English in China: Lexical Variations in Cross-Cultural Communication

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Abstract

The number of non-native speakers of English outnumbers native speakers provided that worldwide enterprises use English for international communication. Electronic communication has also increased the use of English as an international language; as a consequence, it is used by speakers with different linguistic backgrounds. The different linguistic background of authors produces differences or variations in language use. In this paper we analyse business e-mails written by agents from China and Hong Kong who work in an exporting company in Spain and speak English a second or a foreign language. Our main aim is to analyze the possible variations due to the mother tongue and the socio-cultural context, classifying the lexical variation found in business English used as a global working language by non-native speakers. We intended to determine the causes of variation and their influence on communication. We analyzed and contrasted sixty e-mails written by English speakers from China and Hong Kong. We classified the occurrences in categories depending on the lexical characteristics of variation. Finally, we concluded that there are variations in the English language when used by Chinese and Hong Kong speakers and we determined the causes of variation, providing several examples.

Key words: lexical variations, e-mails, English as a second language, China, Hong Kong.

1. Introduction

All languages are constantly developing and changing but the globalisation of the English language is an unprecedented fact in the history of languages' evolution. The widespread of the English language has reached all society contexts. There is no doubt that English is the global language used by millions of people in very different contexts such as the academic, the scientific, the technological, the business, the mass media, the entertainment, the international students' context, etc. The number of non-native speakers of English already outnumbers the native speakers. The existence of other varieties of English is a verified fact by the numerous studies carried out about the varieties of the English language in South East Asia, in Africa, in Europe, etc. These different varieties have flourished along the years due to the coexistence of English and the local languages in multicultural contexts. These varieties show different linguistic and socio-cultural features which reflect their speakers' cultural background. The oral and written variations that non-native speakers produce are subject of analysis as well. Consequently these two facts together cause the present situation of the English language to be exceptional.

The new digital written genres like the e-mail are a tool to spread the English globally, especially in the global business and trade world. The virtual context offers to its participants the opportunity to experiment in the language use changing the traditional linguistic conventions, writing in a more immediate and faster way, using a more direct style, and giving priority to the instant communication over the grammatical correctness. Therefore there is more spelling and grammar flexibility. International business discourse, as any type of discourse, is culturally–situated and therefore context-dependent, and all three, discourse, culture and context play a key role in the communication process (Bargiela-Chiapinni, 2004: 31-34). In the world of business and trade the way the participants use the English language in the intercultural communication (cross-cultural) has its own features that cannot be detached from their cultural background.

China has gradually opened its doors to the world in the last decades. It is developing as a powerful economy compared to the rest of the Asian countries and to many Western countries as well. As Bolton (2003: 228) points out the English language current situation is due to the fact that the government of Deng-Xiao-ping adopted an 'Open-Door' policy towards the West and therefore a renewed interest appeared in learning foreign languages, specially English. After the entry into the World Trade Organization and the Olympic Games in 2008 the popularity of the English language has increased enormously. Before the Olympic the Chinese government launched a campaign promoting the learning of English in the capital and across the country. The objective of this campaign was to ensure a successful Olympic Games celebration and to encourage population in general towards the modernization and integration into the global community. As China has become an economic giant and has established business relationships worldwide therefore the use of business English is completely necessary. Moreover China has shown great potential and as a result has attracted many foreign entrepreneurs to invest and has also established exporting and importing relationships with numerous foreign companies.

Several researchers have observed that China is the largest English learning population in the world (Jiang, 2002; Jenkins, 2003; Bolton, 2003; Crystal, 2008). As a consequence the Chinese English variety is achieving an outstanding position among the new varieties of English. Some features in Chinese English have been detected and analyzed by scholars (Jiang, 1995; Jia and Xiang, 1997; Du and Jiang, 2001; Jiang and Du, 2003; Wei and Fei, 2003; Hung, 2005; Deterding, 2006) specially focused on the following aspects: phonology, lexis, syntax and discourse pragmatics. However there is not sufficient research at the discourse pragmatic level concerning professional English writing (He and Li, 2009) as well as there is a need for an increase in research that examines the effectiveness of cross cultural business communication in written genres (Rivers, 2008), at a more pragmatic level, more and more people are communicating with people from other cultures, we need to explore cross-cultural genre study in great depth (Zhu, 2000: 181).

The analysis of variation in specialized communication is not an easy task, as some stylistic variations are difficult to detect and it is difficult to gather an adequate corpus. The interest of some researchers in language variation seems to have been centred mainly on investigating variation across communities, associating particular discursive features with different linguistic backgrounds (Aijmer, 2001; Yli-Jokipii and Jorgensen, 2004; Hinkel, 2009; Schleef, 2009). The interests of yet another group have lain in detecting these variations between English and Spanish writers (Martín Martín, 2003; de Haan and van Esch, 2005; Moreno and Suárez, 2008). The main aim of these analyses is to describe, through contrastive rhetoric, differences in discourse patterns that sometimes operate as a barrier to effective communication.

Nevertheless, in this study, our analysis is devoted to detect the variation related to the linguistic fossilization of structures inherited from the mother tongue or the culture of the writer. We focus our research on business English, although it is a genre with some linguistic patterns internationally established, we consider that cultural or mother tongue influences vary the way international writers communicate.

Some researchers have already paid attention to the standardisation of the linguistic characteristics of business English, as communication is essential in this genre. As an example, specific attention to business interaction and the rhetorical features used in business letters have been paid by researchers as Louhiala-Salminen (1996); Okamura and Shaw (2000); Pinto dos Santos (2002); Nickerson (2005); Muñiz and Carrió (2007); Carrió and Muñiz (2010); Flowerdew and Wan (2006) and Bremmer (2008). Business communication should be concise and clear and "should not be treated as something separate from the real business" (Louhiala-Salminen, 1996: 50). Nevertheless, this is not always certain. Language use tends to vary depending on the cultural, linguistic or social background of the speaker.

Not only business English in general has been widely researched. Even specific settings in this genre, as the analysis of the language used in business e-mails, have been studied by Barson, Frommer & Schwartz (1993); Warshauer (1995); Giménez (2000; 2006) and Biesenbach-Lucas (2005). Although there are standard guidelines in this genre, e-mails vary their linguistic characteristics if we contrast speakers with different cultural backgrounds. Variations should be detected in order to observe the future evoution of language.

In this research, we focus on the use of the English language by China and Hong Kong's workers of a Spanish exporting company and the way they communicate through e-mails with their counterparts around the world.

The main hypothesis of this paper is to identify if English variation can be detected and if variation is due to the influence of the socio-cultural context of the writer. The objectives of this paper are, first, to detect and contrast the lexical variation in the business discourse used by second language and foreign language writers of English; second, to determine the causes that cause variation in the use of English in both groups and, finally, to analyse if variation causes miscommunication.

2. Methodology

In order to extract our results, we analysed a corpus of sixty e-mails written by business workers. Thirty were written by Chinese English speakers and thirty by English speakers from Hong Kong. The Chinese writers speak English as a learnt foreign language and the Hong Kong writers speak English in a bilingual community because they are former British colonies and nowadays the role of English is a vital one from the point of view of social, administrative and cultural aspects. These e-mails were all written during a period of two years, from 2008 to 2010, by the employees of a Spanish exporting company.

The Spanish company is located on the East Mediterranean Coast of Spain, in Valencia. The enterprise is specialized in the manufacturing of high technology laser machines, which are used for the finishing of denim. Moreover, one of the main activities of this enterprise is selling and exporting these equipments worldwide, being considered number one in its sector. Nowadays, many American and European manufacturing companies have outsourced their productivity to the Southeast of Asia. Therefore, this company's major customers are in Asia. Presently, the area of most commercial activity for this enterprise is the Asia-Pacific region, where the cost of labor is lower than in other parts of the world.

The most usual way of communication inside and outside the company is through e-mails, which are sent through a laptop or Smartphone, which allows communication to be almost instant. Consequently, e-mail communication is very useful for professionals who are out of the office most of the time. The majority of the e-mails compiled in the corpus are usually sent or received within the Sales Department. All the participants were non-native English speakers although their lingua franca was English. In addition, the use of English was compulsory even between workers with the same mother tongue, so that other members of the company can check the e-mails.

The linguistic proficiency in English of the writers was the same, they were able to communicate correctly in English, and this was a compulsory condition to be enrolled in the company. They always communicate in English about business matters.

We carried out a contrastive study between non-native speakers because we wish to verify if communication between non-native speakers varies. We did not contrast our findings with e-mails written by native English speakers, as our main aim was to observe the varieties of English when used as a second language.

Once selected, the sixty e-mails collected for our corpus study were copied into individual *Word* documents. Some of the lexical features analysed could be counted with the help of *WordSmith Tools* 5.0, although other features had to be analysed manually, as the lexical aspects under study could only be observed in context. Although initially further lexical features were included, outstanding results were only obtained in some of the lexical features initially included: calques, adaptation from L1 to L2, invention of the given or first name, abbreviations, ornamented style and commanding style. The occurrences and percentages of the findings were detailed and the results discussed and analysed, providing examples of the context of the occurrences to conclude our analysis.

3. Results

The sixty e-mails compiled had a total of 7,873 words. The lexical features in which we obtained more than one occurrence were analysed and contrasted. In order to contrast the results, we compared the occurrences obtained in the two sets of e-mails. In Graph 1 we can observe the different occurrences found in the Chinese e-mails:
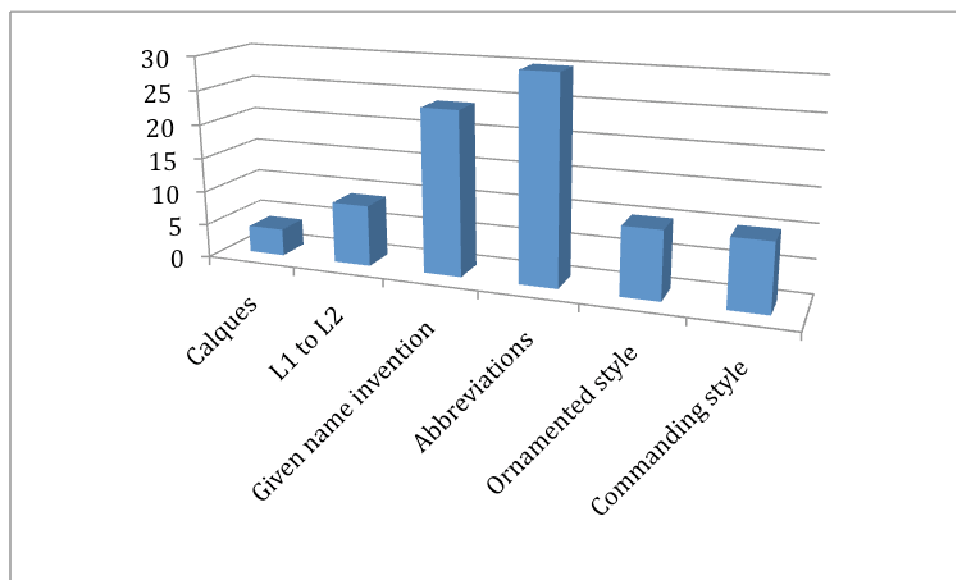
Graph 1. Occurrences of the lexical features found in the business e-mails from China.

We can observe that most of the variations could be found in the use of abbreviations and in the invention of a given name. Chinese writers tend to use a western name in order to facilitate the pronunciation of their name. Calques were not very frequent although some occurrences were found and the influence of the mother tongue and the ornamented style were not very common features. We consider that the most frequent variations found were not caused by the influence of the mother tongue, in the corpus analysed, the specific context of communication, i.e. business English, was relevant to produce English variation. Some examples from the e-mails can be observed in E1, E2, E3, E4 and E5:

E1: Calques:
No need to make it worry
the behind message

E2: Adaptation L1 to L2:
Don't leave this argument between you and me
This kind of argument do not bring a harmony business relation
My concern is more deep in behind.

E3: Given name invention:
Cason, Florence, Williams, Winney, etc
E4: Abbreviations: *Pls find out and…; your proposal is not a solution needed to wait for after CNY holiday; Pls advise yr fty exact address, tks; Your G2 rsult samples; We will confirm you asap; X'max & a happy new year to you all & your family.*

E5: Commanding style:

We want all the parts sent us with the next Big M. shipment together.
We have no room for Big m., it's not make sense to have room for production
Ok, we have tried everything now. I think its time to get some one here R., you are already in china, come to ningbo and sort this out
I want to fix the work schedule as well.
Need assistance urgently to find out why!!!!
I my concept that is clear o matter who close the deal that is NOT important for us. The important is closed the deal?
The visit of your technician or sales team must be free.
There should not be any customers and agents.

We have clearly mentioned to your company that, your constant visit in sales and service in the first two years is compulsory.
This is very clear as you are a product supplier, it is your responsibility to start the business with good support to the client, if your every visit is charging the customers and agent, nobody will buy from you
Your transportation cost is very unfair

In some of the examples it can be seen that the writers use business style in order to communicate with their counterparts. Communication is effective, although Chinese businessmen vary the way they communicate, adapting their style to their social and cultural conventions. They do not communicate in standard English; they vary the use of language in order to achieve their objective, prepare business or inform to the receiver. Linguistic correction is not relevant for Chinese writers, they just prefer to communicate and be understood.

In Graph 2 we can observe the contrast of the different occurrences found in the e-mails from Hong Kong:
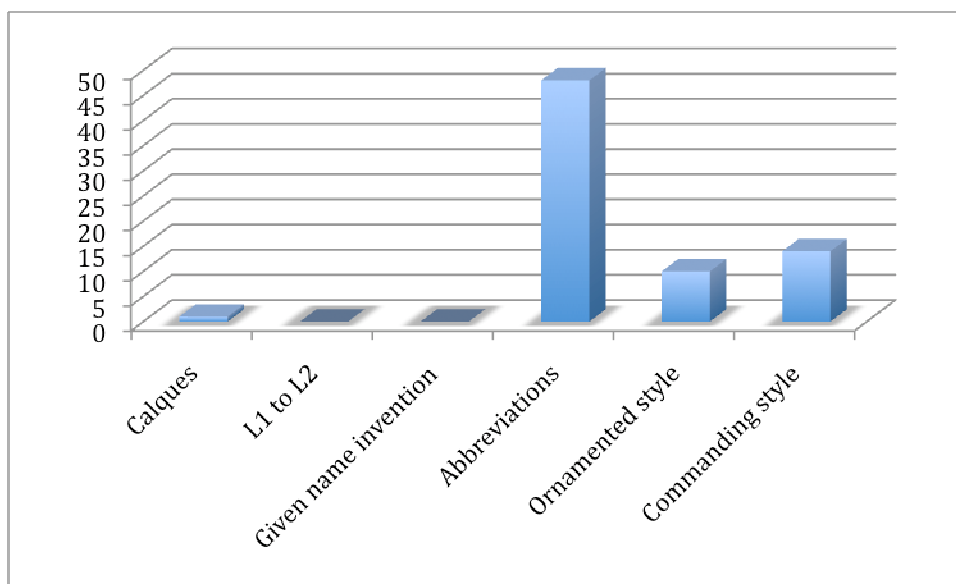
Graph 2. Occurrences of the lexical features found in the e-mails from Hong Kong.

We can see in Graph 2 that most of the occurrences found in the e-mails corresponded to the use of abbreviations. This characteristic, as well as the use of commanding style, is typical of the genre we analysed. Nevertheless, we observed that the abbreviations used are not the standard ones used in British or American English. We can observe in the examples E6, E7 and E8 that the Hong Kong writers use variations of English and the lexical features used are quite peculiar.

E6: Calques: *so I hope for your more favorite price.*

E7: Commanding style and politeness:

I would like to visit Leigh and Patrick in Shanghai. It is good chance for us. It match with my plan to develop Northern China Market as I told you last month.
I will contact Patrick and Leigh to coordinate the meeting.
The best is Leigh staying till next week. Then I do not need to re-schedule my meeting for cactus China laundries. That meeting has been confirmed with Ming / Samsara on this week Friday.
Noted your comment and tks for your advice. Tks.
FYI. I contact Dr Linus Siu, he is Group General Manager, just under Dr. Harry Li and Tommy is far away from him. I knew him since 1992, he is the one to pre- approve any investment for the TAL Group.
All off-shore factories under his supervision, therefore, I contact him. He knows us. When I talked with him he can called out Mr Jose vidal immediately. And he told me that for our company product line is handled by his assistant team Mr Danny Lok & Ronald Cheung.
I will promote G2 accordingly in tmrw meeting.

Just want to know do they bring up any questions on G2. Since Ronald told me Harry has bought up some questions, which waiting answer from you. And that he did not know what is it. That's why I ask you.
Will follow your advice to deal with them. Thanks.
Sorry to late reply, busy with J. here. and welcome back to team. Hope all good to you and for your family and love baby.
Time fly, almost 3 months already. It is great for me to work with an expert like you. On CDS. For sure we will have a lot contact, and hope you don't mind me to ask a lot question.
I have confidence to promote CDS into market and currently on hand I have 3 customer interesting on CDS. Will follow up further after Jose trip here.
Regarding Guess presentation on July 20. Thanks for your support and looking forward to receive those stuffs for study in advance.
Will you come to HK with Michelle?
Besides, could you send the material which you use for CDS people training for study. Gracias.
E8: Abbreviations: *B. Rgds; Pls; Tks; can u*; *takes for Smpls & bulk*; *FYI. I contact Dr Linus Siu*; *in tmrw meeting.*

We can observe that the lexical features used are commanding, they prefer to use abbreviations and they are interested in transmitting their message. The writers focus on the use of content words and they are not interested in the use of stylistic devices. In order to analyse in more depth the variations detected in the corpus analysed, the results from the e-mails from China and Hong Kong were contrasted. In Table 1 we can observe the different occurrences found in both sets of e-mails:

Lexical features	Occurrences (%) CHINA	Occurrences (%) HONG KONG
Calques	4 (4.6%)	1 (1.3%)
Adaptation from L1 to L2	9 (10.3%)	0 (0.0%)
Given name invention	24 (27.6%)	0 (0.0%)
Abbreviations	30 (34.5%)	48 (65.8%)
Ornamented style	10 (11.5%)	10 (13.7%)
Commanding style	10 (11.5%)	14 (19.2%)
TOTAL	87 (100%)	73 (100%)

Table 1. Occurrences and percentages in business e-mails from China and Hong Kong.

We can observe in Table 1 that different occurrences were obtained in the e-mails from China and Hong Kong. Both groups used a similar percentage of ornamented style and commanding expressions to communicate. Ornamented style is typical from eastern cultures; nevertheless, the commanding style is typical from business English. Workers from Hong Kong preferred the use of abbreviations (65%) when they communicate; this reflects an informal style that is not very common in business English. Some abbreviations are even repetitive of the message, they would like to be polite, and nevertheless, they use informal style.

Other occurrences were found in the corpus that we would like to highlight, as they are lexical variations quite unusual in business English. We can observe some examples in E9, E10 and E11:

E9: Use of *kindly* as *please* in e-mails from China:
Kindly note that the shipping company; Kindly do the needful by today; Kindly noted; Kindly consider if you will include; *kindly advise the contact.*
E10: Use of references to Chinese culture:
Chinese culture is when they ask you for Orange, and you only has landscape, they don't care, whether you buy the seed from other country, as long as your landscape can have orange for them, which same as what they want.
E11: Use of ungrammatical variations in e-mails from Hong Kong, conciseness:
It match with my plan to develop Northern China Market as I told you last month.
The best is Leigh staying till next week. That meeting has been confirmed with Ming / Samsara on this week Friday.
Noted your comment and tks for your advice. Tks.

All off-shore factories under his supervision, therefore, I contact him. He knows us. When I talked with him he can called out Mr Jose vidal immediately.
Will follow your advice to deal with them.
I have confidence to promote CDS into market and currently on hand I have 3 customer interesting on CDS.

These variations could be caused by cultural influences and the genre used. The writers tend to be polite and write quickly in order to communicate with other members of the company. Variations are produced as consequence of the linguistic and cultural background of the writers.

We can observe that communication is produced although the business writers vary language. Hong Kong writers do not produce so many variations as Chinese business writers, hence we consider that the fact they learnt English as a foreign language entails that more variations are produced. In Hong Kong, English and Chinese are the official languages as defined in the Basic Law of Hong Kong; in this way, English is considered a second language and this fact produced a lower percentage of occurrences in the corpus analysed. Hong Kong is a former British colony and nowadays it is considered a special administrative region of China, consequently, business deals and the administration tend to use English to communicate.

4. Conclusions

We could observe in Graph 1 and Graph 2, as well as in Table 1, that the results obtained in this study evidenced that variation exists in the English language used by writers from China and Hong Kong. Even in a standardised genre as business English, writers tend to change language. We observed that Chinese writers varied English more than Hong Kong writers as in the latter English is consider an official language and is used as a second language. Business English tends to be more informal when used by Chinese writers, transmitting the linguistic and cultural identity of the author.

Most of the variations were caused by the mother tongue and the cultural influence of the writers, i.e. their intention to be polite, the ornamental style and the invention of the given name. Other variations were caused by the genre they are immersed in, i.e., the use of abbreviations and the commanding style. Although variation was detected in the analysis of our corpus, we noticed that communication was fluent among the workers of the company. The e-mails that answered the ones from Chinese workers were checked and we observed that communication was effective. The receivers understood the message even when variation in communication was evident. We are conscious that there are other aspects to be analysed in communication, as modality, grammar, syntactic and morphologic aspects of language, and so forth. Our aim is to analyse further English aspects of linguistic variation in order to observe if a new variety of English is emerging in China.

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