual puzzle to be worked over, pondered and eventually solved by the linguist as detective.

Despite the lack of a clear set of diagnostics or descriptions of what constitutes Chinglish, native English speakers nonetheless demonstrate multiple interpretations of what Chinglish means in the mouths of Chinese speakers. I would include here the reactions of foreign teachers, nostalgic preservationists, linguists, and writing prescriptivists such as Pinkham. Her guide to translators emphasizes a sense of lack in the linguistic capabilities of Chinese speakers, and asserts the unquestioned credentials of the native speaker as arbiter of usage. Foreign teachers, on the other hand, concentrate on the embarrassing aspects of Chinglish and use it to sustain their own sense of separateness and status within the Chinese English speech community. And finally, linguists and other experts point to Chinglish as an intellectual puzzle that can be used to reveal aspects of Chinese thought and language use. I now turn to the similarly diverse interpretations of the meaning of Chinglish by Chinese speakers.

CHINESE PERSPECTIVES ON CHINGLISH

Among Chinese, there appear to be several broad interpretive frames for Chinglish, each centered on a particular group within the ESL community. At the most authoritative level are translators, professors, school administrators and educational officials (who I will call here Chinese foreign language professionals). Next are Chinese English language teachers working in public and private schools. Finally, there are the language students themselves, who can range from young children in bilingual kindergartens to adults in business English or examination preparation classes.[5] Here I will focus on the active ideological representations of adults,

addressing each group's interpretations of Chinglish in turn and then examining their points of similarity and difference.

Chinese foreign language professionals differentiate Chinglish (*zhongshi yingyu*) from China English (*zhongguo yingyu*), a distinction meant to highlight the validity of some forms of unique linguistic production in China (Li 1993). China English is a form of the language that – explicitly drawing upon a Humboldtian paradigm – is "mainly determined by the intrinsic way of thinking of the Chinese people and by China's unique society and culture" (Wan 2005:42).[6] In this formulation, China English uses Standard English to express uniquely Chinese concepts by way of transliterating Chinese words (such as "mahjong" or "tai chi"), translating unique Chinese expressions into English (the "Four Modernizations" or "iron rice bowl") or coining new English words to express Chinese concepts ("barefoot doctor" or "bird's nest soup"). Much of the acceptable invention of China English is lexical and derives from attempts by Chinese translators to felicitously calque idiomatic Chinese phrases into English: "capitalist roader" and "right deviationist thinking," for instance, were invented to express the meanings of the Chinese terms *zouzipai* and *youqing* respectively (Cheng 1992).

Language which does not conform to Standard English conventions of expression, but "deforms" them in the process of expressing Chinese thought to a foreign audience is, conversely, negatively valued and labeled as Chinglish (Wan 2005:41). As with Pinkham's *The Translator's Guide to Chinglish*, the solution becomes one of increasing educational standards and refining pedagogy. Wang (2000) argues, for instance, that Chinese translators do not possess sufficient familiarity with English to express Chinese thought appropriately in it – a deficit which, conveniently, Chinese foreign language professionals are ideally positioned to remedy. Wang stresses that overcoming Chinglish requires translators to, "not only be proficient in Chinese and English, but also become familiar with the lifestyles of people in English-speaking countries, their style of thinking [*siwei fangshi*] and linguistic customs. They should constantly pay attention to English's developing tendencies [*fazhan dongtai*], listen to English radio, and read original English authors and essays" (Wang 2000:31; see also Zhuang 2000).

The Chinese teachers with whom I worked took this advice to heart. Many listened to foreign radio broadcasts (and internet podcasts), read English books and took university classes on British and American culture; above all, they were consummately interested in life in foreign countries, asking about everything from living arrangements and driving habits to dining options and wedding ceremonies. With this cultural grounding, they not only saw themselves as better language teachers but also as better positioned to identify and root out examples of Chinglish usage.

Their notions of Chinglish, however, were far broader than Chinese foreign language professionals, tending to collapse the Chinglish–China English distinction made above. Joyce, for instance, is a young professional Chinese English teacher I interviewed in 2005. She obtained a much-coveted undergraduate

degree in business management from a British university but returned to China several years later after her mother fell ill from cancer. While working to support her family, Joyce had translated the social capital of her degree into a teaching position at a private English language school in Shenyang geared towards adult education. She now spends the vast majority of her time teaching business and international English to students and corporate employees.

While in many ways Joyce was forced by circumstances to become an English teacher, she also told me that she had developed a larger goal: helping the Chinese population to improve its level of English. "You listen to people, they every day speak some kind of Chinglish. I want to cut it out! They should study harder… if listen to me, I tell them, English is an international language, you should speak it that way." For Joyce, speaking Standard English – as she had learned it in Britain – should be the goal of every foreign language student in China. There is no room, in her formulation of the problem, for the "intrinsic way of thinking of the Chinese people" to shape their production of English. I later discovered that this focus for her work stemmed not simply from her foreign experience, but from the lessons she had learned growing up in China where variation from the norm of Mandarin Chinese can mark a person as backwards and uneducated. She told me, while switching her own speech into Chinese, "Actually my mother is from Beijing, but my father is from Changchun, so he speaks a regional vernacular [*fangyan*]… At university, my professor didn't have an accent. My tutor, she didn't have an accent either. So, I think the higher a person's quality [*suzhi*] the less of an accent they have."

Speaking Standard English, for Joyce and other Chinese teachers, is the primary index of desirable social attributes such as education and personal quality. The idea of quality within contemporary Chinese social discourse refers to far more than respectability or class – it goes, instead, to the very heart of the idea of modernity itself (Anagnost 2004; Kipnis 2006). As Vanessa Fong describes it, in her study of young people living through China's one-child policy, "high quality" represents "a kind of ideal personhood associated with urban modernity" (2007:86). To speak Chinglish is thus to demonstrate one's low quality, one's inability to participate in modern China's reawakening.[7] As put by Tanya, a female Chinese graduate student who was pursuing a degree in English, "Sometimes, even with my teacher, I make that kind of mistake. I will say *sehui* ["society" with a vernacular pronunciation], but it should be *shehui*. I feel very, I think, awkward when my language… can I say, it betrays me?" Here, the intrusion of the vernacular is a betrayal of the performance of modernity, a revelation to the listener – a professor no less – that the speaker belongs to an unsophisticated majority composed of peasants and laborers, rather than an elite and educated minority. Teachers thus perceived – and corrected – any variation from native English speaker norms as undesirable examples of Chinglish.

Chinese students exhibited similar ideological evaluations as their teachers – non-native variation was considered almost universally undesirable – but tended

to lack the authority and expertise to judge the accuracy of utterances. None of the English language students I interviewed had been abroad, and most of those with university degrees had not majored in English. As a result, students identified a vast array of perceived linguistic errors as Chinglish: a Chinese accent when speaking English, the use of Chinese grammar in the production of English utterances, and codeswitching between English and Chinese, especially the substitution of Chinese words for English when one could not remember the proper word. Students also tended to fetishize readily available linguistic markers as convenient indexes of language fluency, such as knowledge of English slang and idioms, with accent being considered the most reliable marker of validity.

Many Chinese English classes feature an inordinate amount of instruction in pronunciation. Students learn the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) from a young age, and most textbooks provide IPA renderings of English words along with the spelling. Some private schools had classes specifically focused on pronunciation, where students would spend their classroom hours repeating the teacher's words as accurately as possible and correcting miniscule variations in accent. This focus on accent reflects a common perception that speech intrinsically marked as "sounding Chinese" must represent the production of sub-standard Chinese English.

Fei Ge was one student that I interviewed who repeatedly expressed this point of view. Now in his forties, Fei Ge had been learning English for over twenty years. While studying to be a Japanese translator at one of Shenyang's universities, his interest in English had been stimulated by BBC news broadcasts on the radio. Working with tutors and from books he had purchased, Fei Ge managed over the years to become a reasonably proficient English speaker. His pride, however, was his accent. Fei Ge liked to take me over to a newly opened foreign coffee shop in Shenyang so that he could order in English. Taking out his notebook, in which he kept track of English words or phrases he had heard on television or seen in public, he would point to each individual entry and repeat it for me out loud. "Bee-yu-tee… Sa-lon… Beauty salon." As I repeated it back to him, he would then take his pencil and make phonetic notations next to the word. "I speak everything, I want it sound beautiful. Like I born speak the language." Fei Ge also used an electronic dictionary in his quest for the perfect accent, a common tool for most language students in China. These small devices allow the user to input Chinese characters and receive an English translation. Fei Ge's even had a built-in speaker which would say the word for him, from which he would attempt to mimic the pronunciation perfectly.

To summarize, in the sections above I have provided an overview of how perspectives on Chinglish vary across several groups marked by differential access to indexical markers of fluency and expertise (see Table 1). The most salient division is that between foreigners and Chinese. Foreigners can draw upon their status as native speakers to unproblematically judge Chinese utterances as texts as Chinglish or not. The precise kinds of language which are enregistered as

TABLE 1. *Summary of the diverse perceptions of Chinglish organized by social group.*

Social Group	Interpretation	Examples of Utterances Enregistered as Chinglish
Foreign Visitors and Observers	Humorous	Inappropriate translation (of signs, documents, etc.): "Fuck goods." "Deformed man toilet."
Foreign Teachers	Humorous	Inappropriate word choice or calque: "We eat cock." "I will furiously study." "Make the plump mouth."
Foreign Linguists	Evidence of language acquisition	All of the above
Foreign Translators and Editors	Barrier to effective communication	Overuse of nouns: "There have been good harvests in agriculture in recent years." Inappropriate lexical choices:"Impression management"
Chinese Foreign Language Professionals	Barrier to effective communication	All of the above, but excluding English which expresses Chinese concepts: "Capitalist roader" "Barefoot doctor"
Chinese Teachers	Evidence of low personal quality	Chinese accent; Intrasentential English-Chinese codewsitching: "Here I teach but, uh, *guowai* [in foreign countries] I am student." Any Deviation from Standard English
Chinese Foreign Language Students	Evidence of low personal quality	Chinese accent; Any *Perceived* Deviation from Standard English: "Long time no see."

Chinglish, and the subsequent interpretation of what this register means, vary greatly. Both foreign observers (those who view texts) and teachers (who also include verbal language) focus on the humorous aspects of Chinglish and the pragmatic inappropriateness of certain signs and utterances. Linguists address the same content, but see Chinglish as linguistically revelatory discourse highlighting the pathways of acquisition for Chinese students. Translators and editors regard Chinglish as a violation of prescriptivist norms, and thus a barrier to effective communication.

From the Chinese side, Chinese foreign language professionals differentiate substandard Chinglish, which disrupts effective international communication, from acceptable China English, which expresses unique Chinese concepts – a separation that can only be recognized and legitimated by their credentialed authority. Chinese teachers take a broader view and include in the category of Chinglish any discourse marked by a Chinese accent, code-switching or other deviation from native speaker norms. Rather than a simple barrier to communication, however, Chinglish indexes low personal quality and inability to participate in China's modernity. Finally, Chinese students agree with their Chinese teachers, but their lack of expert knowledge about Standard English norms causes them to include a greater range of utterances and code features as potential forms of Chinglish.

THE OMNIPRESENT NATIVE SPEAKER

Going back over my recordings of the class I recounted above, where Lily uttered the phrase "we eat cock" to her foreign teacher, I later realized that responses by other students to Gary's question were also riddled with errors. Even the utterance directly preceding Lily's marked phrase ("we at the restaurant") is a direct grammatical transfer from Chinese (*women zai fandian*) and, by the strict criteria of many of the groups I outlined above (particularly Chinese teachers and students), would be considered Chinglish. Yet in the context of this classroom example, it went unnoticed. To think about it another way, had Lily phrased herself in a more innocuous manner, saying for instance, "we eat hen," the sentence would likely have only been met with a teacher initiated repair, the ESL equivalent of a correction, and the class would have moved on without further comment. It was the content of the utterance itself, particularly its suggestive content, rather than its linguistic form which qualified Lily's words as Chinglish. That qualification was effectively dependent upon the interpretive action of Gary as a native English speaker. I now want to consider the complex interactions among the groupings I described above and how Chinglish is enregistered within the interdiscursive space between them.

Native speakers are widely considered the ultimate arbiters of acceptability who can judge whether discourse qualifies as Chinglish or not. But even where native speakers are not physically present, Chinese English speakers subject their language production to a kind of monitoring as though they are. While discussing examples of Chinglish with Andy and Zhao Wei, two Chinese university students majoring in English, Zhao Wei said, "My girlfriend text me all the time. 'I missing you.'" Andy then offered his own example. "Anything have, like, the Chinese grammar. You know, we always say, 'Hey, long time no see.' That's *haojiu bujian* in Chinese, yeah?" I explained to Andy that this was something most native speakers would recognize as Standard English and he became flustered.[8] "What?" he exclaimed, laughing, "I always say they are wrong. That's not English." In this incident, Andy's momentary agitation was not the result, I believe, of simply being told that he was wrong; it was produced instead by a

realization that the criteria he used for evaluating the speech of others were a product of his own metalinguistic reflections rather than an objectively-based native speaker norm. Considering that Chinese speakers can potentially interpret English as Chinglish, we might be justified in asking: if "long time no see" can be Chinglish, what is it that native speakers are speaking?

The possibility that popular metalinguistic interpretations might be incorrect found further expression in anxieties about accuracy and the care which, for instance, teachers took with their lessons, translations, and class preparations. The question which seemed to motivate these practices was: what if I too am speaking Chinglish? Within the schools where I worked, I was often approached by teachers who were preparing public signs or announcements, lesson plans and other documents that might be seen by others, to provide a final check of the language. Joyce, who I discussed earlier, was one such frequent visitor, whose time spent in Britain only seemed to intensify the anxiety concerning her own language. As I reviewed a lesson plan for her that was to be circulated to other teachers, she offered by way of explanation, "I just don't want make any mistakes."

But what is a mistake? As the case of Lily and Gary showed, some mistakes qualify as Chinglish and others ("we ate hen") do not. I am mindful here of the distinction made by the linguist Pit Corder between 'errors' and 'mistakes' in reference to language acquisition. Corder brands non-systematic errors of performance as mistakes – "slips of the tongue (or pen)" (1967:166) – in contrast to systematic errors. Corder realized that there is a pattern to acquisition and that as the learner progresses, so does the state of the mental construct of the target language, over time becoming more like the target language itself (Corder 1981). Errors, then, are wisps of evidence that the linguist can use to reconstruct the language knowledge of the speaker at any given time. When language learners produce language (both written and spoken), some of the mistakes they make are just that – "mistakes" – but others are evidence of a deeper linguistic understanding (or, as the case may be, a productive misunderstanding) and are thus "errors" proper. True errors reveal something about the speaker.

Corder's distinction became the basis for much of the theory and methodology in the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) because it opened the speech of the language learner to analysis, even as Chomsky's formulation of universal grammar and linguistic competence removed it from other areas. But I think we can also see Corder as making a more meaningful distinction in a semiotic sense: he is asking, in other words, whether the mistake has a signifier. Is there a deeper meaning to the incorrect utterance, or is it just noise? If the mistake is meaningful it must be accounted for. It would seem that this is rather productive way to think about Chinglish, one that can highlight the variety of interpretive frames surrounding Chinglish while also systematizing it as a linguistic category. What is important is not the content of the utterance but the interpretive action of the listener, who can identify it as either a meaningfully insignificant mistake ("we ate hen") or as a meaningfully significant error ("we ate cock"). The exact signification is open,

and depends upon the interpretive frame of the listener as well as the relative social positions of the listener and speaker. The listener's judgment is dependent upon a claim to authority, either by being a native speaker (as in the case of foreign teachers) or by having their expertise guaranteed by other credentials (being a foreign language teaching professional or experience studying abroad for instance).

Such a social and semiotic model of Chinglish also illuminates the purportedly humorous properties of Chinglish for native speakers, and the nostalgic concerns for its disappearance. The psychic attraction of Chinglish for native-speaking English teachers in China provides a rather interesting parallel to Freud's (1960) analysis of jokes, one of the few times he devoted much effort to the analysis of language. Freud points out that the humor of the joke comes from the condensation and substitution of words. Using a pun as an example ("…I sat beside Salomon Rothschild and he treated me quite as his equal – quite famillionairely") Freud argues that what makes the joke funny is the formation, in this case, of a composite word ("famillionairely") which is both meaningless in itself but full of meaning in the context of the situation (1960:16). In the case of Chinglish, there is a similar "economy of psychical expenditure," to use Freud's term, "which is to say that the jokes are funny because they draw connections between otherwise unrelated thoughts in a way that does not make the nature of the connection obvious and explicit" (Freud 1960:127). The joke is only funny, however, if the true meaning of the utterance is not indicated directly; only the presence of the substitute points to the existence of the original meaning. Chinglish is an example of this substitute, and the true meaning – left out of the utterance itself but implicit to it – is attributed to the speaker: by speaking Chinglish you are revealing yourself for what you are and what you are not.

Freud importantly establishes the joke as more than a simple language play; it is an intersubjective relationship that ties together the speaker, listener and, by extension, the community to whom the listener then passes the joke on to in turn (Freud 1960:145). But Chinglish is also one of the ways in which the speech community is structured into unequal groups. Expertise in English, and thus the authority to judge the acceptability of the utterances of others or to relegate them to the category of Chinglish, maintains divisions between native speakers, Chinese foreign language professionals and students. While the members of this common speech community engage with each other in frequent conversations, it is Chinese students who produce Chinglish, and linguists and teachers who interpret it. In an echo of what Bourdieu (1991:142) terms the misrecognition of the power of form to modify value, the magic of Chinglish is the ability of this discourse to mask relations of inequality as linguistic differences of form rather than the judgment of experts sanctioned by the authority of their expertise as native speakers or language professionals.

The native speaker is necessary, not only to judge whether the utterance accords grammatically with Standard English, but also to excavate the (hidden) meaning within the utterance itself – often the source of its humorous content. Or, perhaps more accurately, the native speaker isolates and resignifies the utterance. Silverstein

& Urban (1996) describe this type of action as "entextualization," where discourse is extracted from one context and transplanted into another. In the process, this new "text" becomes monologic – it loses the indeterminacy of voice that surrounds its production (what the speaker intends to say) and becomes a metadiscursive interpretation subject to redefinition and evaluation by other speakers. Chinglish does not exist in the words themselves; words become Chinglish when heard and interpreted by a particular audience in a particular way. The incredible power of the native speaker's gaze is evident in the way in which Chinglish was banished for the Olympics. As a pre-emptive strike, the state attempted to eliminate Chinglish to foreclose the possibility that the text could be resignified, in much the same way that Chinese students self-monitored their speech, attempting to eliminate Chinglish before it could be publicly viewed or heard.

CONCLUSION

China's pressing project of modernity and the revolutionary transformation of China into a modern, cosmopolitan society makes the linguistic pronouncements and judgments of language experts especially acute. As the Chinese historian He Ping (2002) has noted, one of the paradoxes of China's modernization drive has always been the fear that it is the very core of Chineseness itself (culture, personality, ethics, character, etc.) that has hindered China's attempts to modernize and led to its subjugation by imperial powers. China's contemporary era has thus been a long story of experimentation with Western influences (militarism, technology, socialism, and capitalism) combined with a deep anxiety about the loss of Chineseness (He 2002; see also Duara 1995; Rofel 1999). As the semi-official linguistic signifier of modernity, English and its study in China perfectly captures this dilemma. Chinglish is thus a kind of failed modernity, where the Chinese character forces itself into obvious presence and thus denies the speaker's claim, a denial that can be offered by any of those groups "authorized to speak," be they native or highly-proficient Chinese speakers.

My focus in this article has been an examination of Chinglish from the perspective of its interpretation and semiotic power, rather than from an analysis of its form. Unlike other examples of non-native English produced in postcolonial contexts (Kachru 1986), Chinglish has little trace of an ontological status in China that would indicate its sedimentation and standardization into a distinct variety. Rather, labels such as Chinglish or China English are judgments about the appropriateness of a speaker's linguistic production from the perspective of an authoritative (and authorized) expert. While often not explicit, such judgments serve to continuously restructure the speech community and maintain the demarcations between various groups within it. As a result, different members of this speech community identify and respond to Chinglish in different ways.

By thinking about Chinglish in this way, I have sought to demonstrate that the dynamics of Chinglish in China reveal and illuminate a wider set of sociocultural

processes. My discussion of Chinglish implicates larger formations and shifts in contemporary Chinese society. The idea of being betrayed by speech, of having one's innermost secrets revealed to the listener by the subtle inflections of one's tongue goes to the heart of the contemporary discourse on modernization. Chinglish acts, within the Chinese English speech community, as a sorting mechanism of inclusion or exclusion where those who can participate in China's globalizing project (the educated, the urban, the cosmopolitan) are separated from those who cannot (the poor, the rural, the backward). The potential betrayal of language is always contingent – it is dependent upon a subject who "knows" English better than the speaker. What truly matters is the interpretation of the speech of one person by another, and of it being found wanting.

Foreigners pining for Chinglish as a vanishing linguistic code are also, in a sense, mourning the erosion of the structures of expertise which underlie it, an index of the mounting ambivalence concerning the relationship between China and the rest of the (mainly English speaking) world. Even as China's growing economy gobbles up American investment opportunities, Chinglish underwrites a racialized perception of the Chinese English language user, doomed to never participate as equal partner in a new global milieu. Experiencing Chinglish as humor projects the perceived linguistic lack of the speaker back on to other dimensions of intersubjective engagement, such that China can be safely portrayed as an undeserving global power as well as an easy market for international manufacturing or marketing. What will be interesting to observe, in the coming years, is whether the growing confidence of Chinese in the international arena translates into a re-evaluation of the legitimacy of Chinglish as linguistic code.

NOTES

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[1]In this article, I argue that "Chinglish" is a particular metadiscursive construction rather than a clearly defined linguistic variant. As I will show, "Chinglish" is the product of popular interpretations of discourse in the media, education and everyday conversation, but does not refer to any coherent system of non-Standard speech. I have highlighted this in the first mention of the term through the use of scare quotes, but they should be implied in all subsequent instances.

[2]Wei & Fei (2003) list these features of Chinese English as the most common but also add others. Many of the other characteristics they describe for "China English" are typical of language learners cross-culturally, however, such as a preference for simple over compound sentences and limited use of passive constructions.

[3]Chinese students often went by both Chinese and English names. In giving pseudonyms to my informants, I follow their naming preferences; that is, I have used an appropriate equivalent based on the language of the name they preferred in our interactions.

[4]Some of the most extensive web collections are at http://www.engrish.com and Oliver Radtke's blog at http://www.chinglish.de. Further archives can be found by searching the photo-sharing website http://flickr.com and on http://www.facebook.com.

[5]In practice, these groups often overlap, as most of the language teachers I worked with also considered themselves students.

[6]All translations from Chinese are my own.

[7]Shenyang is doubly marked then, not only by its lack of English expertise but by a regional vernacular called Dongbeihua. This variant of Standard Mandarin includes phonological and semantic differences as well as many unique lexical items. For more details, see Ma & Jiang (2005) and Henry (2008). Although widespread, many young urban residents invest considerable effort in erasing Dongbeihua from their own speech in favor of Mandarin.

[8]It is unclear whether the English phrase itself derives from Chinese. The Oxford English Dictionary, 2nd edition, calls "long time no see" a jocular imitation of broken English, and dates the earliest occurrence in print to 1900 where it was used to mock Native American English. However, the exact phrasing in that case appends a pronoun (specifically "long time no see you") which would be out of place in contemporary usage, and the phrase in its modern form may indeed derive from Chinese. See also the discussion in Fan (2008:47–8).

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