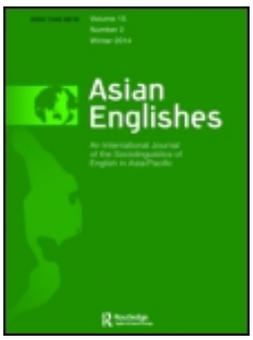

Asian Englishes

ISSN: 1348-8678 (Print) 2331-2548 (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/reng20

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To cite this article: Li Siqi & Andrew Sewell (2012) Phonological Features of China English, Asian Englishes, 15:2, 80-101, DOI: 10.1080/13488678.2012.10801331

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/13488678.2012.10801331

Published online: 11 Mar 2014.

Phonological Features of China English

Siqi LI & Andrew SEWELL

Abstract: This article builds on previous studies of China English by investigating the use of a number of phonological features by twelve students from mainland China. The students were studying at a university in Hong Kong, and came from different regions of China. They were recorded reading a standardized passage and certain aspects of feature use were analyzed. Patterns of variation in some of the features identified in previous studies, such as the substitution of the palato-alveolar fricative /ʒ/, are confirmed as being related to the regional origin of the students. The study also describes some features that have received less attention in previous studies, such as diphthong shortening and the simplification of final consonant clusters. The possible influence of British and American English on some aspects of the students' pronunciation is also briefly considered. Although some knowledge of these features is believed to be useful for educators, the article outlines some of the drawbacks that may result from the premature association of such features with so-called "emergent varieties" of English.

1. Introduction

If it is the case that English is an Asian language (Kachru, 1997), then it could be asserted that China English holds the key to its future. According to Kirkpatrick (2007, p. 146), the number of Chinese people learning English probably outnumbers the total combined population of the US and Britain. Kirkpatrick (2007) further argues that it is "inevitable" that the use of English by such a large number of people will lead to a distinctive Chinese variety of English.

As with other varieties of English that are seen to be "emerging", the identification of distinctive features has been a preoccupation of research. Xu (2010) traces the development of this research amongst Chinese scholars, also noting different names for the variety in the literature. The first use of the term *China English* is attributed to Ge (1980) and is also used by several other researchers (e.g., Jia & Xiang, 1997; Qiong, 2004), but terms such as *Sinicized Englis*h have also been used (e.g., Cheng, 1992). In general, there seems to be little difference between the denotations and connotations of *China English* and *Chinese English*. The descriptive study of Xu (2010) opts for the latter, while this paper will employ the former.

Among studies of the phonological features of China English, Deterding (2006) is probably the most extensive. Deterding mentions the paucity of research in this area, noting Chang (1987) as one of the few available listings of such features. Studies of Taiwan English (e.g., Chung, 2005) may also be relevant because of the shared L1 (Mandarin Chinese, known as *Putonghua* in mainland China).

It is immediately apparent, however, that any discussion of China English must avoid overgeneralization because of the large number of dialects and languages used in nominally Chinese-speaking areas. The difficulties of classification can be appreciated if we consider the case of Cantonese speakers. While research has identified a distinctive Hong Kong English accent which is at least partly attributable to the influence of Cantonese (e.g., Hung, 2000), it is uncertain to what extent this accent resembles that of Cantonese speakers from other areas (for example, Macau, and the province of Guangdong).

Given the amount of diversity, and the early stage of research in this area, this paper will not attempt to present an extensive survey of the phonological features of China English. Instead, it presents analyses of some of the phonological features used by 12 speakers of the variety, which are then compared with the findings of previous studies (mainly that of Deterding, 2006). It identifies some features that do not seem to appear in previous studies, and as an initial foray into the characterization of a regionally-differentiated China English, in some cases it makes tentative observations about the influence of the speakers' geographical origins and dialectal orientations.

In the discussion part of the paper, we take a step back from the data and raise some general questions relating to the identification of linguistic features and their association with varieties of English. On the one hand, throughout the paper we use the term China English to denote the English used by people from China. On the other hand, we wish to problematize the notion of *variety* and avoid overgeneralizing about the patterns of variation that we observe. We take the position that while descriptions of features may be useful in some ways, for example in informing language teaching, it would be premature to assume that these features are constitutive of an emerging variety.

2. The Phonological Features of China English

As mentioned above, the most extensive listing of the phonological features of China English is probably that of Deterding (2006). In this section, some of the main findings of this and other descriptive studies are briefly summarized. Following Deterding's study, there is an emphasis on segmental, rather than suprasegmental features.

In terms of vowel features, one of the most noticeable features of China English is the use of vowel epenthesis or the insertion of an "extra final vowel" (Deterding, 2006, p. 179). This occurs after final plosives and usually involves a schwa, so that *and* becomes [ændə] (Deterding, 2006, p. 180; Ho, 2003). Deterding (2010, p. 106) notes that because of epenthetic schwa, *mist* may sound like *mister*, and believes this may reduce intelligibility. Other vowel features noted by Deterding include the

absence of reduced vowels and the use of nasalized vowels. The possibility of certain vowel contrasts (such as that between /e/ and /æ/) being absent from China English is mentioned by Ma (2007), who relates them to the different phonemic and allophonic distributions in Mandarin and English. No specific data is presented, however.

Turning to the consonantal system, Deterding (2006) lists several features of "standard" or Inner Circle English that have distinctive substitutions or realizations in China English. These include the dental fricatives /θ/ and /ð/, the palato-alveolar fricative /ʒ/, the labiodental fricative /v/ and the alveolar fricative /z/. The substitution of [n] for /l/ is also mentioned. The difficulty presented by final consonant clusters is noted by Deterding (2010), with either vowel insertion (as noted above in the case of *mist*) or deletion being possible strategies.

There has been relatively little research into suprasegmental features, but Deterding (2006) mentions the phenomenon of stressing final pronouns such as *him* (e.g., in the phrase *fold his cloak around him*, in the test passage used).

3. Data Collection: Participants

In this study, 12 participants from mainland China were recorded reading a test passage and answering some questions about themselves. All of the participants were studying at a university in Hong Kong at the time of recording. There were 6 male and 6 female subjects, and they came from different regions of China. Table 1 below provides more information about the participants.

Table 1: Details of the 12 Participants Used in Recording

Subject code	Place of origin	Regionalect (dialect)	Major	Time in Hong Kong	Other overseas study	Years of learning English
F1	Xinjiang (North)	Northern	Translation	6 months	No	10
F2	Hunan (South)	Hunan / Xiang	Social Science	6 months	No	9
F3	Liaoning (North)	Northern (northeastern dialect)	Business Administration	1.5 years	No	13
F4	Guangdong (South)	Cantonese	Social Science	1.5 years	No	10
F5	Henan (North)	Northern (Henan dialect)	Finance	2.5 years	Yes (USA)	10
F6	Jiangsu (South)	Jiangsu-Zhejiang / Wu	Economics	2.5 years	Yes (USA)	10
M1	Beijing (North)	Northern	Finance	6 months	No	14
M2	Shanghai (South)	Jiangsu-Zhejiang / Wu (Shanghai dialect)	Business Administration	6 months	No	12
M3	Hebei (North)	Northern	Social Science	1.5 years	No	10
M4	Sichuan (South)	Northern (Sichuan dialect)	Insurance	1.5 years	No	12
M5	Hebei (North)	Northern	Accounting	2.5 years	Yes (USA)	10+
M6	Zhejiang (South)	Jiangsu-Zhejiang / Wu	Finance	2.5 years	Yes (USA)	8

In order to assist with the identification of possible regional features, the 12 students were chosen in such a way to include six from the north of China and six from the south of China. In geographical terms, a commonly-used north/south boundary is provided by the "Qin River–Huai Mountain" line (see Ramsey, 1987). However, the distinction between languages and dialects in China, and the boundaries between them, is considerably more complex. DeFrancis (1984, p. 58) notes the problematic nature of such distinctions, and proposes the term *regionalect* for the mutually unintelligible varieties of Chinese (while acknowledging the

gradable quality of "intelligibility"). The term *dialect* is then reserved for "mutually intelligible subvarieties of the regionalects" (DeFrancis, 1984, p. 57).

The students were interviewed in English by the first author of this article, and their self-reported "original" or "home" dialect (in the non-technical sense) formed the basis for allocation to regionalects and dialects. Of the eight regionalects listed by DeFrancis (1984, p. 58), who bases them on an official classification, the participants in Table 1 thus represent four: Northern (Mandarin or *Putonghua*), Hunan or Xiang, Cantonese, and Jiangsu-Zhejiang or Wu. Within the Northern category, there are three self-reported dialects (Northeastern, Henan and Sichuan). The last-mentioned is geographically in Southern China, but linguistically Northern, so in linguistic terms there are actually seven Northern and five Southern speakers. The actual importance and influence of these regionalects and dialects within each speaker's repertoire is unknown, but the basis for classification appears to be adequate for an exploratory study.

At the time of recording, the students had been in Hong Kong for periods of time ranging between six months and two and a half years. The question arises as to whether this residence outside mainland China might have affected their pronunciation of English. There are several possible ways in which this could happen, including exposure to the local variety of English, namely Hong Kong English (or still other varieties, in the case of students who had studied in the US); increased awareness of "standard" English through language proficiency courses; and dialect levelling as a result of interaction in Chinese with other students. However, the search for "pure" dialect speakers is likely to be fruitless in contemporary conditions. In addition, all of the students had been studying English for at least eight years, so most of their acquisition or learning had taken place before they arrived in Hong Kong.

It did not prove feasible to measure or compare the subjects' English language proficiency levels in any meaningful way, although as students in a university where English is the medium of instruction one would expect them to be reasonably high.

4. Data Collection: Procedures

After the biographical details recorded in Table 1 had been noted, the participants were asked to read a short passage entitled "A Bad Dream" (hereafter referred to as the ABD passage). The passage was adapted from an online source of short stories and is reproduced below.

1 One afternoon, Ben was playing in the backyard as usual. A big brown cat jumped over the
2 stone. Ben caught it by the tail and dropped it into a tub of water. His mother looked through
3 the window and saw him. She called him into the house and scolded him for such cruelty.
4 Then she told him that he must stay quietly in his room till late that night. Before long Ben fell
5 asleep. He dreamed that he became as small as a tomato. A huge cat seized him in its mouth
6 and ran away with him. He screamed but he could not get away, At last the cat dropped him
7 and he fell into a large pond. He sank into the freezing water. Then he woke up.

The passage contains possible contexts for most of the features of China English noted by Deterding (2006). For example, voiceless TH (/θ/) can be found in initial position in the word *through*, and in final position in the word *mouth*. The voiced TH (/ð/) occurs in both initial position (in *then*, *that* and so on), and in medial position (in *mother*). The word *with* might be pronounced with either sound in final position, but voiceless TH seems more likely in view of the following voiceless onset (the /h/ in *him*). The word *usual* is included because it contains the "difficult" /ʒ/ sound in medial position, and the phrase *late that night* provides a possible context for the conflation or substitution of [n] for /l/.

The students were recorded using a handheld digital recorder, and the occurrence of features was noted after a process of repeated listening by both the authors of this paper, combined with discussion of differences. Where there was disagreement regarding the allocation of a sound to a category, it was assumed that no substitution took place; thus the data analysis may tend to understate, rather than overstate, the existence of substitution. The results of the analysis are presented in the following sections. Patterns of inter-speaker or intra-speaker variation are identified and possible explanations for these patterns are discussed, where appropriate. As we did not carry out detailed spectrographic examination of the recordings, the study should be seen as exploratory in nature and any conclusions are necessarily tentative.

5. Data Analysis

In this section we will report the findings of data analysis in the following phonological areas: vowels (extra final vowels and diphthong shortening), consonants (substitution of the voiced palato-alveolar fricative /ʒ/ and the dental fricatives), consonant clusters (past tense forms), and suprasegmental features (stressed final pronouns). We also look briefly at the possible influence of American and/or British English on some aspects of the students' pronunciation.

5.1. Vowels: Extra Final Vowels

As in Deterding (2006), occurrences of the word *and* were analysed for the presence of an extra final vowel. There were 12 interviewees and five contexts for *and* in the passage, so the total number of tokens was 60. The results are shown below in Table 2.

Table 2: Occurrence of Extra Final Vowels (schwas) in the Word *and* in the Passage

Line	Context	No. of speakers using extra schwa	No. of speakers having no extra schwa
2	*the tail **and** dropped it*	4	8
3	*window **and** saw*	7	5
3	*house **and** scolded*	8	4
6	*mouth **and** ran away*	7	5
7	*him **and** he*	9	3
		35 (58.3%)	25 (41.7%)

From the table, it can be seen that that an overall majority of the speakers added an extra final vowel, namely schwa. The pattern in the first context (*the tail **and** dropped it*) was slightly different, with most speakers not adding an extra vowel to the word *and*.

The most likely explanation for the phenomenon is that in Mandarin, plosives like /d/ do not occur in coda position; only nasals such as /n/ and /ŋ/ can appear here. Some accounts of Mandarin syllable structure (e.g., Wang, 1993) even analyse such final consonants as approximants, suggesting a strong preference for the CV syllable structure (at least in certain dialects). Mandarin speakers may thus find it easier to add an extra vowel in order to create a "valid" syllable. It should also be mentioned that speakers of several other languages display various forms of vowel insertion, for example Japanese and Portuguese (Major, 2001, p. 74).

As also noted by Deterding (2006), it seems that many Mandarin speakers are unaware that a certain amount of elision is a common practice in native-speaker English, or that there is a weak form of *and* (/ən/) in rapid speech. With native speakers, this would be expected to occur frequently in preconsonantal contexts (i.e., all of the contexts in Table 2). Mandarin speakers are usually "concerned about dropping sounds" (Deterding, 2006, p. 180), and schwa addition may be the result of a concern with faithfulness to the perceived "original" or written form, a kind of hypercorrective behavior. Ellis (1996, p. 215) observes that Asian learners may have a "reverential attitude towards the mastery of individual linguistic forms", for example

the importance attached to the aesthetic qualities of Chinese characters (Marr, 1981, as cited in Ellis, ibid.). There may be a transfer of language attitudes, in addition to the more commonly noted transfer of features.

The present study adds more detail to what is known about extra final vowels. The recordings show that the phemomenon may be associated with lexical or syntactic processing. For example, speaker F1 uses an extra final vowel in the *house **and** scolded* context, but this seems to be associated with pausing, perhaps because of the unfamiliarity of the low-frequency word *scolded*. Schwa insertion here may function as a filler, a device to prolong a word while some kind of processing or planning takes place. Similarly, the speaker also inserts an extra vowel in the *him **and** he* context, but this seems to be a result of syntactic processing as the speaker prepares to read the following phrase (*fell into a large pond*). Further research into the connection between schwa insertion and such "strategic pausing" is required, but it seems probable that the phenomenon has varying causes.

As mentioned above, only in the first context (*the tail **and** dropped it*) do the majority of speakers pronounce the word *and* without an extra schwa. This seems to be a result of connected speech processes. As /d/ is both the final consonant of *and* and the initial consonant of the following word, *dropped*, the two sounds are blended to some extent, effectively removing the coda consonant and obviating the need for vowel insertion.

5.2. Vowels: The Shortening of Diphthongs

Analysis revealed that some of the speakers substituted short vowels for diphthongs in certain words. This feature of China English, which does not appear to have been noted in the literature before, resulted in *stone* (/stəʊn/ in RP) being pronounced with a vowel more like [ɒ]. The process can thus be technically described as glide shortening or monophthongization (Tillery & Bailey, 2004, p. 332); this paper will refer to it as diphthong shortening. Our data and our sophistication of analysis are insufficient for firm conclusions to be drawn about the prevalence of this feature, but we feel it is worth reporting as an indication for further research.

Of words normally associated with /au/ (*brown*, *house* and *mouth*), the word most likely to show a noticeable shortening and monopthongization of the diphthong was *mouth*, with four or 33% of the speakers using a short vowel. The next most likely was *house*, with two or 16% of the speakers using a short vowel. None of the instances of *brown* were shortened in this way, and an initial observation is that the phenomenon appears to be more likely in words ending with a voiceless final consonant. There is of course the principle of pre-fortis clipping, in which vowels become relatively shorter in this position (the vowel of *feet* would usually be shorter

than that of *feed*, although both are phonemically transcribed with the /iː/ vowel symbol). This is a common feature in many accents of English and is also found in other languages (Ashby & Maidment, 2005, p. 97). However, the diphthong shortening here is more noticeable and involves phonemic substitution.

Of words normally associated with /ou/ (*stone*, *scolded* and *woke*), the word most likely to show shortening of the diphthong was *stone*, with three or 25% of the speakers pronouncing it with a noticeably short vowel; pre-fortis clipping cannot be adduced as an explanation here. The next most likely was *scolded*, with two tokens, although there may have been a degree of "spelling pronunciation" as this word was unfamiliar for some speakers. Only one speaker pronounced *woke* with a short vowel, with the pronunciation resembling an American English version of *walk*.

The speakers were reading a passage, and one possibility is that they were misled by the spelling. In *Pinyin*, diphthongs are signalled by two-letter combinations (for example, <ao> and <ou>). Chinese speakers may therefore be less likely to associate a diphthongal pronunciation with English words that have single letter spellings for vowels, although this is apparently refuted by the example of *woke*. However, the English spelling <one> can be associated with short vowels, for example in the word *one*. This suggests that there may be some scope for the teaching of sound-spelling relationships, especially in contexts of learning where the written medium is likely to be dominant. As the word *stone* ends with a nasal, the causative factors may differ from those proposed above for the /au/ words.

A more general explanation of the tendency to shorten diphthongs is gained by taking a contrastive perspective. There are similar diphthongs in Mandarin (transcribed as /ɑo/ and /oʊ/ by Xiaorong & Jian, 2011, p. 19), but the distribution of the sounds is quite different, in that they cannot be followed by consonants. The influence of an L1 phonotactic constraint therefore provides another explanation for diphthong shortening. Interestingly, a similar tendency can be observed in Hong Kong English. According to Setter, Wong and Chan (2010, p. 23), if a diphthong is followed by a final consonant, one of three things can happen: the diphthong is pronounced, but the final consonant is deleted; the final consonant is pronounced, but the diphthong is realized as a monophthong (i.e., monophthongization or diphthong shortening); or both the diphthong and the final consonant are produced.

The Mandarin speakers in this study mainly follow the third strategy (i.e., following a "native-like" pattern), with some conforming to the second (retaining the final consonant, but shortening the diphthong). Those who did exhibit diphthong shortening did not have Cantonese as a language background, however; speakers F5 and M3, who used short vowels in both *house* and *mouth*, were both speakers of the Northern regionalect.

5.3. Consonants: The Palato-alveolar Fricative /ʒ/

The palato-alveolar fricative /ʒ/ sound, though uncommon in English, presents "one of the biggest problems for speakers from China" (Deterding, 2010, p. 105). The word *usually* thus becomes something of an identifier, with many Chinese speakers pronouncing it at as [ˈjuːɹəli]. The primary explanation again comes from L1/L2 differences, complicated by the existence of regionalects and dialects. For some speakers the sound represented by the letter <r> in the *Pinyin* romanisation system may be a voiced fricative similar to the English /ʒ/, while for others it may be an approximant that resembles the English /r/ (Deterding, 2006, p. 191).

Although there were no contexts for the sound in the passage used in Deterding (2006), five speakers were asked to read the word *usually*. Three of the five used [ɹ], while two used [ʒ]. On the basis of this data and of data from other studies (e.g., Hung, 2005), Deterding suggests that the substitution may be more common amongst speakers from Northern China. The present study set out to confirm or disconfirm this regional pattern, by including the word *usual* in the reading passage.

Our data shows that the speakers were evenly divided between using [ɹ] and using [ʒ], with other realizations being possible. Table 3 shows the results in more detail.

Table 3: The Pronunciation of the Word *usual*

Speaker	**Pronunciation of /ʒ/ in *usual***		
	[ɹ]	[ʒ]	other
F1	○		
F2			[zj]
F3		○	
F4		○	
F5	○		
F6		○	
M1	○		
M2		○	
M3	○		
M4			[j]
M5	○		
M6		○	
Total	*5 (42%)*	*5 (42%)*	*2 (16%)*

The distribution is therefore similar to that reported in Deterding (2006), with a slightly higher proportion using [ʒ]. The data also supports the contention that the use of [ɹ] is associated with speakers from Northern China, as all five of the speakers who showed this substitution (F1, F5, M1, M3 and M5) are classified as users of the Northern regionalect (see Table 1 above). A further dimension to this observation is that the substituted sound often has a retroflex quality, and in some cases may be more accurately represented as [ɻ] rather than [ɹ]. This is probably because northern dialects of Chinese are normally characterized as having more retroflex sounds (Ramsey, 1987).

5.4. Consonants: The Voiced Dental Fricative

One would probably expect the English dental fricative sounds /ð/ and /θ/ to show modification in China English; they are absent from Chinese and are also rare in the world's languages. When they are present in a phonemic system they tend to be acquired late in child language, further indicating that they are "marked" or unusual sounds. In the case of the voiced dental fricative /ð/, Deterding's (2006) study found that when occurring at the start of function words like *then* and *that*, they were in fact realized as [ð] in nearly half of the tokens. Around a quarter of tokens involved the substitution of [z], with the remaining quarter featuring [d]. Our data showed a slightly different pattern, with 40% of the 60 tokens showing [ð], 5% [z] and 55% [d]. The use of [z] as a substitution was therefore less apparent in our data and [d] was more common, as in the study of Hung (2005, as cited in Deterding, 2006, p. 188).

One explanation for this difference might lie in proficiency level, as the ability to approximate native-like phonology tends to increase over time. The students in Deterding's study were participating in an intensive English programme, while in the present study most of the students were majoring in business-related fields. Another possible influence might be that of Hong Kong English; it is well known that Cantonese speakers in Hong Kong tend to substitute /ð/ with [d] (Deterding, Wong & Kirkpatrick, 2008). It is entirely possible that input from fellow students and even from local teachers contains a preponderance of [d] substitutions.

The possible influence of regional origin on substitution patterns is considered in Deterding's study, in which speakers from Liaoning (north China) and Zhejiang (south China) used [d] while speakers from elsewhere used [z]. In the present study this pattern did not seem to be repeated, although the number of [z] substitutions was too small to form a basis for hypothesizing about the effects of regional origin.

There was one context for medial /ð/ in the passage, in the word *mother*. Again, in our data [d] substitution was more likely than [z] substitution, with there being only two clear instances of the latter (altogether there were 4 instances of [ð], 2 of [z] and 8 of [d] among the 12 tokens). However, it was often hard to distinguish between

[ð] and [z], with intermediate realizations and weak consonants being possible; in doubtful cases the consonant was assigned to [ð]. In Deterding's study, among the 9 occurrences of the word *mother*, 6 medial consonants were realized as [ð], 1 as [z], and 1 as [d], while in one case the consonant was absent.

5.5. Consonants: The Voiceless Dental Fricative

Turning to the voiceless dental fricative /θ/, the patterns of substitution noted in Deterding (2006) can be summarized as follows; in initial position, slightly more than half (13) of the 23 realizations of /θ/ were [θ], the remainder being classified as [s]. In final position [s] substitution was slightly more common, with 25 of the 52 realizations of /θ/ being [θ] and the remainder [s]. In our study [s] substitution was somewhat less prevalent. In initial position, there were only three clear instances of [s] among the twelve tokens of the word *through*. In final position, for which the word *mouth* provided the context, there were five instances of [s] substitution. The general tendency for [s] substitution to be more common in final position was confirmed, however (as in the Hong Kong-based study of Deterding et al., 2008). We should point out, however, that the relative unsophistication of our recording equipment may have led us to understate the occurrence of substitution. As Deterding (2006, p. 186) states, even phoneticians often disagree about how realizations of "underlying" /θ/ should be classified. As in Deterding's study, doubtful cases were assigned to the [θ] category.

5.6. Consonant Clusters: Past Tense Forms

An area of phonology that was not examined in Deterding (2006) was that of final consonant clusters. It is well known that final cluster simplification is a common feature of both native and non-native varieties of English. Schreier (2009) identifies the main factors determining the likelihood of reduction as being the preceding sound (elision is more likely after a nasal, as in *sandwich*), the following sound (elision is more likely before a consonant than before a vowel, so that the /t/ of *last month* would be prone to elision), and the morphology of the word concerned (monomorphemes such as *guest* are more likely to show elision than bimorphemes such as *asked*).

On listening to our data, it was noticeable that many speakers tended to elide /t/ and /d/ in past tense forms such as *dropped* and *dreamed*. As the reading passage took the form of a story, such forms were quite numerous and possibly contributed to the comprehensibility of the passage. This area seemed worthy of further attention, although once again we will do no more than outline the phenomena involved. Table

4 below shows the number of speakers who kept or omitted the inflections of eight verbs in the story. (In other words, speakers who kept the inflections did not use consonant cluster simplification).

Table 4: Occurrence of Reduction of Past Tense Inflections/ Final Cluster Simplification

Line	Context	No. of speakers keeping the inflections (no simplification/elision)	No. of speakers omitting the inflections (simplification/elision)
(Clusters with /t/)			
1	**jumped /t/** over	6	6
2	**dropped /t/** it	2	10
2	**looked /t/** through	3	9
6	**dropped /t/** him	5	7
		16/48 (33.3%)	*32/48 (66.7%)*
(Clusters with /d/)			
3	**called /d/** him	11	1
5	**dreamed /d/** that	3	9
5	**seized /d/** him	4	8
6	**screamed /d/** but	9	3
		27/48 (56.2%)	*21/48 (43.8%)*
	Total /t/ and /d/	*43/96 (44.8%)*	*53/96 (55.2%)*

Table 4 shows that more than half (55.2%) of the tokens of past tense forms were pronounced without the inflections. The two sequences most likely to show elision were ***dropped*** *it* and ***looked*** *through*. According to Schreier's (2009) criteria, the environmental attributes involved in ***dropped*** *it* (post-plosive, pre-vocalic, and bimorphemic) should all reduce the chance of elision. Given that ***looked*** *through* also involves a post-plosive environment, we can only speculate that such plosive + plosive clusters present particular difficulties for Chinese learners, particularly if the consonants involved are voiceless.

Turning to those sequences that showed lower rates of elision, ***called*** *him* and ***screamed*** *but* were the most likely to be pronounced with the inflectional endings. There seems to be no obvious explanation for this, but it is possible that sequences involving consecutive voiced consonants present fewer problems. Of course, underlying any discussion of consonant cluster simplification in a second or additional language there is the question of the speakers' other language(s), and

in this case Chinese does not permit consonant clusters. Given this fact and the likelihood that final cluster reduction can have negative effects on intelligibility, this may be an area to prioritize in teaching.

It is worth mentioning that there was a great deal of inter-speaker variation in the rate of elision; speakers F5, M2 and M4 were notably more native-like in their production of final clusters. Although this cannot easily be explained in terms of biographic factors, the speaker's level of proficiency seems likely to be another factor that will affect the occurrence and nature of consonant cluster reduction.

5.7. Suprasegmental Features: Stressed Final Pronouns

A tendency for speakers to stress pronouns, especially when they occur in final position, has been noted in Singapore English (Levis, 2005) as well as in China English (Deterding, 2006). In the present study, stressed final pronouns were noticeable in the phrases *looked through the window and saw him* (where the word *him* was stressed by nine out of twelve speakers) and *ran away with him* (the word *him* was stressed by six out of twelve speakers). The prevalence of this phenomenon was therefore slightly lower than in Deterding's study. Native speakers would probably not stress these pronouns, and would often place tonic stress on *saw* and on the second syllable of *away* respectively. It is certainly possible that some non-native speakers of English prefer to use what Kirkpatrick (2010, p. 80) calls "heavy-end stress" in order to signal the end of an utterance, rather than the tonic stress patterns used by native speakers. Further research is needed, however, to ascertain whether it is a characteristic of regional lingua franca English (Kirkpatrick, 2010, p. 80).

5.8. British and American English

Finally, we thought it would be interesting to look for signs of British or American influences in the participants' English pronunciation. It is certain that the students in the present study have been exposed to a wide variety of input from various sources, ranging from classroom instruction in China, Hong Kong and in some cases the US, to media products such as movies and music. Levis (2005, p. 374) points out that accent, and hence the use of phonological features, influenced not only by "biographical timetables" but by "sociolinguistic realities" as well. According to Levis (2005), "speakers speak the way they do because of the groups they belong to or desire to belong to". It is equally true, however, that the desire *not* to belong to certain groups, or to be perceived as belonging to them, influences feature use.

Although determining the extent of American or British influence would be

a very complex undertaking, we focused on two variable features in the data: the second vowel of the lexical item *tomato*, and the use of either a voiced alveolar tap [ɾ] or a voiceless alveolar stop [t] for the medial consonant in the word *water*, of which there were two occurrences in the passage. A diphthong [eɪ] in *tomato* might suggest American influence, but could also conceivably be a result of speakers dealing with an unfamiliar pronunciation by analogizing with a familiar one (see Chan, 2011). The alphabet letter "a" is pronounced /eɪ/, for example. Similarly, the use of a voiced alveolar tap in *water* could be a result of American influence, but this phenomenon is described as "very common" in British English by Collins and Mees (2003, p. 179).

Data analysis showed that half of the speakers used [eɪ] in the word *tomato*, with half opting for the more British-sounding [ɑː]. Voiced taps were heard in less than half of the 24 tokens of *water* (9 tokens, as opposed to 15 voiceless stops). The use of either form was usually consistent in intra-speaker terms, as only one speaker (M2) used both. However, "American" or "British" forms did not always co-occur with each other, and the most common pattern was British [t] sounds with American [eɪ] sounds, used by four students. Of the four students who had been to the US, three used [eɪ] in *tomato*. Interestingly, within this group, the two female students (F5 and F6) used British [t] sounds, while the two male students (M5 and M6) used American taps.

When considering the possibility of cross-language influence, it is worth speculating whether exposure to the English of Cantonese-speaking Hong Kong students might also have affected the students' English pronunciation. This was in fact one of the questions asked during the interview, but the responses suggest that the students were not themselves aware of any such influence.

6. Discussion

The above analysis, though limited in both scope and depth, has succeeded in verifying, clarifying and to some extent extending knowledge of the phonological features of China English. However, using the term China English has the unfortunate effect of reifying and tending to oversimplify what are actually complex patterns of language use. We have mentioned two "biographic" factors—regional origin and proficiency level—that complicate the notion of a singular variety. In this discussion, we would like to stand back from the data itself and explore the nature of this kind of analysis and its effects on conceptualizations of varieties of English in general. In doing so, we will raise some issues surrounding the characterization and classification of World Englishes, including Asian Englishes.

The collection of lists of features—whether phonological, grammatical or lexical—and their association with putative "varieties" of English has been to

a certain extent a mainstay of studies in World Englishes and related fields (for example, Xu, 2010 for China English; Hung, 2000 for Hong Kong English; Deterding & Kirkpatrick, 2006 for ASEAN English Lingua Franca). While valuable in many ways, for example by raising awareness of differences and enabling educators to identify and evaluate points of departure between "standard" models and local patterns of language use, there are also several disadvantages to this approach.

In considering studies in World Englishes, Mahboob and Szenes (2010) criticize the preoccupation with linguistic features, arguing that this has led to a neglect of the semantic richness of local varieties. An obvious difficulty in describing local varieties in terms of their linguistic features is that not all speakers use the features in question, as indicated in the present study. There may be several reasons for this, including: speakers' multilingual or multidialectal backgrounds; the effects of language proficiency; experience of communication in English; exposure to different accents in education, at work or in the media; attitudinal or identity-based orientations towards English; and variation related to task type, register and style.

Another problem that results from viewing certain features as "markers" of varieties and their speakers is that these "distinctive" features are often in fact common across many varieties of English. While the substitution of /ʒ/ with [ɪ] does appear to be unique to China English, other features such as the simplification of final consonant clusters are in fact found in many other varieties of English, both native and non-native. We would not therefore wish to make any premature associations between the phonological features noted above and the existence of a variety called China English. In particular, although feature use appears to be linked to proficiency and more broadly to communicative experience with the language, more data are needed regarding the effects of proficiency (without being unduly influenced by the notion of a native-like target).

In general, it appears that attempts to claim variety status on the basis of distinctive features may involve excessive reification (or objectification), a process in which the existence of variation tends to be downplayed or ignored. While reification has its uses, its many disadvantages include essentialization and the associated belief that accents and their speakers should have certain features. If speakers in accent-related research have accents which contain most or all of the distinct local features in descriptive studies, a common result is that local users tend to give such accent samples low ratings in terms of acceptability. This can be seen, for example, in the study of Li (2009, p. 87), in which student listeners were presented with accent samples containing phonological features of non-native speakers in East Asia.

While these negative attitudes may well be due in part to the existence of language ideologies that militate against the acceptance of locally-accented English, another possibility is that the samples represent linguists', rather than local users',

conceptions of the local variety (it is also possible that local users simply do not have any such conceptions.) Listeners in studies of this kind need to be presented with a spectrum of accents, ranging from those that contain all or most of the features found in descriptive studies, to those to contain none—some speakers may not use the features of a variety, while still being recognizable as coming from a particular region or language background.

This last possibility raises another ontological problem for the study of Asian Englishes, and of World Englishes in general. If a speaker does not appear to use any of the features of a local variety, although they "should" be using them by dint of birthplace or language background, can they still be classified as speakers of a local variety? If not, why not? We have considered this question while viewing the finals of an English speech contest broadcast by China Central Television (CCTV). Some of the contestants, all of whom were young Chinese nationals, spoke American- or British-accented English, while others were instantly recognizable as being Mandarin speakers (very few of them used any of the phonological features listed above, however, confirming our view that feature use is linked to proficiency level). Were the American- or British-sounding speakers using American or British English? (In fact, on closer listening, they often used certain unobtrusive features of China English, mainly at the suprasegmental level). Similary, were those who sounded more Chinese using China English, even though (once again) their use of distinctive features was limited to the suprasegmental realm of rhythm and intonation? In fact, in phonological terms, speakers of "standard" regional varieties often show more similarities with each other than with their "non-standard" compatriots.

Our conclusion is that the network of communities—real or imagined—that people belong to, and the multiple identities they express therein, are usually too complex to be captured by any attempt to label them as speaking a particular variety. In fact, the desire to delimit and classify varieties of English by associating them with nation states (China English, Hong Kong English, Indian English and so on) reveals the extent to which English, a global language, still tends to be conceptualized in narrowly national terms. In a perceptive observation of the links between nation-building and language varieties, Saraceni (2010, p. 76) notes that "the liberal linguist seems to be engaged in a battle whose rules have been set by nationalist linguistics". The prediction that China English will become a "future power" (Xu, 2010) suggests that any reified "variety" is prone to becoming a vehicle for various ideologies, including the nationalism that originally required the promotion of "common" languages as part of the process of nation-state formation (Anderson, 1991).

Of course, it is not our intention to single out any particular authors as taking a narrowly national perspective. Rather, we would like to suggest that the whole undertaking of identifying varieties of English reflects the inheritance of problematic

frames of reference, including colonialist views of language (Pennycook, 2008) and a segregationalist linguistics that overemphasizes form and views languages as discrete, autonomous entities (Harris, 1998). Far from creating a "club of equals", the nation-based varieties approach to English in the world seems likely to reproduce inequality and prejudice (Saraceni, 2010). It may also recreate existing forms of discrimination (for example, between speakers of standard and non-standard subvarieties) at a local level.

When nation states or regions share a common first language, it is uncertain whether additional languages such as English contribute much to a sense of shared identity or community, although this obviously depends on the context. Certainly, in the case of Expanding Circle countries such as China it seems unlikely that English will become strongly associated with collective national identity in the sense of an "imagined community" (Anderson, 1991). The development of a distinctive variety, while to some extent visible in descriptive, de facto terms, therefore also seems somewhat unlikely unless there is some "identity space" for it to fill. If such a variety can be said to exist, it will show a great deal of variation and be a manifestation of a "diffuse" rather than "focused" speech community, in the terms of Le Page and Tabouret-Keller (1985).

The drawbacks of the varieties approach are particularly visible in the case of the Expanding Circle, which perhaps explains the development of alternative approaches such as English as an International Language (EIL) and English as a Lingua Franca (ELF). For Matsuda and Friedrich (2010), ELF is best thought of as a function, not a variety. In considering the results of this study, then, we would almost prefer not to use the variety label China English at all, and it is only the absence of an alternative denotation that has led to its appearance in this article. It is imperative that the label (or any similar label) is capable of covering a wide range of individual and contextual differences, in order to avoid either oversimplifying or essentializing what is actually a spectrum of variation. However, this means that at the margins—as with the speech contest participants—it appears to be of limited usefulness. The use of such a label should come with the range of warnings that accompanies any instance of reification; in characterizing the process of reification in general, Wenger (1998, p. 62) alerts us to both its "generative power" and its "delusory perils".

7. Conclusion

This article has attempted to describe and characterize some of the phonological features of the English spoken by Chinese students studying in Hong Kong. Its approach has highlighted the importance of variation, for example that arising from regional origin or proficiency level. Its findings were generally in line with

the findings of previous studies, and it may be seen as a step towards more detailed studies of how various factors influence the English pronunciation of Chinese students. One way to make use of the findings of this and similar descriptive studies would be to consider the features in terms of their likely effects on intelligibility, while bearing in mind that intelligibility is a two-way process between speaker and listener (Rajadurai, 2007), and to identify priorities for teaching and testing. As Patil (2006, p. 84) states, "average learners would be satisfied with comfortable intelligibility of an easily understandable accent". However, the use of lists of features to support the claimed "emergence" of a language variety may involve a number of drawbacks, especially in the case of the Expanding Circle, as the discussion above has outlined.

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