

2010 China History and Culture Curriculum Project  
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The Use of Chinglish in Public Signs in China

**Fields of Application:** Language and Culture, Applied Linguistics, Dialectology, Sociolinguistics, Pragmatics, ESL Education, Language and Society.

**Key Words:** Language, culture, public discourse, humor, sociolinguistics, pragmatics, linguistics, public signs.

**Duration:** Three class periods

**Course Objectives:** Students will

1. develop an appreciation of the importance of communication in Chinglish;
2. understand that “Chinglish” is not a variety of English as any other world variety of English;
3. see the connection between Chinglish and the historical events (e.g., opening to the outside world);
4. understand that Chinglish is necessary despite the fact that it is not a variety of English;
5. see a possible relationship between the use of Chinglish and the Chinese way of life.

**Assignment (to be completed before next class meeting):** Each group of three or four students will select one topic on China among the topics suggested below (the list is not exhaustive). You will research and present the findings to class in the next class period. The use of multimedia is highly recommended and will have an impact on the score.

- **Topics:** tourism in China, restaurants/food in China, Chinese clothing, Chinese music, Chinese movies, transportation in China, and Chinese family life. You may suggest your own topic for approval.

**1<sup>st</sup> class period: Presentation--**Groups present their findings orally to the class using multimedia (see rubric in Appendix C).

**2<sup>nd</sup> class period: Introduction--**In this class period, we will establish the context in which Chinglish is used by looking at the Chinese socio-cultural life, and we will also determine whether Chinglish can be classified as a dialect or variety of English.

Let us first look at some samples of Chinglish and try to figure out what they mean (see also Appendix A for more samples).



You wonder where signs like these are found in China. Well, they're found everywhere. As you can see, the sign "Caution: wet floor" is placed on the "grassless" ground in the front yard of a school office in Xi'an after the rain. The sign was a caution to the Fulbright-Hays visitors since we had to go across to enter the room where we had to listen to a lecture.

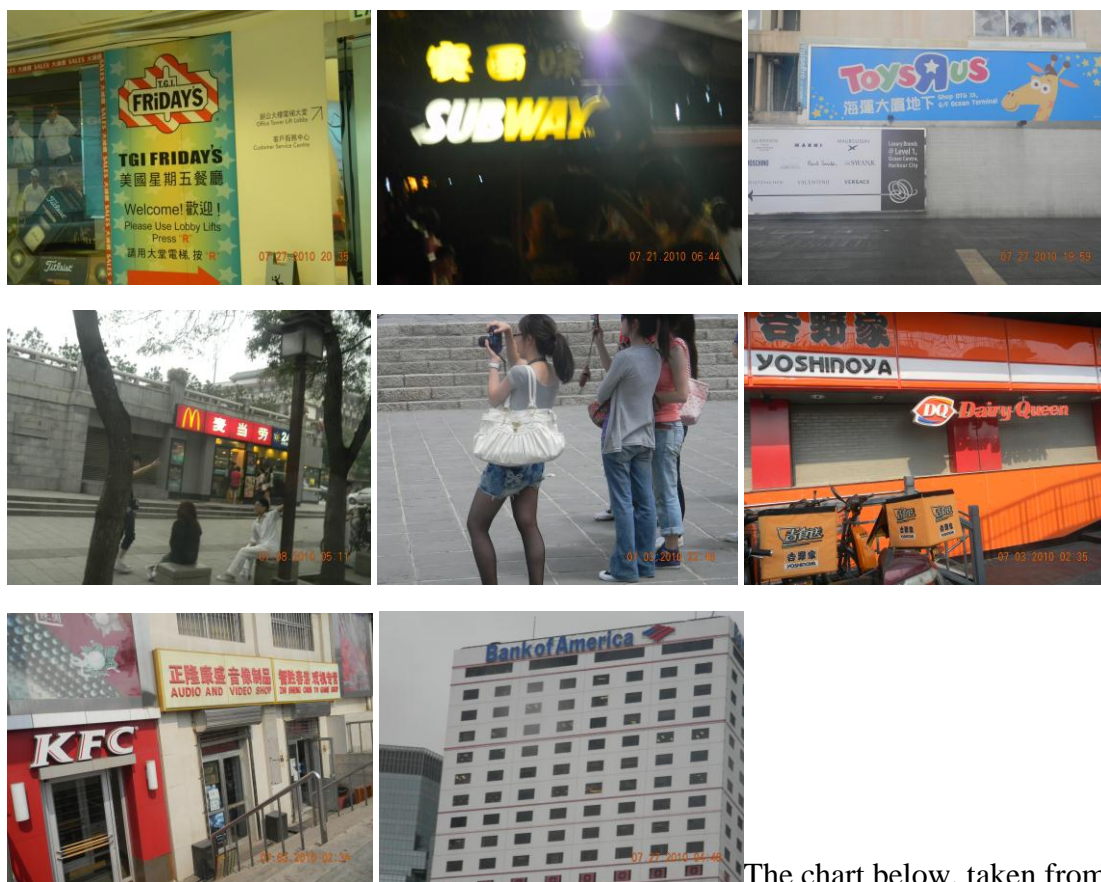
**A brief introduction of where Chinglish is found and the context in which it is used--**The first linguistic surprise a speaker of English will encounter upon arrival in China is Chinglish. Chinglish is found everywhere in China. As Oliver L. Radtke (2007) put it so well in his book, *Chinglish: Found in translation*, "I spotted it throughout, often in the most unsuspected places. I found it on hotel room doors and brightly lit highway billboards, construction sites and soccer balls, condoms and pencil boxes" (p. 6). Chinglish is characterized by its humor and sometimes mis-use of grammar. "Chinglish," says Radtke, "is very funny because of the sometimes scarily direct nature of the new meaning produced by the translation. A "deformed man toilet" in Shanghai or an "anus hospital" in Beijing is funny because it instantly destroys linguistic euphemisms ..." (p. 7).

**Socio-cultural changes:** It is a fact that the outside world has had an influence on China due to its opening to the world in 1978. For instance, some cultural changes have taken place in China

as a result of its contact with the outside world, and those changes have had some impact on the use of English, e.g., Chinglish. As Radtke (2007) observed, Chinglish “exists because people travel and their language travels with them. Chinglish also exists because of China’s opening to the world, the tourism industry, state propaganda mechanisms, and the internet” (p. 6).

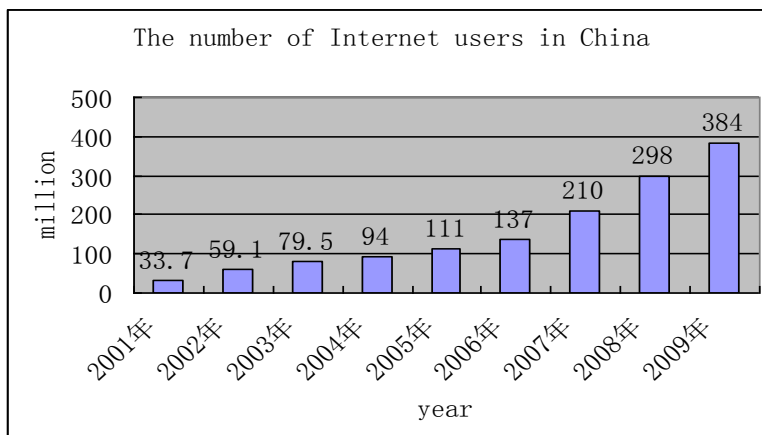
With this opening to the world, China has experienced some changes. For instance, some American restaurants, fast food restaurants, stores, banks, etc. have been established in China and jeans are worn by the youth as a result of its opening to the outside world. China has gone from a closed society into an open society. According to Professor Wang Yingjie<sup>1</sup> of Beijing Normal University,

American living style and culture came in. Coca-Cola is one of the most popular soft drinks. McDonald and Kentucky Fried Chicken are widely spread over China. Nike shoes and fashion blue jeans are new fashion, and there is internet and opening of cultural products market. China was authorized to participate in internet in 1994.



The chart below, taken from Professor Wang Yingjie’s presentation, gives us also an idea about the number of the Internet users between 2001 and 2009.

<sup>1</sup> Professor Wang Yingjie addressed the 2010 Fulbrighters on the topic “Dramatic social changes and educational reforms in China” on July 2, 2010 on the campus of Beijing Normal University.



China's opening to the world made it possible for the tourist industry to interact with the visitors using English as the language of international communication. In fact, English is spoken worldwide. Radtke (2007) observed that

nearly four hundred million people speak it as their mother tongue, another six hundred million as their second language. A billion are learning it, a third of the world's population is exposed to it, and *The Economist* predicts that by 2050 half the world will be in some way proficient in it: English is globalization's number one language, the communicative tool for trade, techniques, and tacticians in foreign ministries around the world. (p. 8)

It is in this context that "Chinglish" appears in China. It is therefore important to understand that this opening of China to the outside world made it possible also for tourists to come to China. For instance, American tourists started visiting China again since the normalization of the US-China diplomacy on January, 1979. With the opening of China to the outside world, the need for Chinese to use English, e.g. Chinglish, continues to grow as they provide directions, warnings, caution, and so forth to international visitors.

**Is Chinglish a variety of English?** Let us look at some characteristics that qualify a variation to be considered a dialect or variety of English. Edward Finegan (2008) observed that "among speakers of any widely spoken language there is considerable international variation, as with Australian, American, British, Indian, and Irish English, among others." He went on to say that "in addition, even casual observers know that residents of different parts of a country speak regional varieties of the same language" (p. 347). The question is whether Chinglish can be classified as a dialect or variety of English at the same level as Australian, American, British, Indian, and Irish English, among others. The answer is no since Chinglish does not present a consistent pattern in its production. Braj B. Kachuru and Cecil L. Nelson (2006), for instance, defined dialects, i.e. language varieties, as being "characterized by identifiable differences *vis-à-vis* other dialects, in pronunciation, lexical choice or usage, grammar, and so on" (p. 10). They suggested that "in assessing written text," for instance, "one can notice word choice or *lexis*, preferred word combinations or *collocations*, and grammar" (p. 12). In the same way, Finegan pointed out that "like the existence of different languages, the existence of regional varieties of a language suggests that people who speak *with* one another tend to speak *like* one another" (p. 347).

Since “Chinglish” is expressed only in written form and since its *lexis*, *collocations*, and grammar do not present consistency in their distribution and uses, we can conclude that it is not a variety of English in the same way British, American, Australian, Chicano, Black Vernacular varieties of English are. In other words, Chinglish does not belong to the so called “world Englishes” (Kachru and Nelson, 2006, pp. 10-12). The main characteristic of Chinglish is its use of direct translation, personification, and its mis-use of grammatical structures.

One fact is true, however, that Chinglish, with its creativity and humor identifies Chinese people as people who belong to the same language affiliation. As Finegan (2008) explained, “along with physical appearance and cultural characteristics, language is part of what distinguishes one nation from another. Regional varieties may be important markers of social affiliations” (p. 347).

Assignment/Home work: Find 10 examples from Ratdke’s books *Chinglish: Found in translation* and *More Chinglish: Speaking in tongues*, provide their correct English translations and be ready to discuss them in class.

**3<sup>rd</sup> class period: Introduction**--We will look at Chinglish from the linguistic and communicative perspective to see whether it is intelligible, comprehensible, and interpretable. We will also try to answer the question: Why is “Chinglish” displayed in public places, and nobody cares?

As Larry Smith (1988) noted, “any text is received by a reader or hearer on three levels – intelligibility, comprehensibility, and interpretability (as cited in Kachru and Nelson, 2006). Let us examine Chinglish in terms of these three characteristics.

- **Intelligibility:** As with any piece of communication, “the context of situation,” as J. R. Firth pointed out, “will contribute to the decoding of the message” (as cited in Kachru and Nelson, 2006). Smith also observed that *intelligibility* “consists of word-level recognition. If you recognize that you are hearing (or reading) English, then the language is intelligible to you, according to this technical definition of the term” (as cited in Kachru and Nelson, 2006). Since Chinglish displayed in the public signs is produced in a context of situation (restroom, restaurant, elevator, and so on), we may say that in most of the cases it is intelligible. In this case it is important to emphasize the significance of the context. As Kachru and Nelson suggested, a consideration of both the producer and the receiver of the text and of the circumstances under which the text was produced would be indispensable (p. 21).
- **Comprehensibility:** As with intelligibility, if a receiver can find a text meaningful, then it is comprehensible. Kachru and Nelson (2006) argued that  
If someone says, ‘Please open the door,’ and if the words are intelligible to you and you can assign referential meaning to them (you understand *please* as polite request opener, *open* as referring to a particular activity, *door* as having a certain concrete referent in the immediate environment, and so on), then that bit of text is comprehensible to you. Further, if you interpret the utterance ‘Please open the door’ as a request for a particular activity which you may carry out, ignore, object to, or otherwise react to in ways that will, in their turns, elicit another round of interpretation and response from other participants in the situation, it is comprehensible to you. (p. 21)

In the case of Chinglish, for instance, someone who reads the humoristic sign “I like your smile, but unlike you put your shoes on my face,” posted in front of the grass, as meaning “Please do not step on the grass,” indicates that the sign is intelligible and comprehensible since he or she understood the intended meaning of the utterance.

- **Interpretability:** Kachru and Nelson claim that interpretability refers to the apprehension of intent, purpose, or meaning behind the utterance. It is the capacity to take “Gee, it’s hot in here” as the equivalent, as far as appropriate response is concerned, of the direct request ‘Please open the window’ (p. 22). In the case of Chinglish, if someone can interpret “I like your smile, but unlike you put your shoes on my face” as meaning “Please do not step on the grass,” interpretability is achieved.

**Grammatical errors:** The question that comes into the mind of any speaker of English who encounters Chinglish is: Why is it that Chinglish, with all the wrong translations and grammatical errors, is displayed in public signs? Radtke (2007) posed this question in his book, *Chinglish: Found in translation*. He came up with five possible reasons<sup>2</sup>:

- **Nobody speaks English in China:** He concluded that this reason was not valid as there are enough foreigners and Chinese university graduates with excellent language skills. The problem may be that young Chinese who are fluent in English don’t like working as translators and foreign native speakers of English are not fluent in Chinese.
- **We don’t care:** Radtke explained that the idea behind Chinglish is no matter if it is right or wrong, as long as it looks foreign, cool, and different, we are fine with it. Some of the Chinglish, according to Radtke, is not translating, but decorating. English words are meant for display, not for information. Hence, advertisements such as “Are you praised when it’s great?” are found on men’s underwear in China<sup>3</sup>.
- **We don’t know any better:** According to Radtke, companies use translators without checking their credentials. Most of the time companies would use an employee who has some knowledge of English because they cannot find a better person to do the translation. The result is therefore that no one notices the wrong translation because no one in the companies knows English better than the employee.
- **We want to do it ourselves:** Radtke pointed out that this reason had something to do with “losing face.” We can translate our own work without asking foreigners to do it for us.
- **The might of online translation tools:** Chinglish in this case, according to him, is a direct word-by-word translation from a dictionary and/or online translator. Radtke

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<sup>2</sup> I will briefly present the five possible reasons in this project.

<sup>3</sup> I need to point out here that “Are you praised when it’s great” is not meant for information. Someone who wears the underwear is indirectly answering the question positively, implying that when he’s seen wearing the underwear, he is sending the message that he has taste, and as such people will praise, i.e., compliment him.

illustrates his point by showing how five different websites issued different translations of two of his catchier phrases.

After some observation, I came up with my own possible interpretation.

- **A Reflection of Social and Public Life:** Chinglish might be a reflection of Chinese way of life, and as such, it is accepted in public like any of the Chinese aspects is. In the same way that “euphemisms” in signs are displayed in public, Chinese people display aspects of life that may be considered “euphemistic” in other cultures, particularly in the Western cultures, in public. For instance, they dry their clothes in the streets, on the sidewalks, on soccer fields and basketball courts in school, and so forth.



Dance lessons and music lessons are taught in the open. Morning ping-pong games where males and women play take place in the parks, and people enjoy it. People sit on the escalator while it's running (at the Expo), and no one bothers them.



This public behavior by which Chinese people freely express themselves by exposing their way of life in public may be what is reflected in their use of Chinglish in the public place. Maybe China is saying to the tourists and to the world, “we are free to use English the way we see fit, just like we are free to expose our way of life in public the way we see fit.” In other words, Chinglish may be a liberal way for the Chinese to show that they are different, to indicate their common affiliation, and to affirm their identity.

**Class activities:** Groups may discuss some more Chinglish as illustrated in Appendix A and discuss some cultural aspects as illustrated in Appendix B.

#### References

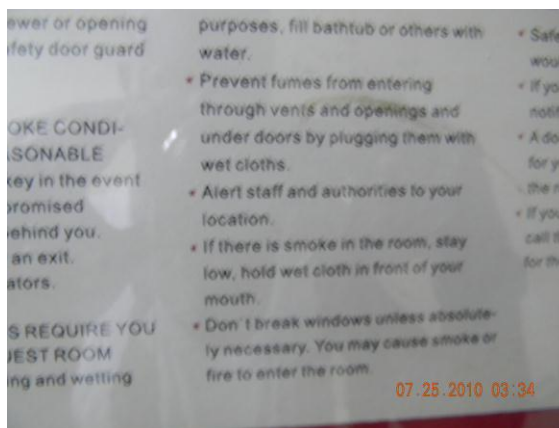
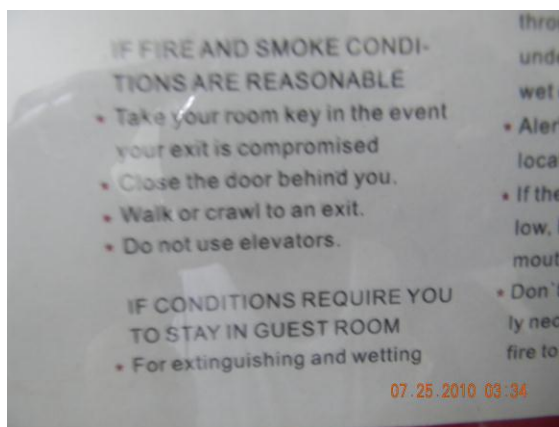
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Appendix A: Samples of Chinglish





Appendix B: Chinese way of life in public



## Appendix C: Rubric for Presentation

## China: Group Presentation

Names \_\_\_\_\_

Topic \_\_\_\_\_

**Content**

Content is relevant to the assigned topic 0 1 2 3 4 5

Specific examples are offered for each main point 0 1 2 3 4 5

Total \_\_\_\_\_ /10

**Organization**

## A. Introduction

Attention-getter material (first words effectively gain attention) 0 1 2 3 4 5

Thesis clearly presented 0 1 2 3 4 5

Preview of main points clearly presented 0 1 2 3 4 5

## B. Body

Main points (clear, distinct from each other, support thesis) 0 1 2 3 4 5

Transitions (clear, creative) 0 1 2 3 4 5

Equal development of all points 0 1 2 3 4 5

## C. Conclusion

Restatement of main points 0 1 2 3 4 5

Restatement of thesis 0 1 2 3 4 5

Strong concluding remarks 0 1 2 3 4 5

Total \_\_\_\_\_ /45

**Delivery**

Conversational style, NOT reading 0 1 2 3 4 5

Voice (variety in pitch, rate, volume, pauses) 0 1 2 3 4 5

Enthusiasm/energy 0 1 2 3 4 5

Eye contact (sustained, entire audience) 0 1 2 3 4 5

Movement (posture, gestures) 0 1 2 3 4 5

Clear, succinct wording/phrasing 0 1 2 3 4 5

Total \_\_\_\_\_ /30

**Effectiveness**

Note cards contain clear outline of the presentation 0 1 2 3 4 5

Overall, this presentation was holistically a high effective presentation 0 1 2 3 4 5

Multimedia shows seriousness of preparation 0 1 2 3 4 5

Total \_\_\_\_\_ /15

Over/under time penalty (-5 points per 30 seconds over/under) \_\_\_\_\_

Grand Total \_\_\_\_\_ /100