

# The interlanguage of L1 Chinese speakers learning English as a second language

S. Qiouyi Lu  
s@qiouyi.lu

LING 5651  
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## **Introduction**

English is a popular second language choice for L1 speakers of Chinese. Hou (1987) estimates that there are 50 million people studying English in China; however, due to an increase in the value of English in the linguistic marketplace, this number may be outdated and may be even higher now. In addition to L1 speakers of Chinese in China who are learning English, Singapore and Hong Kong both have high populations of native Chinese speakers. Both also use English as an official language; there are thus many English-language learners in Singaporean and Hong Kong schools as well. Finally, many Chinese immigrants to the United States also speak L2 varieties of English with varying degrees of transfer from Chinese.

“[Target language] acquisition may be shaped, coloured and accented in varying degrees by

the transfer of typological features from the [native language].” (Green 1996: 119) Other than Wong (1988), however, there does not seem to be any large overviews of the characteristics of the interlanguage of L1 speakers of Chinese learning English as a second language. This gap may be partly explained by the difficulty in defining “Chinese learners of English” as a group—the “Chinese” language is comprised of many subvarieties that may or may not be mutually intelligible; these various subvarieties may constitute different speech communities, and the differing characteristics of these varieties may have different impacts on the kind of transfer we see in this interlanguage. The literature on Chinese-English interlanguage is primarily divided between literature on Cantonese L1 speakers and Mandarin L1 speakers; Mandarin L1 speakers are further subdivided into Taiwanese Mandarin L1 speakers and PRC Mandarin L1 speakers.

Rau et al. (2009) found shared speech norms between Taiwanese Mandarin and PRC Mandarin L1 speakers—namely, the preference for /s/ in substitutions for /θ/—suggesting that, under a Labovian definition of speech communities that relies on shared speech norms rather than speech performance (Labov 1966), Mainland and PRC Mandarin speakers may comprise one speech community. The fact that Hong Kong Cantonese speakers have been shown to prefer /f/ for substitutions of /θ/ may then suggest that they comprise a separate speech community from the Mandarin speakers; however, for the purposes of this study, I will still look at both speech communities and describe Chinese-English interlanguage with both bodies of data.

In addition to having different varieties for their L1s, learners may also be exposed to different varieties of English. L2 learners of English in Hong Kong and Singapore may be more likely to be exposed to British varieties of English, whereas L2 learners of English in the United States are more likely to be exposed to American varieties of English. It is unclear from the

literature whether the type of English that L2 learners are exposed to produces significant variations in the surface structure of the interlanguage.

In this paper, I will survey research from a variety of different linguistic subfields on characteristics of L2 English from adult L1 Chinese speakers. I will provide an overview of various phonological, morphological, syntactic, and pragmatic features of Chinese-English interlanguage. Although there may be variation between individuals in the realization of this interlanguage (see Rau et al. 2009 for a variationist approach to individual variation in the interlanguage), as well as variation depending on the type of L1 Chinese and type of L2 English, this survey should still provide some broad characteristics of Chinese-English interlanguage.

## Phonology

Cantonese phonology and Mandarin phonology both differ significantly from English phonology. The consonant and vowel inventories for both Chinese languages differ from the consonant and vowel inventories for English; the differences are represented below, with sounds appearing only in English in darker shaded cells and sounds appearing only in Cantonese and Mandarin in lighter shaded cells (charts adapted from Norman 1988, Li & Thompson 1981, Zsiga 2006, and Zee 1991):

	Labial	Labiodental	interdental	Alveolar	Retroflex	Postalveolar	Palatal	Velar	Glottal	
Stop <sup>1</sup>	p p <sup>h</sup>	b		t t <sup>h</sup>	d			k k <sup>h</sup>	g	ʔ
Fricative		f v <sup>2</sup>	θ ð	s z	ʃ ʒ	ʃ ʒ	ç	x		h
Affricate				tʃ tʃ <sup>h</sup>	tʃ tʃ <sup>h</sup>	tʃ dʒ	tʃ tʃ <sup>h</sup>			
Nasal		m			n				ŋ	
Approximant		w <sup>3</sup>			ɹ			j <sup>3</sup>	w <sup>3</sup>	
Lateral					l					

<sup>1</sup> Aspirated and unaspirated stops are contrastive in Chinese, whereas they are allophones in English.

<sup>2</sup> Some varieties of Beijing Mandarin can have /v/ as an allophone of /w/.

<sup>3</sup> In both English and Chinese, these may not be considered separate phonemes but may be considered consonantal forms of their respective high vowels.

	Front	Central	Back
High	i y	i	ɯ <sup>3</sup> u
	ɪ <sup>1</sup>	ə <sup>2</sup>	ʊ
Mid	e	ə	ɤ <sup>3</sup> o <sup>3</sup>
	ɛ œ		ʌ ɔ
Low	æ	ɐ <sup>2</sup>	
	a		ɑ

<sup>1</sup> This vowel exists in Cantonese and English but not in Mandarin.

<sup>2</sup> This vowel exists in Cantonese but not in Mandarin.

<sup>3</sup> This vowel exists in Mandarin but not in Cantonese.

Both Cantonese and Mandarin do not allow consonant clusters in any position; Cantonese and Mandarin both allow only /n/ and /ŋ/ in syllable-final positions, with Cantonese also allowing /m/, /p/, /t/, and /k/ in syllable-final positions. Word-final stops in Cantonese are unreleased.

Wong (1988) notes a number of common problem areas in English phonology found in the literature, including (1) final consonant deletion, (2) consonant cluster reduction (particularly word-finally), (3) vowel simplification, (4) unreduced vowels in unstressed positions, and (5) use

of epenthesis. (Wong 1988: 3) Given the differences in the consonant and vowel inventories of the three languages here, as well as the differences in phonology, these errors are not unexpected.

Chan (2006) examines some strategies used by Cantonese speakers in the production of English consonant clusters. She found that, contrary to Wong (1988)'s discussion, epenthesis was a very rare and almost nonexistent strategy in coping with English consonant clusters; Chan further argued that epenthesis may be disfavored because it (1) does not solve the problem of having a difficult consonant to produce, and (2) calls for resyllabification, which is disfavored. However, Chan's speakers were primarily intermediate and advanced speakers; beginning speakers may have different speech patterns. Instead of epenthesis, then, Chan's speakers more commonly used deletion and substitution. /j/ and /θ/ were commonly substituted with /s/ and /f/ respectively; however, Rau et al. (2009) found that, for Mandarin speakers, /s/ was favored as a substitution for /θ/ rather than /f/.

Chan (2006) also found that /l/ and /r/ were commonly substituted with /w/, suggesting a possible neutralization of the two liquids by Cantonese speakers. Furthermore, while three-consonant clusters proved harder than two-consonant clusters overall, Chan (2006) found that onset + liquid combinations in particular were difficult and subject to deletion of the liquid. In addition to difficulty in producing liquids in consonant clusters, Chan (2004a) found that final /l/ was hard to produce. In the same study, Chan found that many final stops were unreleased. Stibbard (2004) confirms Chan (2004a)'s findings of the non-release of final stops, and also finds that there is often a failure to distinguish between long and short vowel phonemes, as well as a tendency to devoice final obstruents.

## Morphology

Chinese and English also vary significantly with regards to morphology. Chinese is an isolating language (Li & Thompson 1981: 11), whereas English is mildly inflected; Wong (1988) notes that “all [studies surveyed] agree that the uninflected nature of Chinese has a profound effect on the learning of English, a moderately inflected language, by Chinese speakers.” (1988: 4)

Robertson (2000) notes a marked tendency for Chinese interlanguage speakers to omit the article where native speakers would use one. Liao & Fukuya (2004) also note an avoidance of phrasal verbs, such as *go out*, *come in*, *turn up*, *let down*, *cut off*, and *burn down*, which are comprised of a verb and another morphological unit. These phrasal verbs are unique to Germanic languages (Liao & Fukuya 2004: 211–212) and do not have equivalents in Chinese; Chinese has particles, but they are semantically transparent and the attachment to the verb produces one semantic unit.

## Syntax

Chan (2004b) notes a number of speech errors that derive from transfer, such as “(a) confusion in verb transitivity (e.g., “\*I like *listen* music”); (b) calquing (e.g., “\**I every year birthday* was very happy”); (c) using an independent clause as the subject of a complex sentence (e.g., “\**She do this thing* is my most important thing in my life”); (d) topicalization (e.g., “\**And played the table-tennis* I am very bad”); (e) vocabulary compensation (e.g., “\*I *opened* the T.V. and *opened* the playstation”); (f) use of *there have* in existential constructions (e.g., “\**There has* a book on the table”).” (Chan 2004b: 58) However, for her study, she focuses on five syntactic error types in the speech of Chinese learners of English: “(a) lack of control of the copula, (b) incorrect placement of adverbs, (c) inability to use the *there be* structure for expressing the existential or presentative function, (d) failure to use the relative clause, and (e) confusion in verb transitivity.” (Chan

2004b: 56)

Chan (2004b) notes differences in the way these five structures are used in Chinese versus in English. (a) The copula in Chinese is often used as a linking verb between the subject and its complement; however, it does not co-occur with auxiliary verbs as it may in English. (b) Adverbs usually occur preverbally in Chinese, whereas they may occur postverbally in English. (c) Existential sentences are signaled with *you* 'have' in Chinese, whereas they are signalled with 'there is' or 'there are' in English. (d) Relative clauses in English are postmodifying, whereas they are premodifying in Chinese; Chinese relative clauses are not signaled with relative pronouns, whereas in English they are signaled with a variety of relative pronouns, such as *who*, *that*, *which*, *whom*, and *where*. (e) Finally, verb transitivity patterns differ between Chinese and English, with verbs having the same semantic meaning across both languages possibly differing in transitivity.

Chan (2004b) found syntactic transfer in all five areas that she examined, and found that the evidence of transfer could not be wholly attributed to L2 factors. Additionally, self-report in her study revealed that many students thought in Chinese first before translating sentences into English, thus potentially amplifying the amount of transfer that occurred.

Chinese and English also vary typologically on the placement of topic. "Topic" in Chinese equates roughly to English "theme"; however, Green (1996: 121) notes that "topic, as it functions in Chinese, explicitly establishes a point of reference for the ensuing discourse by introducing new information [...] Topic in Chinese, then, is a relatively "free-standing" element and, unlike English theme, requires little or no use of cohesive devices to relate it to discourse which surrounds it." Topic prominence, or topicalization, then, is common in Chinese. Green (1996) further classifies Chinese as having "pragmatic word order", whereas English has "grammatical word order". That is, for Chinese, clarity of imparting information is the primary

determiner of word order, whereas for English, syntactic norms dominate to the point where semantically empty placeholders, such as “there is” or “it is”, may be used to preserve word order. Deviation from the syntactic norm is marked.

The contrast between pragmatic word order and grammatical word order produces some transfer effects on the interlanguage of Chinese learners of English. One recurring error found in Green’s corpus was the non-appearance of a coreferential pronoun, as in the following sentence (Green 1996: 127):

- (1) There are many young and educated Asian women nowadays want to marry but cannot because they lack suitable partners to select.

Rather than interpreting this error as a mere deletion of the coreferential pronoun, Green interprets it as a transfer effect from topic prominence, as well as a hypercorrection in the use of English “there are”. Further, Green notes that there is a serial verb construction in this sentence that is likely to be due to transfer from Chinese. Green provides further examples that more clearly illustrate the transfer of topic prominence in Chinese-English interlanguage:

- (2) (a) According to research, it shows that more Asian couples are getting divorced nowadays.  
 (b) More Asian couples are gettng divorced nowadays according to research.  
 (c) According to research, more Asian couples are gelling divorced nowadays.  
 (d) Research shows that more Asian couples are getting divorced nowadays.

(2a) is the sentence produced by a Chinese learner of English. (2b) through (2d) are sentences that a native speaker would produce, contrasting with the topicalized sentence produced by the Chinese learner of English.

### Pragmatics

The speech act of refusal is universal across languages; however, the ways in which refusal is realized varies, with differences in the kinds of explanations provided and the frequency of strategies used in refusal. (Chang 2011: 73) Liao & Bresnahan (1996), for example, found that Chinese speakers use fewer strategies when refusing and only brush upon the point when handling complicated or awkward issues (Chang 2011: 73); both American and Chinese speakers, however, appear to be relatively direct in the explanations given for refusal, although L1 Chinese speakers learning English appear to prefer more indirect approaches than their English native speaker counterparts. (Chen 1996)

Chang (2011) examines with both production and perception tasks other differences in the refusal strategies of Chinese learners of English as compared to native speakers of English. Chang identifies two main differences in Chinese and English cultural communication: one, Chinese has a high-context communication style, involving “group value orientation, spiral logic, [and] indirect verbal interaction”, whereas English has a low-context communication style, which “value[s] individual value orientation, line logic, [and] direct verbal interaction”. (Ting-Toomy 1988: 225, quoted in Chang 2011: 71–72). Two, American culture is typically classified as individualist, while Chinese culture is typically classified as collectivist. These differences affect the ways in which refusal is realized across both languages.

## Conclusion

English is a popular second language choice for L1 speakers of Chinese. However, Chinese and English vary typologically in a number of important ways across a number of linguistic subfields. In this paper, I have surveyed some differences between Chinese and English, including differences in phonology, morphology, syntax, and pragmatics. These differences create marked transfer-based features in the interlanguage of Chinese speakers of English. Understanding the interlanguage of Chinese speakers of English will allow for a more detailed understanding of other varieties of Chinese English, such as Chinese-accented English, Chinese American English, and others.

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