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ESSAY

A cultural linguistics approach to Asian Englishes

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In this essay, I adopt a cultural linguistics (Sharifian, 2011) approach to explore Asian Englishes (see also Sharifian, *in press*). In particular, I discuss how cultural conceptualizations¹ can be adopted as a framework for understanding intercultural communication among Asian speakers of English. As Sharifian (*in press*, p. 1) puts it, ‘English is used by communities of speakers around the world to express their culturally constructed conceptualizations and worldviews’. I elaborate on the framework with specific examples of cultural *schemas*, cultural *categories* and cultural *conceptual metaphors*. I suggest that Asian speakers of English should not only acquire linguistic competence and communicative competence associated with Asian Englishes, but also understand cultural conceptualizations and develop metacultural competence for intercultural communication.

English has been widely used in Asia and the Asia-Pacific. It is the de facto national language of Australia and New Zealand, and it is adopted either as one of the associate official or co-official languages, or a second language, in countries and regions such as India, Singapore, Malaysia, Philippines, Sri Lanka and the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR). It is also ‘the foreign language of choice’ in Japan, Korea and China, where ‘elements of the language have been strongly assimilated into national life and the national language in various visual and cultural ways’ (McArthur, 2003, pp. 21–22). English has been regarded as an Asian language based on observations of the sociolinguistic profiles of English in Asia (Kachru, 1998; Kirkpatrick, 2000; McArthur, 2003; Smith, 1998). More recently, Honna (2014, p. 61) argues that in the context of Asia, ‘English is the language to express our own culture, not to imitate others’.

There are many different approaches to researching world Englishes, including ‘corpus linguistics’, a ‘features-based’ approach, ‘Kachruvian studies’, ‘applied linguistics’, ‘popularisers’ and ‘linguistic futurology’ (Bolton, 2003, pp. 42–43). Cultural linguistics (Sharifian, 2011) is a branch of linguistics and cognitive linguistics that explores the relationship between language and culture, and it attempts to ‘understand language as a subsystem of culture and examine how various language features reflect and embody culture’ (Sharifian, 2013a, p. 1590). Based on earlier research in cognitive linguistics and a number of other relevant disciplines, Sharifian (2011, 2013a) has developed a multidisciplinary framework of ‘cultural conceptualizations’, which views language as firmly grounded in a group-level cognition that emerges from the interactions between the members of a cultural group.

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Cultural conceptualizations are defined as conceptual structures such as schemas, categories, and conceptual metaphors, which not only exist at the individual level of cognition but also develop at a higher level of cultural cognition, where they are constantly negotiated and renegotiated through generations of speakers within a cultural group, across time and space (Sharifian, 2013a, p. 1592).

Schemas, categories and metaphors are all likely to be grounded in cultural knowledge and experience.

Schemas in cognitive psychology are considered as ‘building blocks of cognition used for storing, organizing, and interpreting information’ (Sharifian, 2013a, p. 1591). Cultural *schemas* are depicted as ‘an emergent property of cognition at the level of cultural group rather than the individual’ and they emerge from the interactions between the minds that constitute the cultural group (Sharifian, 2011, p. 6). There are *event* schemas, *role* schemas, *image* schemas, *proposition* schemas and *emotion* schemas.

‘Event schemas are abstracted from our experience of certain events’; role schemas include ‘knowledge about social roles which denote sets of behaviors that are expected of people in particular social positions’; image schemas refer to ‘intermediate abstractions between mental images and abstract propositions that are readily imagined, perhaps as iconic images, and clearly related to physical or social experiences’; proposition schemas are ‘abstractions which act as models of thought and behavior’ and these schemas ‘specify concepts and the relations which hold among them’; emotion schemas help ‘define, explain and understand emotions primarily by reference to the events and situations in which they occur’ (Sharifian, 2011, pp. 8–11).

I now provide examples from my research data that have been collected for various research projects over the years on world Englishes, English as a Lingua Franca, and intercultural communication to illustrate the different types of cultural schemas. In terms of event schema, data excerpt (1) below illustrates how the event schema of *wedding* exists in different cultures, and how it varies between Korean (K) and Chinese (C) informants.

(1)

- K: Yeah, wedding. We call it Gyeolhon in Korean. Activities include a male and a female getting together, becoming one family. It’s a symbolic thing, I guess.
- C: Do people normally go to church for a wedding?
- K: No. We go to a wedding hall, a special building. Everybody gets married in each individual room. It’s like a funeral place. There are funeral room 1, room 2, room 3, room 4.
- C: Really? So there will be a wedding hall?
- K: Yeah, wedding hall 1, wedding hall 2, wedding hall 3. So there will be a wedding hall building. Every day they book, about three couples probably from 10 to a certain time. I don’t know how many. So in that building maybe 20 couples come out one weekend.
- C: Really?
- K: Depending on how big.
- C: So then on a special day, the building can be fully booked?
- K: Yeah, you have to find different places, so
- C: So people don’t normally go to a restaurant or a church?
- K: Within that building, there’s a restaurant. After the wedding ceremony, we go upstairs or downstairs where the restaurant is.
- C: To have a banquet?
- K: Very brief, 30 minutes or an hour. That’s it.

The above interaction reveals variations of *wedding* as an event schema between Korean and Chinese in terms of the conventional venue for a wedding event, e.g. ‘church’, ‘restaurant’ or ‘wedding hall’, and whether a ‘banquet’ or a ‘very brief’ meal is provided to the guests (Xu & Dinh, 2013, pp. 382–383).

In terms of role schema, data excerpt (2) shows how two Chinese postgraduate students in their 20s conceptualize the role of their parents.

(2)

- R: (researcher): *Now at this time, can you say you are independent from your parents?*
- P1: (postgraduate student 1): Um ... No. I think economically probably I ... I am independent, but emotionally, I always depend on my parents.
- R: So, yes.
- P2: (postgraduate student 2): When we are in trouble, we often ask for ... for advice from parents.
- R: Yes, okay. Then do you normally agree with your parents?
- P1: Normally I will agree.

Such a Chinese role schema of ‘parents’ is grounded in Chinese cultural values in which filial piety in the form of obedience to parents, respect for parents, honoring of ancestors is of supreme importance to the Chinese (Xu, 2010, p. 136).

In terms of image schema, one of the salient images in some East Asian cultures is *yin-yang*, an image that comprises a circle divided into two halves in black and white, within each of which there is a smaller circle of the opposite color. This image schema represents a conceptualization of the universe in terms of two opposite cosmic energies, with *yin* being ‘female’ energy, such as the moon, night, weakness, darkness and softness; and *yang* being ‘male’ energy, such as the sun, day, strength, brightness and hardness. ‘The white dot in the black area and the black dot in the white area connote coexistence and unity of the opposites to form the whole’ (Fang, 2011, p. 31), and the *yin-yang* image schema reflects such cultural conceptualizations as coexistence, mutual reinforcement, and dynamic and paradoxical unity (Fang, 2011, p. 34).

In terms of proposition schema, one of the examples is what I call the ‘work unit’ complex, or ‘work unit’ mentality schema, which has existed in the minds of Chinese particularly in the second half of the twentieth century. This proposition schema exists in the form of WORK UNIT AS FAMILY/HOME, and it has impacted on the Chinese in various aspects of their lives. The concept of ‘work unit’ refers to an urban industrial state-owned enterprise or institution where people are salaried on a monthly basis. People who work for a ‘work unit’ are considered as having a job for life with cradle-to-grave welfare arrangements, including benefits for healthcare, medical treatment, personal hygiene (e.g. coupons for bath-taking), family planning (e.g. free contraceptive products), transportation to and from the ‘work unit’, and magazine and newspaper subscriptions. The welfare arrangements also involve the provision of education (from kindergarten to secondary schooling) for the children of those employed by the ‘work unit’, and arrangements of jobs for them when they have completed their education. Such a proposition schema of WORK UNIT AS FAMILY/HOME has also been commonly depicted as an ‘iron rice bowl’ mentality. In my data of Chinese English short stories, one of the protagonists, who has worked for a cannery (‘work unit’) for a considerable time, says ‘I’ve worked for them for over 20 years, so I belong to the cannery. When I’m alive, I am their man; when I’m dead, I am their ghost’ (Xu, 2010, pp. 154–155).

In terms of emotion schema, one of the examples is about Chinese ‘pride’, or *jiaobao* in Chinese. *Jiaobao* is an emotion that generally has two denotations, including a satisfied sense of one’s achievements, and an inflated sense of one’s status or accomplishments. It can be a pleasant and exhilarating emotion or a virtue that is associated with positive evaluation of the self, but it can also be regarded as conceit or a sin that is associated with embarrassment and shame. Chinese tend to feel ‘pride’ when they bring ‘honor’ to their family, their ancestors or their country. For example, parents feel ‘pride’ when their children make great achievements in their schools and go to top universities, and athletes feel ‘pride’ when they achieve top performances in competitions, because of the tremendous honor that these high-achieving children and athletes bring to their family and country. On the other hand, pride as a form of conceit is severely despised, as a Chinese saying goes, ‘modesty helps one progress, and conceit makes one lag behind’. Therefore, a Chinese ‘pride’ schema is as follows: X feels PRIDE because of his/her hardworking; becoming better than others; bringing something good to his/her family or where he/she belongs (e.g. workplace, city, province or country). In addition, X feels PRIDE because of his/her feeling too good about him/herself; and so he/she stops working hard and becomes left behind. The fact that parents feel pride about their high-achieving children is because their children bring face and honor to the family, and because their good effort and investment in educating their children, and their children’s hard work have all paid off. On the other hand, parents may also scold their children if they see that their children stop working hard because of their pride about themselves.

In addition to cultural *schemas*, cultural *categories* are also grounded in cultural cognition. Categories, according to Rosch (1975, p. 193) are ‘logical, clearly bounded entities, whose membership is defined by an item’s possession of a simple set of criterial features, in which all instances possessing the criterial attributes have a full and equal degree of membership’. Cultural categories are rooted in people’s cultural experiences, and they mirror the structure of attributes perceived in the world.

Cultural categories have both vertical and horizontal dimensions.

The vertical dimension concerns the level of inclusiveness of the category – the dimension along which the terms collie, dog, mammal, animal, and living thing vary. The horizontal dimension concerns the segmentation of categories at the same level of inclusiveness – the dimension on which dog and cat, car and bus, chair and sofa vary (Rosch, 1978, p. 30).

For both dimensions, ‘categories tend to become defined in terms of prototypes or prototypical instances that contain the attributes most representative of items inside and least representative of items outside the category’ (Rosch, 1978, p. 30).

Polzenhagen and Xia (2014) argue that the basic principles we abide by in categorizing the world and the fundamental structure of our conceptual categories are universal, however, the cultural experience and knowledge we gain from our situatedness in a particular culture inevitably shapes our thoughts, making the conceptual categories not only embodied but also ‘encultured’. One example is that Chinese conceptualization of the cultural category of *festival* varies from that in other cultures, e.g. Indonesian.

Data excerpt (3) below shows that Indonesian and Chinese have different conceptualizations about *festival*, e.g. in Chinese culture, many occasions can be labeled as *festivals*, including Spring Festival, Mid-Autumn Festival, Lantern Festival, Dragon-Boat Festival, Qingming Festival (which is a day to honor the deceased), and even the National Day, Labor Day, Women’s Day, Children’s Day, Father’s Day, Mother’s Day

and Teacher's Day are all literally called *festivals*. However, the Indonesian informant insisted that a *festival* has to be a 'joyous occasion'.

(3)

- I (Indonesian): You call it a *festival*, but we just call it a *day*. We don't call it a *festival*.
For example, the Mother's Day is a *day*, not a *festival*.
C (Chinese): We call it a *festival*. It's a *festival* to us.
I: Yeah. But it's not a *festival* to us (Xu & Dinh, 2013, p. 374).

Cultural *metaphors* are defined as 'cognitive structures that allow us to understand one conceptual domain in terms of another' (Sharifian, 2013a, p. 1591). Cultural *metaphors* shape the way we think and act in intra- and intercultural communication. One of the examples of cultural *metaphors* is regarding how people conceptualize *time*, e.g. TIME IS MONEY, TIME IS A LIMITED RESOURCE and TIME IS A VALUABLE COMMODITY (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, pp. 9–10). Within this conceptualization of *time*, people tend to use a corresponding coherent system of metaphorical expressions, e.g. some refer specifically to money (*spend, invest, budget, profitably, cost*), others to limited resources (*use, use up, have enough of, run out of*), and still others to valuable commodities (*have, give, lose, thank you for*).

One of the cultural metaphors in some Asian Englishes is about one's HOME COUNTRY OR NATION AS LAND OF PARENTS, i.e. the use of *motherland* or *fatherland* to refer to one's home country. The data collected for investigating lexical semantic variation from a group of informants respectively from different Asian countries and regions including Australia show that the Hong Kong informant understands *motherland* as her homeland. She takes Chinese mainland and Hong Kong SAR as her *motherland*. The Vietnamese informant refers to his own country as 'land of fathers and land of ancestors' (*King Hung*). Similarly, the Japanese informant uses ancestor's land to refer to her home country. She explains that 'we translate the term as *sokoku* (ancestor's land), and we also call our own country motherland but fatherland is more popular'. However, the Burmese informant states that 'we refer to our own country as *SHE*, so *motherland* is the term we use to refer to our own country'. It is worth noting that while East Asians and South Asians share much of the *motherland/fatherland* cultural *metaphor*, the Australian's response reveals a different discourse, as shown in data excerpt (4) below:

(4)

- C (Chinese): What do Australians call their country?
A (Australian): They call it Australia. People might talk about ... if they're very patriotic, they'll say...
C: Our land?
A: Australia's my country. It's my home. They won't say it's my homeland, it's my father or it's my motherland. This fatherland is very German sounding. Yeah, I've never heard even racist Australians use any of these kinds of words to talk about Australia. They'll say our country or my country.

The awareness and application of cultural conceptualizations associated with the cultural linguistics approach to Asian Englishes have implications for English language teaching and intercultural communication. One of the implications is that English language teaching in the Asian context is not only about teaching the English language per se, but about teaching Asian students to become multilingual speakers of their first

language and culture, including raising the students' awareness of their own cultural conceptualizations, plus those associated with the English language and cultures. This new conceptualization of English language teaching moves beyond the exclusive focus on linguistic and communicative competence, to a level of cultural linguistics, decoding and unpacking the intricate relationship between language and culture. The 'language' here involves both the learners' first languages and different varieties of English, and the 'culture' in this context involves the learners' own cultural conceptualizations and those associated with English, namely Asian Englishes and other varieties of world Englishes.

Another implication is that metacultural competence becomes essential to intercultural communication among different speakers of Asian Englishes. As pointed out by D'Angelo (2010, p. 3), 'World Englishes has served us [speakers of Asian Englishes] well, with its ethos of inclusivity and pluricentricity, and has brought widespread recognition of the richness of Australian English, Singaporean English, Indian English, Philippine English, and even a budding Chinese, Japanese or Vietnamese English'. In addition, D'Angelo (2010, p. 3) reiterates Sharifian's argument that English as an International Language (EIL) proficiency for intercultural communication 'requires metacultural competence, becoming aware of our own and our interlocutor's cultural conceptualizations'.

'Metacultural competence' refers to 'a competence that enables interlocutors to communicate and negotiate their cultural conceptualizations during the process of intercultural communication' (Sharifian, 2013b, pp. 8–9). Metacultural competence involves three components, including '*conceptual variation awareness*, or the awareness that one and the same language could be used by different speech communities to encode and express their respective cultural conceptualizations'; '*conceptual explication strategy*, which is a conscious effort made on the part of interlocutors to clarify relevant conceptualizations with which they think other interlocutors may not be familiar', and '*conceptual negotiation strategy*' which enables interlocutors to negotiate intercultural meanings in 'seeking conceptual clarification' when they feel that there may be 'more behind the use of a certain expression than is immediately apparent'.

In this essay, I have adopted a cultural linguistics approach to explore Asian Englishes. This approach comprises cultural conceptualizations as a framework consisting of cultural *schemas*, cultural *categories* and cultural *conceptual metaphors*. I have also explored implications of the cultural linguistics approach for English language teaching in Asian context and for intercultural communications among speakers of Asian Englishes. It can be suggested that Asian speakers of English should not only acquire linguistic competence and communicative competence associated with world Englishes, including Asian Englishes, but also understand cultural conceptualizations and develop metacultural competence for intercultural communication in Asian context and beyond. I hope that this essay may generate interest among Asian Englishes scholars to explore more and more varieties of English from the perspective of cultural linguistics.

Note

1. Sharifian spells it 'conceptualisations' in his work, but I have adopted the 'z' spelling here.

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