

Rhetorical strategies, electronic media, and China English

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ABSTRACT: Scholars tend to explain or predict China English's rhetorical strategies on the basis of Chinese discourse and cultural preferences. This inference model, I argue, falls short in studying the Chinese variety of English because, first, it essentializes both China English and Chinese, treating their discursive strategies as two easily generalizable, static entities; second, it neglects context, which determines the semiotic meaning potential of any language. I propose an alternative model that studies China English with context treated as the main variable. In light of the context model and Aristotelian and Confucian rhetorical concepts, I examine how Chinese youths use English to foster a community and to realize their particular goals in a bulletin board forum. It has been found that they develop patterned rhetorical strategies in the contexts of requesting opinions, seeking advice, sharing experiences, and expressing feelings. These strategies evidence China English's growing meaning potential in electronic medium spaces because they differ remarkably from those identified in other contexts by previous scholarship, and they cannot be easily labeled as traditional Chinese. As China English finds its way into more contexts and domains, I suggest that we adopt the context model to fully unveil the language's expanding meaning potential.

INTRODUCTION¹

Studies of rhetorical strategies employed in China English have largely adopted an inference model. The model explains or predicts discursive strategies of China English on the basis of Chinese discourse and cultural preferences. For example, in a study of 180 English expository essays written by Chinese students, Wang and Li (1993) find that 66.11 per cent of them employ an "indirect" pattern, 6.11 per cent use a "general/particular" pattern, and the rest use a mixed pattern. They attribute the predominant use of the "indirect" pattern to the circularity and indirection of traditional Chinese essay writing. Similarly, Kirkpatrick and Xu (2002) suggest that, as English is widely used in China, millions of English speakers will inevitably create a variety of English that adheres to Chinese syntactic and pragmatic norms. Such norms include subject-less sentences, "frame-body" sentence and discourse patterns, and face-saving rhetorical moves. In her analysis of Ha Jin's novel *In the Pond*, Zhang (2002) identifies a series of nativized discourse patterns, rhetorical strategies, and speech acts, and argues that they are located in the "texture of Chinese ideological, political and socio-cultural representations" (p. 305). Resorting to Chinese discourse features and cultural traditions for reference, these scholars have discovered a range of distinct discursive strategies used in the emerging Chinese variety of English.

The inference model has clearly grown out of the ways in which scholars have conceived the Chinese variety of English. For example, some call the emerging variety "Chinese English" or "Chinglish." Chinese English is defined as an interlanguage, or a learner language, characterized by users involuntarily transferring Chinese linguistic features into

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English. Some also call the new variety of English “China English.” As Li’s (1993) well-known definition goes, China English has “normative English as its core but with Chinese characteristics in lexicon, syntax, and discourse, and it is employed to express China-specific things through means of transliteration, borrowing, and semantic regeneration but without interference from the Chinese language” (pp. 19–20). In contrast, Kirkpatrick and Xu (2002) conceive China English as bearing a number of Chinese syntactic and pragmatic norms rather than “Chinese characteristics in lexicon, syntax, and discourse.” Focusing on the transfer of Chinese linguistic features in Chinese English or seeking “Chinese characteristics in lexicon, syntax, and discourse” or a number of Chinese syntactic and pragmatic norms in China English, scholars have inevitably fallen back on Chinese discourse and culture for guidance.

While the inference model offers insightful linguistic and cultural explanations for discursive strategies found in China English, it falls short in uncovering the language’s full rhetorical potential. The model has two drawbacks for studying China English. First, it essentializes both Chinese and China English. It assumes that Chinese discourse strategies are static regardless of the language being used in any mode, by any speaker/writer, or for any audience; by the same token, it assumes that an entity of easily generalizable Chinese characteristics also exists in China English. Second, by treating Chinese language and culture as the main variable, the model neglects the context and the speaker/writer in fashioning specific discursive strategies of China English. If we cease to focus exclusively on Chinese characteristics in lexicon, syntax, and discourse and start to examine China English as it is used in particular contexts and for particular audiences, we may start to unveil a wider scope for its rhetorical potential.

An alternative model should focus on the context. In systemic linguistics, Halliday (1973) differentiates between “context of culture” and “context of situation.” While the former defines the potential, or the range of possibilities, of a language, the latter determines the actual linguistic choices we make. The inference model has examined China English within the context of the Chinese language and culture and identified some important discourse strategies. However, the context of situation has been overlooked. The alternative model should focus on how the speaker/writer negotiates the context of situation, which includes the rhetorical purpose and exigency (field), the genre (mode), and the audience (tenor). An individual’s negotiation of these contextual factors may generate novel rhetorical strategies for which the inference model fails to account. Context-centered models have been similarly proposed by Y. Kachru (1995; 1997) for studying English writing in Outer Circle countries, and by Canagarajah (2006) for studying multilingual writing. The deep penetration of English in Chinese society has opened up many new contexts and domains for English use, which entails some expansion of English’s semiotic potential (Halliday, 2003). Electronic media have been particularly powerful in creating new contexts in which the Chinese can use English. An alternative model focusing on how individuals negotiate these emerging contexts will shed new light on China English’s rhetorical strategies.

In light of the context model, I investigate how Chinese youths use English in a bulletin board forum to foster an online community. Over the last decade, the Internet has created virtual enclaves for many educated Chinese to share their experiences, feelings, and desires in English. What discursive strategies do they use to communicate between them and to deal with particular exigencies, or particular contexts of situation? As both building a community and dealing with specific exigencies involve mobilizing rhetorical acts to

influence people, a rhetorical approach will be taken in this study. I will first introduce the bulletin board community and key rhetorical concepts to be used in this study. Next, dividing the discussion threads into four sets of contexts on the basis of the rhetorical purposes and exigencies of the initial messages, I will analyze the rhetorical strategies that the forum members use in each set of contexts. It is found that a particular context of situation, defined by rhetorical purposes or rhetorical exigencies, largely determines the rhetorical strategies used, which are somehow different from those identified in other contexts by previous scholarship. I conclude by suggesting that scholars of China English adopt the context model as an important complement to the inference model.

DATA

The data for this study have been collected from a bulletin board forum that focuses on English writing. The 21st Century Community is an online platform offered by 21st Century Newspapers, a popular newspaper group targeting English-learning students of all levels in China. Due to the popularity of its newspapers, the group attracts a large number of students and college graduates to its online space: the 21st Century Community hosted over 285,000 registered members by the end of 2007. Participation in the online community is on a voluntary basis with no access restriction for non-registered participants; however, only registered members can post messages on the board. In the community, there are 33 forums for different participants (teachers, college students, teens senior, teens junior, kids, etc.) with varying interests (language pedagogy, language skills, opinions, Q and A, etc.). The present study focuses on one of the forums, the "English Writing" forum. According to my observation, most participants of this forum are college students and college graduates. I followed discussions in this forum in 2005 and 2006. During these two years, the forum featured over 2,000 discussion threads. As the present study focuses on how Chinese youths use English to foster an online community, and also for the manageability of the study, only threads that have attracted more than 20 follow-up posts are examined. A total of eight threads have met this requirement.

RHETORICAL ANALYSIS

The eight threads constitute eight discrete contexts of situation for using China English. Each context of situation arises when someone posts a message with particular rhetorical purposes and exigencies. Other people follow with non-synchronous responses, which elicit further responses. Each context consists of participants (including their situated life experiences, feelings, and desires), rhetorical purposes, messages centering on a certain topic (with a few possible digressions), and the electronic medium. Rhetorical acts performed in these contexts will be the focus of this study.

The threads will be examined through rhetorical analysis. In contrast to linguistic analysis, which tends to focus on formal features of a language at phonological, lexical, syntactic, and pragmatic levels, rhetorical analysis is "an effort to understand how people within specific social situations attempt to influence others through language" (Selzer, 2004: 281). In this study, both Aristotelian and Confucian rhetorical theories will be used. Following Aristotelian rhetoric (Aristotle, 2007, Selzer, 2004), I will examine strategies that Chinese youths employ in invention, arrangement, and style. Invention accounts for discursive features related to the trustworthiness and credibility of speaker/writer (*ethos*), the

community-shared values that appeal to the audience (*pathos*), and the logical reasoning of the speaker/writer (*logos*). Arrangement deals with the layout of discourse components. For example, bulletin board posts sometimes appear like letters, involving a salutation, a main body, and a closing. In expository and argumentative types of discourse, people tend to differentiate between inductive and deductive reasoning patterns, which have become focus points in contrastive studies of Chinese and English essay writing (Connor, 1996; Kirkpatrick, 1997; Wang and Li, 1993; You, 2005). Style involves such things as choice of words, grammatical correctness, modes of discourse, levels of formality, and figures of speech. In terms of Confucian rhetoric, the concept of ritual (*li* 禮) will be used. Confucius holds that a harmonious community is built through individuals performing rituals, including speaking and writing, appropriate to the social context. As rituals carry community-shared values, by participating in or performing rituals, individuals can easily recognize and identify with the community values, and are thus persuaded automatically (Confucius, 1989; You, 2006). In a close-knit bulletin board forum, patterned rhetorical strategies become an important ritual for community building and sharing. After identifying patterned strategies in invention, arrangement, and style, we may come to a better understanding of how English has been mobilized by Chinese youths to serve their needs in this cyber community.

Rhetorical analysis grounded in contexts of situation should not exclude considerations of context of culture. Any context of situation is located within a broad context of culture. Culture always plays an intricate part in human communication. Insights gained through the inference model could be brought into discussions of particular rhetorical acts for triangulation purposes. When discussing rhetorical acts in the bulletin board forum, I will bear in mind rhetorical strategies previously found in prose and letter writing by scholars using the inference model. The goal is to discover strategies particular to the context of situation through conscious comparison and contrast. Although traditional prose and letter writing is different from bulletin board communication, forum members may adopt strategies that they have developed in the former and reinvent them in the latter.

Before delving into the details of the threads, several common features of bulletin board messages can be identified in the data. First, the messages range in content and especially in format from the letter-like style to the conversation-like stream, making it difficult to classify them as either writing or speech (Crystal, 2006; Herring, 2001). For example, in threads 1, 2, 4, and 6 (see Table 1), the initiators post a message and then virtually disappear most of the time, while in threads 3, 5, 7, and 8, they are engaged in continual conversations with the follow-up posts. Second, the messages clearly fall into the written domain, as they often quote previous posts. Both Crystal (2006) and Herring (2001) argue that quoting creates the illusion of conversational coherence, recreating an adjacency pair as if the previous turn (the quoted material) and the current turn happened at the same time. I want to suggest that the practice of quoting is a ritualistic act, which creates a sense of proximity and connection that draws the forum members together. Third, the messages seem to serve two kinds of audience. On one hand, the poster wants to speak to a specific person who posted an earlier message; on the other hand, he or she actually speaks to all members of the forum who will read his or her message. Therefore, when conversing with some people, like friends, the posters use emoticons, abbreviations, acronyms, distorted or truncated words, and lower-case spellings, as Al-Sa'di and Hamdan (2005) and Merchant (2001) have found in synchronous online chat and Craig (2003) has found in text messaging. However, as the

Table 1. The topics, number of posts, number of viewers, and rhetorical purposes of the initial posts for the eight threads

	Topics	Posts	Viewers	Rhetorical purposes
1	Moving	71	12,591	Sharing experiences
2	Finding love on the Internet	21	2,420	Requesting opinions
3	Friendship	60	5,256	Seeking advice
4	No love in the world	31	3,441	Seeking advice
5	My adventure	58	4,315	Sharing experiences
6	Spring	47	3,530	Expressing feelings
7	What does a teacher mean to you?	21	2,109	Requesting opinions
8	One year ago	26	3,057	Sharing experiences

posters seem conscious of the public gaze, they rarely use taboo words, which, according to Al-Sa'di and Hamdan, pervade private online chat. These shared features of bulletin board messages, clearly ritualistic in the Confucian sense, affectively glue the community together.

To analyze the rhetorical strategies used in the eight threads of discussions, the purpose of the initial message in each thread has been identified first. "Rhetorical purpose" refers to the goal the speaker/writer hopes to achieve through discourse. It is derived from the poster's recognition of the context of situation, i.e. multiple exigencies and the complex relationship between the audience and the poster's interest. It shapes the rhetorical strategies to be employed, not only in the initial messages but also in the follow-up postings, including ethical, emotional, and logical appeals; *topoi*; rhetorical structures; and styles. Four types of rhetorical purpose are identified in the initial messages of the threads; therefore, there are four sets of contexts of situation: requesting opinions, seeking advice, sharing experiences, and expressing feelings. Table 1 shows the topics, the number of posts, the number of viewers (hence the impact of China English), and the rhetorical purposes of the initial messages for the threads. Next, I will analyze the rhetorical strategies used to achieve a certain rhetorical purpose as initially staged in each thread.

Requesting opinions

Posts that request opinions are the most common in this forum. The thread initiator brings up a topic and asks the other members to share their opinions or their reasoning with him or her. The following are requests of this type which jumpstart threads 2 and 7:

- (1) Is it possible to find love on the internet? Is there any danger? How can you be careful?
It is one of my presentation topics. :D
Would you want to share your own opinion with me? (Havenofun)
- (2) What does a teacher mean to you?
In the world, teachers play such an important role in education. However, with time changing, teachers are also changing. For you, what does a teacher mean? An educator, a knowledge-transfer, a friend . . .
What should a teacher focus, knowledge or morals?
What would you teach if you were a teacher? (Dillonway)

Whether or not an initial message will attract many responses depends on the topic. Apparently, both finding love on the Internet and the meaning of being a teacher are intriguing topics for the forum members, as each message has received 20 follow-up messages. Addressing the audiences directly by using “you,” the two initiators, Havenofun and Dillonway, speak in a semiformal and friendly manner. This type of audience positioning extends an open invitation for opinions. What, then, are the rhetorical features of the response messages?

In terms of rhetorical reasoning, the respondents have employed both deductive and inductive patterns when writing elaborated messages. In deductive reasoning, the respondent states the main point (thesis) first and then supports it with lines of reasoning and examples (details). In terms of inductive reasoning, the respondent delineates his or her reasoning process with supporting details and then draws a conclusion (thesis). In the two threads of “requesting opinions,” there are 40 follow-up messages. Among them, 17 have adopted deductive patterns. The following is a response to post 2, which clearly shows the “thesis-details” pattern:

- (3) teacher is to intiate spirit
for me,i think that teacher is to intiate spirit.We have learned so many years .Now we know the method to grasp knowledge and the criterion to found our own moral. What we really need is the spirit to bestir us forward,a spirit lead us to pursue science and truth (SABRINAR)

The respondent, SABRINAR, first states the main point in the subject line as well as in the beginning of the body text, “for me,I think that teacher is to intiate spirit.” Then the respondent explains the reasons why a teacher needs to kindle the spirit of intellectual pursuit in students. Among the 40 response posts, four follow inductive patterns. The following post is one such follow-up to post 1:

- (4) I run into my girlfrident via Internet,bofore I meet her I also suspect of netlove,now we have a nice fridentship,we believe in lot, Never think too much when you chat with the guy or the gal you want to communicate!share you passion,you will get the nice! (boboxiaozhu)

In contrast to post 3, the respondent, boboxiaozhu, first relates his successful experience in finding love on the Internet and then concludes with an imperative “share your passion,you will get the nice [girl on the Internet].” The sharing of personal experience establishes the respondent’s *ethos*, and the imperative reaches the audience’s emotion.

The 17 deductive and 4 inductive instances show that Chinese youths are comfortable with syllogistic reasoning in English. When facing the need to offer elaborate responses, they choose to use formal logical patterns to express themselves. However, the predominant use of the deductive pattern seems contradictory with what has been found in Chinese students’ English expository writing, which tends to favor inductive reasoning (Cai, 1999; Connor, 1996; Wang and Li, 1993). Most likely, the anonymity in cyberspace has undercut the power hierarchy found in other discursive contexts, allowing the respondents to speak with more directness and less circularity. The bulletin board’s mediation in these contexts of situation has evidently played a part in shifting Chinese youths’ preferred reasoning patterns.

It is equally noticeable that some respondents prefer brief statements, each usually consisting of one or two sentences. The use of brief statements is characteristic of bulletin

board communications (Crystal, 2006). As all members “talk” in writing, some will say more and some will say less. Of the 40 response messages, there are 19 instances of brief statements, such as:

- (5) be honest, u will find true thing via internet (wolf5331I)
- (6) a good teacher can change a student’s life (lisa han)
- (7) A good teacher is the one that you like to remember every now and then even if you haven’t seen him/her for a long time.
A bad teacher is the one that you forget in seconds even if you just meet him/her.
:) (Smallsmall)

These three messages are rather brief; however, functioning like maxims, they are to the point and thought-provoking. In particular, post 7 uses antithesis to establish a contrast between “a good teacher” and “a bad teacher” from a student’s perspective. The stylistic choice of brief statements serving as maxims can be directly attributed to the context of the electronic medium.

Seeking advice

“Seeking advice” is another kind of thread often seen in the forum. The initial post usually introduces the poster’s particular circumstance and then calls for advice from the audience:

- (8) Friendship
After coming to the college, I have found that it is so hard for us to find a really close friend. And now I am so disappointed about that. I am a guy who is so childlike, and most of the time, I need some help and caring from others; and I have tried my best to treat others well enough, even I can spend everything in them.: (But what I have got is misunderstanding.: confused: why? and I am always thinking about this question, even now I didn’t find the answer. Some classmates have told me that you should find a way to relax yourself, :cool: traveling?no! I don’t know what to do! who can help me?: ((Johnny 1983)
- (9) No love in the world
in my opinion, there is no love in the world.
this is a reason that i lose my sweetheart again and again.
i need sb to help me out of the trap.
the messy things often let you sad. (tanggai2005)

As illustrated in the above posts, the posters usually tell personal stories that intend to arouse various emotional responses, including sympathy, in the audiences (*pathos*). By sharing two rather private matters – the frustration of not finding a close friend and the sadness of losing a sweetheart – they have treated the forum members as trustworthy friends. The 59 and 30 follow-up messages (including some follow-up responses by the initiators themselves) indicate that both topics of “friendship in college” and “breaking up with a lover” have intrigued the audiences.

Among the responses, there are recognizable reasoning patterns. Respondents tend to follow the sequence: (opening remarks) – reasoning – suggested actions – (closing remarks) in elaborated messages. Both opening and closing remarks are sometimes omitted. Among

the respondents' messages in the two threads (71 in total), 26 fall into this pattern. The following example is a response to post 8 and shows the full-fledged pattern:

(10) Take it easy!

You treat other peop well, but other peop have no responsibility treat you in the same way!! The society is too realistic, you have no need to worry about this thing, focus on taking care of yourself! If you think you have try your best, this must be their problems. DON'T PUT THE BURDEN ON YOURSELF !If you have just only one real friend in your life, you must satisfy with this. Becuse everyone in the world not all your friends. You should adapt yourself to the society! Think more happy things!

At last, wish you happy everyday !! (iloveff123)

In the above message, the respondent reasons with the poster about why he should not blame himself for not finding friends in college and suggests a course of action: "focus on taking care of yourself! . . . Don't put the burden on yourself! . . . You should adapt yourself to the society! Think more happy things!" By using ritualistic opening and closing remarks ("Take it easy" and "At last, wish you happy everyday!!"), the respondent expresses care and good wishes for the poster, establishing needed rapport with the poster/audience. Thus, a full-fledged pattern effectively combines logical reasoning with ethical and emotional appeals.

While the reasoning-suggested actions pattern dominates the elaborated responses, six messages place suggested actions before the reasoning. The following is such a response to post 8:

(11) hi, Johnny. i think you'd better not take yourself so important .you should know your classmates don't have the obligation to treat you well how you treat them. you treat them well. it is good. that is all. don't worry, be happy. you are a friendly guy. you will find the friendship which you want. :) (vivid color)

The respondent first suggests that "Johnny" should not take himself so seriously, and then explains the reasons. This message also includes an encouraging closing remark ("don't worry, . . .") to enhance the respondent's *ethos*.

The predominant use of the reasoning-suggested actions pattern seems to agree with the preferred information sequencing in modern standard Chinese as identified by Kirkpatrick (1991; 1993; 1996). In his study of complex Chinese sentences and discourse patterns, Kirkpatrick argues that, being a left-branching language, modern Chinese tends to follow a modifier/frame-modified/body structure. The unmarked Chinese syntactic structure places the subordinate clause before the main clause, as exemplified in the "because-therefore" pattern commonly found in Chinese oral and written discourses. The "because" clause provides the cause(s) as a frame for the result(s) contained in the "therefore" clause. In contrast, both American and British Englishes use the "therefore-because" pattern as the unmarked syntactic form. Kirkpatrick further finds that the "frame-body" principle also operates on a Chinese discourse level. Following Kirkpatrick's argument, the "reasoning-suggested actions" pattern seems to be an incarnation of the "frame-body" structure. Reasoning frames, or provides the needed background for, suggested actions, which can be considered as the body of the message.

In the reasoning section, the respondents commonly use pure rhetorical syllogisms, definitions, or personal anecdotes. In a rhetorical syllogism, one draws a conclusion based on a premise and a warrant. Posts 10 and 11 both use rhetorical syllogisms. In post 11, for example, the premise is that “your classmates don’t have the obligation to treat you well [regardless of] how [well] you treat them.” Since “Johnny” is disappointed with his classmates for not being his close friend (warrant), he has taken himself too seriously (conclusion). The following two messages are also responses to post 8, and show the use of definition and personal anecdotes for persuasion:

- (12) think that friend indeed is not friend in need, you know, when you want your friends to do something that they could not do well or could not do, your truly friend must sad, and not satisfied! So friend is not to be used, but to talking our opinion each other! (Lonedragon)
- (13) i am a senion student this year. at the begainning, as you, i don’t have a friend. but after some days . i told them first to ask some questions. so that i have knew them.
you just can told with them. you know it’s not a difficult things for you, i think.
go go go, just do it you can (辽阔天空)

In post 12, by defining friends as people whom one shares opinions with, the respondent encourages “Johnny” to alter his expectations of friendship. In post 13, the respondent shares a successful story of making college friends by taking his or her own initiative. Through the use of rhetorical syllogisms, definitions, and personal anecdotes, the respondents propose their suggested actions quite convincingly.

Short messages also pervade in the threads of “seeking advice” and have achieved various rhetorical effects. Like the closing remarks in the elaborate messages, the short ones suggest actions, give comfort, or encourage the poster. The following are such responses to post 9:

- (14) Give love before you are loved (Tiantian)
- (15) optimistic
不要让眼前的乌云，挡住了所有的阳光!! (周一凡)
- (16) I will help you
one question for you!
you love yourself?
love yourself! you’ll be happy again (wu_tianwen01)

Although these messages are brief, they have all performed the function of giving advice. Post 15 code-mixes a Chinese phrase (“Don’t let dark clouds block the sunshine”). In a post-industrial digital era (Warschauer, 2003; 2006), code-mixing in English and Chinese clearly signifies the bilingual and bicultural identity of the cyber community. As code-mixing is usually not allowed in school writing, it becomes a “textual icon” for uncensored language play enjoyed by multilingual youths (Belz and Reinhardt, 2004: 330). Mixing in a popular, familiar-sounding Chinese phrase also enhances the emotional appeal of the suggestion, which an English translation can hardly achieve. In post 16, the respondent uses short sentences and punctuation to create a sense of face-to-face conversation.

Sharing experiences

Besides requesting opinions and seeking advice, forum members also use virtual space to share their life experiences. Often their experiences are not particularly unique or significant; they simply want to share moments of their lives with the rest of the community. Although the narratives tend to be very personal, they often embody some universal themes that will resonate in the audience and lead to a series of audience responses. The following message initiates thread 8:

(17) ONE year ago!

At the same time of last year, I was fighting with my TOEFL and GRE.

It became a history.

I cherish this process and the results!

It is full of fantastic stories and is hard to recall.

Now I am facing a new beginning . . . I hope it will be the RIGHT one. (Smallsmall)

The poster first recalls a year of industrious work and then expresses her uncertainty about the future. Although her personal story is rather trivial *per se*, it harbors two important, universal themes in human experience: the hardship of life and the uncertainty of the future. The large number of responses to threads 1, 5, and 8 (70, 57, and 25 respectively) demonstrate that the forum members are interested in deliberating issues of a philosophical nature.

What has been conveyed as the universal themes in the initial post becomes the *topoi* of the follow-up posts. The term *topoi* refers to recurring themes and motifs used in literary works. Aristotle (2007) also defines *topoi* as places or lines of reasoning useful in inventing persuasive arguments. The hardship of life and the uncertainty of the future are such “places” where both the poster and respondents can explore and relate their personal experiences. The following are such messages responding to post 17.

(18) Cool

everything you need to try, if not you will never know what happen later, and also you will never successfulness . trust me, because i have try it . :D :D (marklily)

(19) Three years ago

three years ago, i am a student in collage with many dreams, two years ago, i am a wonder in the street of shanghai, and one years ago, i am a worker in my hometwon, and now who am i? (mardiny)

In post 18, the respondent raises the notion of never yielding to challenges in life. And by saying “trust me, because i have try it,” he establishes his *ethos* in making his persuasive point. Post 19 uses exactly the same pattern as post 17. The respondent first relates what has happened to him over the previous three years and then how he now feels uncertain about his identity and his future. The two posts show that responses to the “sharing experiences” type of posts tend to maintain the same or similar themes embodied in the initial posts. By doing so ritualistically, they come to create a rich and wide intertextuality on experiences and feelings that can be identified by and related to all members. It is exactly this identification process that creates discursive influences and persuasion, which in turn make every member feel the communal bond.

However, once a “sharing experiences” post reveals some urgent issue in the poster’s life, respondents will reason persuasively with the poster, thus turning the entire thread into a “requesting opinions” thread. In thread 1, for example, the initial message relates a story about the poster, nicknamed “sunshine,” who works in Shanghai and is about to move to another apartment. Before her move, she sorts things in her old apartment and encounters items from her college life, which used to make her feel secure and tranquil. Then she contrasts her recent feelings as follows:

- (20) And day by day, I seems to be drawn into an anxious and lonely hole, deep and dark. Especially at present, the frustrated and helpless feeling is popping up again to snatch me. Maybe, the new changeable life is claimed to the blame. Recently, a female Korean movie star took her life away herself for her spirit torture under the life’s pressure. Sometimes, I keep it in mind that death is the best healer to everything. When it comes to take your breath away, it might be the most releasing moment. Nothing to worry and nothing to lose, too . . .

The drifting style of life in Shanghai has made the poster often feel “frustrated and helpless,” which triggers her idea of committing suicide like the “female Korean movie star.” Sunshine’s intention to end her life apparently has caught a lot of attention among the forum members, as 70 people respond to her post.

Some respondents converse with her rationally and employ syllogisms (including eight deductive and three inductive patterns). The following is an inductive pattern:

- (21) in my high school,my Chinese teacher’s remark about suicide has made deep impression in my heart,she said suicide was a unresponsibility thing,even you had lost you beloved people,there are still a lot of people who worth your care.if you take you life away,that will make more people sad. i can’t agree more .what do you thinkabout it? (Lyn)

The respondent recalls her high school teacher’s remarks and then concludes that suicide is an irresponsible act because the person committing suicide neglects the large community of which she is a part. In the above message, the respondent appeals to both an authoritative figure (a high school teacher) and the community (“a lot of people who [are] worth your care”), which importantly boosts her *ethos*, probably as a high-school student speaking to a college graduate. The characteristic of maintaining the theme of the initial message, i.e. the meaning of life, is still clear in those follow-up messages, but the strong persuasive force emerging from the use of syllogistic patterns makes the thread resemble the “requesting opinions” thread.

Expressing feelings

Seemingly the same as the “sharing experiences” threads, the “expressing feelings” threads have an explicit focus on conveying the poster’s feelings. There may be a component relating to the poster’s life experience, but the overall focus of the post is on his or her feelings. The message reads similar to a Chinese essay genre called *sanwen*, literally “scattered writing.” It is called scattered writing because there is no restriction on topics, which can involve either the past or the present, serious political issues or trivial daily events, and natural objects or social phenomena. Further, there are no structural or stylistic constraints either, thus allowing a writer a great deal of stylistic creativity to accommodate

the various topics. However, despite the topical, structural, and stylistic liberty, the essay needs to maintain a spirit (*shen*), or a focused theme, which unifies the seemingly scattered thoughts and form. Thread 6 starts with such a message.

- (22) Spring 春天
 i wait for spring for a long time .
 when the sky are full of kites,a lovely breeze pet my face,i feel very happy. so,i go
 to see the poet _hai-zi!!
 let read out 面朝大海, 春暖花开:;))
 Spring has come! Everything are full of energy. Flowers has turned out,birds are
 singing song, men are planning their new year's work.Because the most important
 season is the Spring,you can make most things ready for a whole year.
 Wish you make rapid progress in this energitic season. (waitor king)

In this short message, the poster mentions several things: she waits for spring; she is happy to see the sky full of kites and to feel a breeze; she reads a Chinese poem; and she deliberates on the importance of the season. Structurally and stylistically, she opens with a narrative, code-switches to part of a rhymed Chinese poem (*mian chao da hai/chun nuan hua kai* [I am looking at the ocean; flowers are blossoming in a warm spring weather]), and then constructs a parallelism (“Flowers has turned out, birds are singing song, men are planning their new year’s work.”). There is indeed a scattered or unstructured feeling for the topic and the textual form. However, under the seemingly disorganized surface, most readers will not fail to sense the poster’s happiness and excitement at the arrival of spring. These easily identifiable feelings unleashed a flood of responses from the forum members.

Among the 46 responses, 16 elaborate ones have followed the initial post in using the “scattered writing” style. They praise spring and meditate on its meanings. The following is a rather poetic response in the “scattered” style:

- (23) new season, new begaining
 :D the spring is coming
 with everyone planning a happier and more valuable life
 everything is new
 everything is ready to begain something
 just like a spring rain
 which is coming (Vasin)

Similarly to the initial post, although the respondent mentions several different things, ultimately she wants to convey her happiness and excitement, as the smiley “:D” clearly shows. It is quite intriguing to note the respondent’s poetic creativity in this example. Rather than following predetermined patterns as in classical Chinese poetry (*shi ci*), she uses rhymes as naturally as she speaks. The respondent may have imitated the free verse style, which was introduced into Chinese poetry writing from the West in the early 20th century, or she may have combined both classical Chinese and Western poetic styles.

Some responses simply consist of one or two sentences. They are hard to label as “scattered” style; however, they are equally powerful in conveying the respondents’ feelings and arousing intricate audience responses. For example:

- (24) One sentence!
 The whole year’s work depends on a good start in spring.

- The whole day's work depends on a good start in morning. (elix)
- (25) Wonderful Spring
I'd like spring (Breaze15)
- (26) I was born in spring. :D ((鸡汁土豆泥))

The parallelism in post 24 is a translation of a Chinese saying. Used in household discourse, the saying is often meant to encourage the listener to work hard and not to squander life. It is the shared cultural experience and value that make this statement compelling to the audience. Post 25. makes it seem that the respondent is speaking to the audience directly. The witty post 26 by 鸡汁土豆泥 (“meshed potatoes with chicken broth”) easily makes the audience smile. Using short and rhythmic sentences and a smiley, these messages clearly show the respondents' lightheartedness about the arrival of spring.

DISCUSSION

Rhetorical analysis has clearly shown that the forum members have developed distinct sets of rhetorical strategies in different sets of contexts. In terms of invention, the poster tends to position the audience members as equals and friends when requesting their opinions on a certain issue or seeking advice from them. In doing so, he or she fosters rapport with the audiences (*ethos*) and elicits responses from them. When offering advice to the poster for his or her problems, the respondents sometimes use opening and closing remarks to greet, cheer, comfort, or encourage the poster, thus establishing crucial *ethos* and *pathos* to make their advice sound persuasive. Besides using ethical and emotional appeals, the respondents also reason with the poster logically. They use rhetorical syllogisms, definitions, or personal anecdotes to strengthen their arguments. When the poster simply wants to share his or her experiences and feelings, the audience members respond with their own experiences to deliberate and elucidate the same universal themes (*topoi*). Collectively, through such ritualistic acts as positioning audience members as equals, using opening and closing remarks, employing formal logic, and sharing experiences and feelings, a strong sense of community naturally arises among the forum members.

In terms of arrangement, there are also recognizable strategies in different contexts. When responding to posts requesting opinions, many audience members employ either deductive or inductive patterns to explicate the issue in question. They also use short statements, like maxims, to make their points. When a poster seeks advice, the respondents tend to use the (opening remarks) – reasoning – suggested actions – (closing remarks) pattern to reason with the poster and to suggest solutions. Sometimes they also suggest actions first and then explain the reasons. In the context of sharing experiences, both the poster and the audience members use narratives. They not only share life experiences but, more importantly, via their experiences, deliberate on some universal themes. In the “expressing feelings” threads, messages seem to follow a “scattered” structure, mixing both life experiences and feelings. Although the messages typically enjoy topical and structural liberty, they invariably convey the poster's or the respondents' particular feelings. Besides elaborated messages in “scattered” style, brief and witty messages are often used. On one hand, these discursive patterns seem effective in their respective contexts. On the other hand, when using these patterns ritualistically, forum members consciously or unconsciously identify with community-shared values and strategies when making arguments, sharing experiences, and relating feelings.

Common as well as varying stylistic features are also found in these contexts. As mentioned earlier, the forum members frequently use emoticons, abbreviations, acronyms, and distorted or truncated words, but they seldom use taboo words. They often use lower-case words throughout an entire message without leaving spaces – or leaving unnecessary spaces – between words and punctuations. Besides elaborated messages, they often use brief messages consisting of one or two sentences, which tend to be thought-provoking, cheerful, or witty. These are all common features of Internet language (Crystal, 2006). Particular to the rhetorical contexts, the members tend to use expository style in the threads of “requesting opinions” and “seeking advice” and narrative style in the threads of “sharing experiences” and “expressing feelings.” When focusing on their feelings, the members sometimes use the “scattered” style, which can be quite poetic. Whether the members employ stylistic features common to Internet language or particular to a rhetorical context, these features help the members get their meanings across effectively; furthermore, as these are community-shared, ritualistic features, they enact a sense of community whenever they are used.

These patterned rhetorical strategies are particular to the context. They are somewhat different from rhetorical strategies found in other contexts and can hardly be labeled as traditional Chinese. For example, while the predominant use of the “reasoning-suggested actions” pattern seems to indicate a transfer of the “frame-body” pattern from modern standard Chinese, as Kirkpatrick and Xu (2002) have hypothesized, the prevailing use of deductive patterns in the context of requesting opinions clearly departs from the preferred pattern of traditional Chinese expository texts. The departure from Chinese norms (if indeed they ever existed) can be partly explained by the change of context. In the electronic-medium context, the forum members are identified mainly by their login names. As they do not see each other physically, traditional concerns relating to identity, power relation, and politeness have markedly shifted. Treating each other as equals, they can speak directly and use a wider variety of discursive strategies to communicate, such as code-mixing, free verse style, figures of speech (e.g. antithesis, parallelism, rhyme, and maxim), lower-case word spelling, and other features of Internet language. The change of context has allowed the Chinese youths to try out alternate identities and to experiment with English creatively.

While we recognize the shaping power of the computer-mediated context, we should not neglect the agency of forum members. Every member has his or her particular life experiences, interests, desires, and feelings, which could lead to varying responses to the same context of situation. In every thread, there are always a few respondents who wander away from the rhetorical purpose expressed by the initial message. Even when a member responds seriously to the initial message, he or she can choose between greeting or not greeting the poster, elaborate or short responses, inductive or deductive patterns, and expository or narrative styles. It is the member’s assessment of the context – the exigencies, the audiences, the appropriate modes of discourse, and his or her personal interests and feelings – that determines his or her choice of rhetorical strategies. Of course, individual agency can turn into a collective rhetorical action. In thread 1, for example, the poster shares her experiences of living in Shanghai. However, once the members sense her intention of committing suicide, they do not simply share their own experiences about the hardship of life, which seems to be the theme of the initial post. Instead, they focus on dissuading the poster from committing suicide. Bloch (2004) also notes the rhetorical agency of electronic-medium users: members of a US-based Usenet group turn a somber discussion of a TV

show into a collective response against its ill-conceived and racially biased assumptions. Thus, besides the electronic-medium context, it is also the speaker/writer that determines the appropriate rhetorical strategies. China English has derived and enjoyed its growing meaning potential largely from the transient nature of the relationship between the speaker and the writer, and of the context.

This growing meaning potential warrants a fresh, unmechanical conceptualization of China English. The language should not be understood mechanically as bearing a number of Chinese syntactic and pragmatic norms or as having “normative English as its core” plus “Chinese characteristics in lexicon, syntax, and discourse.” This characterization assumes that Chinese and English elements are easily separable, as the inference model seems to imply. Since English is used by numerous Chinese in new contexts and domains, it will undoubtedly develop a rather sophisticated, self-sustaining linguistic system. Rather than viewing the new variety of English against a native-speaker norm, it may better to view it as a new system based on “elements, structures, and rules drawn from both English and from one or more languages used in the environment” (Kandiah, 1998: 99). These elements, structures, and rules will be fused so seamlessly that it might at times be difficult to pinpoint what the Chinese characteristics are in this new variety of English. In my analysis of the bulletin board threads, I have identified patterned rhetorical strategies. Which ones can we be certain are truly influenced by Chinese discourse, and thus can safely call rhetorical strategies with Chinese characteristics? Therefore, identifying Chinese characteristics becomes less important than observing and describing the meaning potential of China English – what Chinese people can mean and can do with English in new contexts and domains.

CONCLUSION

As English is widely used in China, scholars have generally concurred that a Chinese variety of English, China English, is emerging (Chen and Hu, 2006; Hu, 2004; Jiang, 2003; Wei and Fei, 2003). How to study this new variety of English in the largest Expanding Circle country has become a central issue in the field of world Englishes (Berns, 2005). So far, formal study of China English, particularly its rhetorical strategies, has centered on an inference model. This model assumes that China English possesses linguistic and rhetorical features that originate from Chinese discourse and cultural preferences. While this model has offered us much guidance in identifying Chinese characteristics in lexicon, syntax, and discourse in China English, it falls short in uncovering the growing semiotic potential of this new variety of English. As China English is still evolving, the interaction between elements, structures, and rules of both Chinese and English and the Chinese discursive and cultural context may generate new, hybrid linguistic and rhetorical features that can hardly be labeled as traditional Chinese. The inference model may blind us to these important features of China English.

To accurately study the rhetorical features of China English, I have suggested an alternative model which treats context as the primary variable. The model examines China English in various contexts of situation and identifies its discourse strategies in motion. Following the context model, my rhetorical analysis of bulletin board English reveals that Chinese youths develop different sets of rhetorical strategies in different contexts of situation. These rhetorical strategies are somewhat different from those identified in other contexts by previous scholarship, and they may or may not bear distinct Chinese discourse and cultural

features. Clearly, context and the user determine the rhetorical potential of China English. Therefore, while we should not forsake the inference model, it is imperative that we also adopt the context model to fully capture the meaning potential of China English.

NOTES

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