

Foreword

Two questions continually tease students and scholars of global English – especially those interested in the statistics of English use. What on earth is happening in India? What on earth is happening in China? The vast populations of these two countries impact immediately on any estimates we dare to make about the number of people in the world who speak English. We await an up-to-date evaluation of the situation in India. This book provides just such an evaluation for China.

But quantitative data is of far less interest than qualitative. It is not the number of speakers that matter, but their spread, their character and the range of linguistic situations in which they are using English. This sociolinguistic perspective is critical, and it is good to see it present from the opening chapter. A regional perspective is critical too. Generalisations about language use in China often fail to take account of the huge diversity that exists – not only in languages and dialects, but in language policies, planning and pedagogical implementation. It is rewarding to see so many regions of China given separate treatment in this collection – as well, of course, as to see a separate analysis made of the situations in Singapore, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macao.

Plainly, we can observe a sociolinguistic transition rapidly taking place in China. The timeframes that accompanied such transitions in the past no longer obtain. The internet, in particular, has changed everything, and the rate at which the Chinese have taken to this new technology is bound to have a significant effect on English language awareness, learning and use. The question of fluency remains open: we do not yet know just how well or how often people are using the language, and statistics will remain uncertain until more precise information is available. But, as is pointed out, the increasing presence of competent Chinese English contributions in internet forums is an indication of the speed of progress.

Another indication is the arrival of linguistic creativity. One of the most interesting things I read in this collection was the way a new variety of English – the authors call it China English – is emerging in the literature and the media. Such localised varieties can be predicted for any country that has adopted English as a medium of communication; but

hitherto this has been observed chiefly in countries where English is a first or second language. Notions such as American English, Australian English, Caribbean English and Indian English are familiar, not least with reference to the linguistically distinctive literatures they have produced. All countries will develop such literary English varieties in due course, but I imagined that it would take quite some time before we would see such varieties develop in countries where there is no historical tradition of English cultural contact. China is altering that expectation, and cases like Taiwan are providing us with a further affirmation of the fuzziness that exists between the notions of second language and foreign language.

Anwei Feng and his colleagues have done English language scholarship a great service in providing such a wide ranging and detailed account of a linguistic region that is going to play an increasingly important role in the future of English. I saw English in China, hitherto, as through a glass darkly. The image is much brighter now.

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