

A LINGUISTIC PORTRAYAL OF CHINA ENGLISH: CONFRONTATION OF THE THEORY AND THE EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

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Abstract: The purpose of the paper is to conduct research into one of the most recent as well as the most developing international varieties of the English language – China English. Therefore the present study aims at compiling a theoretical basis regarding the Chinese variety of English by means of analysis of the main factors of its emergence and subsequent development as well as its specific features on a lexico-grammatical level. Moreover, the theoretical information is confronted with the outcomes of the empirical research concerning the usage of China English by the native Chinese population. Finally, conclusions are drawn.

Key words: the spread of English, English as a world language, China English, grammar, lexis

Introduction

The global spread of English is a fascinating tangle of the historical, political, social, cultural and linguistic elements. Starting with the British colonial power from the 1500s up to the present globalisation, the English language has progressively developed towards a position of a world language. Naturally, a process of the spread of English has also encountered the Asian continent and nowadays it is a home for one of the most recent as well as rapidly developing variety of the English language in the world – China English.

Since the Chinese variety of English has not been systematically studied yet, except for several sporadic studies, the purpose of the paper is to conduct research into the variety. The research resides in a theoretical basis confronted with the data collected in the electronic survey concerning the usage and linguistic uniqueness of the Chinese variety of English distributed to the native speakers of China English. The paper strives to give an overview of these linguistic features on a grammatical as well as lexical level and aims at answering the question whether the theory corresponds to the reality.

1. English as a World Language

The dominant status of the English language around the world is according to Crystal (2003: 106) the consequence of two major factors, namely the historical and economic one.

From the historical point of view, there have been ups and downs in terms of the spread of English in China. However, in the 1980s the People's Republic of China made English the main foreign language in education (Lam, 2005: 245-256) and the first attempts of a linguistic definition of China English emerged. It was Professor Gi Chuangui who elaborated its definition: "although incorporating elements of Chinese lexis, phonology, sentence structure, and discourse style, [China English] is still sufficiently rooted in a standard model as to be intelligible to speakers of other World Englishes" (Cole: 2007). To put it in another way, the 1980s presents a key point concerning the legitimate position of China English within World Englishes.

Secondly, the dominance of English worldwide is ensured by the economic power of the United States and the process of globalisation over recent years. Definitions of globalisation differ depending on the domain (e.g. economics, sociology or anthropology) but generally the phenomenon of connection between nations, corporations and individuals is shared as a common feature amongst all of them (Vaish, 2010: 30).

The two factors mentioned above, supplemented by a wide range of other reasons of the leading position of English around the world proposed by different linguists, create a cornerstone for attempts of modelling its global spread that, by the time, have undergone several modifications. The first outstanding model was proposed by Peter Stevens (1980) – so-called "World map of English" which represents a family tree-like division of the two main branches of English, i.e. British and American, and their subsequent spread around the world.

However, the most influential model was introduced after few years by B. B. Kachru (1985): "Three Concentric Circles of English" that involves the historical, sociolinguistic and formal elements. The well-known model is organised into three circles: the Inner Circle, the Outer Circle and the Expanding Circle. Despite its influence and renown, as the time goes, limitations have progressively been revealed, especially in connection with the borders between the circles.

In order to overcome the limitations, by the end of the twentieth century, Modiano proposed the first of his two models, i.e. "The Centripetal Circles of International English",

whose core is made up of speakers who are proficient in International English, be they native or non-native. A few months later, Modiano reshaped this model and proposed the second one employing for a basis EIL (English as an International Language), in other words a set of features which is comprehensible to almost all native and proficient non-native speakers of English. (Jenkins, 2009: 21-23).

Finally, one of the latest models of the spread of English is proposed by David Graddol who argues that an ambiguity in terminology has emerged with the global spread of the English language when the difference between “native speaker”, “second-language speaker” and “foreign-language speaker” has become unclear. He revises Kachru’s circles and takes “functional nativeness” and speakers’ linguistic proficiency as a basis for his model.

All in all, based on the factors and models mentioned above, it can be seen that the major consequence of the global spread of English is its stratification into Englishes, thus the emergence of its multitudinous varieties amongst which China English epitomises the most developing one in the course of three recent decades.

2. The concept of China English

As it was indicated above, in the 1980s the first linguists, especially Professor Gi Chuangui, started to concentrate on the definition of China English. However, with the definition of this variety, a terminological problem emerged, i.e. the difference between China English and Chinglish, so-called Chinese English.

It was Wenzhong Li (1993) who elaborated Gi Chuangui’s definition by taking into account the term Chinglish / Chinese English; China English is the variety which takes Standard English as its basis with lexis, syntax and discourse of Chinese characteristics, “and without any interference of the Chinese language, expresses social and cultural peculiarities of China, by means of transliteration, borrowing, or semantic shift” (Zhang, 2009: 93). On the other hand, Chinese English or Chinglish is the result of direct influence of the Chinese language that caused the malformation of English. Moreover, it is not based on Standard English, thus does not follow the rules of native English and is not accepted by native English users (Jingxia, 2008: 30); it is a substandard linguistic phenomenon.

On the whole, there are many linguists who have contributed to the discussion on China English, i.e. Rongpei Wang (1991), Wenzhong Li (1993), He and Li (2009) or Haijun Li (2011);

consequently their linguistic studies concerning the English language in China have encouraged an opinion of an objective existence of China English (Zhang, 2008: 99).

3. China English Lexico-grammar

Studying the definitions of China English, it can be deduced that the fundamental characteristics of uniqueness of the Chinese variety of English reside in its grammatical and lexical levels. Consequently, the two levels are exclusively focused on in the present paper.

3.1 China English Grammar

Sporadic studies of China English as a whole parallels a tangled situation connected to an effort to summarise specific linguistic features of this variety. One of the initial analyses of a specific use of definite and indefinite articles was conducted within the study of all non-native Englishes by Kachru and Wong (1981) (Zhang, 2009: 94). As article system does not exist in Chinese, unsurprisingly, an analysis of newspapers has confirmed the improper use of articles in publications as Beijing Weekly or China Today (Jingxia, 2008: 34).

Regarding pronouns, the empty “it” as a subject is widely used by native English speakers, but such a pronoun does not exist in the Chinese language, therefore China English users do not have a natural sensitivity about it as the following examples demonstrate: *Who are you?* (“Who is it?”); *The clock struck twelve o’clock just now* (“It struck twelve o’clock just now”) (ibid: 33). Besides, Chinese people prefer *Winter is very cold* to “It is very cold in winter” (Tian, 2010: 102). Apart from the partial studies concerning the articles and empty “it”, the linguistic researchers put an emphasis on the analysis of syntactic features within the field of grammar.

First of all, it is essential to point out a difference between Chinese which represents a language of parataxis, i.e. a sentence is organised by logical relation, and English which stands for a language of hypotaxis, i.e. a sentence is structured by means of grammatical relations. Moreover, an impact of Chinese way of thinking is reflected in the linear structure of a sentence (Jingxia, 2008: 33).

In China English, there is a tendency to use the following pattern of a sentence: subject – adverbial(s) – predicate – object or adverbial(s) – subject – predicate – object (*Yesterday John had a good dinner*); while in English, there is a universal structure of a sentence: subject – predicate – object – adverbial(s) (“John had a good dinner yesterday”). However, nowadays,

both structures are regarded as normative ones (Luan, 2011: 13). As this characteristic feature is regarded as well-formed sentences even in Standard English, an opinion of some scholars is that the Chinese language is the source of adverbial initial-utterance position of Standard English.

He and Li (2009: 7) go down that road and point out the following distinctive perspectives:

- (1) Topicalisation of adjuncts: the opposite placement of “the cause and result” elements (Jingxia, 2008: 33). E.g. *Because he was ill, he did not go to work yesterday* (“He did not go to work yesterday because he was ill”)
- (2) Questions: a different position of interrogatives underlines the distinctiveness of China English: *Do you think when he will come?* (“When do you think he will come?”)
- (3) The null subject parameter is a result of the influence of Chinese because it has an optional subject while the English language requires a subject, e.g. *Very glad to write to you again; Miss you a lot.*
- (4) The lack of conjunctions, moreover in some cases, only commas are used to connect clauses. The feature is mainly related with a rhetorical structure expressing wisdom: *A fall into the pit, a gain in your wit.*

Summing up, through the points and examples mentioned above, it is obvious that the distinctive features of China English grammar are more or less restricted to the syntactic level of the variety of English. However, it is evident that the further linguistic studies are requisite in future.

3.2 China English Vocabulary

From the historical point of view, there has been more intensive and visible influence of the Chinese language, customs and way of thinking on English lexis than on grammar, because the English vocabulary has exceedingly reflected the sociocultural and political Chinese situation.

The present situation of China English lexis displays that a predominant contribution to the variety derives from Chinese borrowed words (I), loan translation (II) and semantic innovations (III) (He and Li, 2009: 5-6; Luan, 2011: 9).

Generally, an enrichment of the lexis progresses in two ways. Firstly, China-specific words penetrate to English by means of transliteration and loan translation in order to introduce

their uniqueness into the English world. As no standardised loan translation exists, one can find several translations of one lexical item (He and Li, 2009: 6).

Moreover, by way of illustration, a brief sample of lexical items is proposed (Hu & Li, 2009: 6; Jingxia, 2008: 32; Luan, 2011: 9-11; Tian, 2010: 100):

(I) Transliteration, thus the adoption of Chinese words:

(A) History and culture: *dazibao* (big-character poster; commonly used during the Cultural Revolution); (B) Recreation and sports: *taichi* (Chinese martial art); (C) Food, clothing, housing and transportation: *tea*; (D) Local conditions and customs: *fengshui*; (E) Geographical names: *Hong Kong*; (F) Measurement units: *jin* (Chinese measurement of weight);

(II) Loan translation:

There are two major groups of loan translation. The first group (1) stands for compound words representing a model loan + Standard English word, such as *Canton ginger* (Jingxia, 2008: 32).

The second group (2) comprises calques; lexical items are translated literally into China English mainly after the opening-up policy and reform and express solely Chinese history and culture: *the Great Leap Forward* (the attempt by the People's Republic of China in 1950-1960 to solve the country's economic problems by labour-intensive industrialisation).

The peculiarities of the lexical items mentioned above cannot be found in native English culture, they are exclusively a part of China English lexicon and demonstrate Chinese specific nuance.

Secondly, as a process of lexical enrichment functions mutually, the Western world has also enriched the Chinese language and China English by means of an adoption of many polysyllabic words such as *modeng* ("modern") (Kachru, 1992: 166).

Within this way of nativisation of lexis, the semantic regeneration (III) can be seen when lexical items has penetrated China English with a specific lexical connotations. By way of example, *individualism* has acquired a negative meaning of selfishness in China; by contrast, in English, it is a positive word displaying the idea of freedom. On the contrary, some lexical borrowings from Standard English, originally with negative connotation, display a positive value in Chinese context, such as *labour*, *communist* and *propaganda* (Kachru, 1992: 171; Tian, 2010: 101).

To sum up, lexical influences come from the Chinese side as well as from the English one that create together a distinctiveness of the China English lexicon. The lexical features are mixed with the syntactic ones and constitute a specific area of idiomatic expressions and collocations.

3.3 Idioms and Collocations

Indigenous idiomatic expressions are an abundant source of distinctive lexical features for China English. Generally, there are two ways of penetration of Chinese idioms into English. Firstly, it is free translation (a) and the second one is literal translation (b) (Jingxia, 2008: 32).

In general, the prevailing part of Chinese idioms has no English equivalents, therefore correspondingly to the lexical enrichment, transliteration, loan translation or semantic shift take part in a process of their adoption into China English, e.g. *one arrow, two hawks* or *shoot two hawks with one arrow* (Luan, 2011: 11-12).

Even if there is an English equivalent, China English expressions still aim for emphasising their Chinese identity. Zhang (2008: 100) adduces the example as follows: *Three cobblers with their wits combined equal Zhuge Liang the master mind* meaning “Two heads are better than one”. In the Chinese context, the historical figure Zhuge Liang is a symbol of wisdom, thus without knowledge of Chinese culture, the expression remains unintelligible for the speakers. Moreover, Standard English “three cobblers make one Solomon” would lose the Chinese distinctiveness of this phrase. *Good wine is not afraid of being located at the end of a long lane* in a sense of “Good wine needs no bush”. In this case, both idioms convey different cultural features, i.e. China English idiom points out an agricultural way of living, while Standard English puts stress on a commercial way of living. *Heaven has no eyes!* While the Western civilization believes in an omnipotence of God, the Heaven has a divine power for the Chinese. Therefore the expression is equal to Standard English “Oh my God”.

All in all, the phrases indicated above tend to be related to the Chinese specific character, i.e. traditions, customs and politics, thus idioms represent a good way of understanding a culture and mentality of the Chinese society. However, due to the absence of studies of lexical theory and practice of idioms, comparably to China English grammar, there are a lot of unexplored areas of the China English lexis that should be a subject of further research in future.

The presentation of the specific features claims that China English, used by native as well as non-native Chinese speakers, has resulted from the permanent linguistic, cultural, social and political contact of both, Chinese and English, languages. Thus its development has experienced not only the nativisation of English in China, but also the recognition of Asian values within the variety (Jingxia, 2008: 34).

4. Confrontation

The compilation of peculiar linguistic features comprises a springboard for their consequent confrontation with the linguistic reality of the native speakers of China English. The reality is recorded by means of the survey whose data was carried out in the course of March, April, September and October 2012 in the form of an online electronic questionnaire.

From a formal point of view, the questionnaire is made up of two parts. The beginning of the survey includes a note that the present survey is concerned with the issue of China English, and not that of Standard English. Consequently, the participants are encouraged to choose a more natural or common response for them which would be used in their English conversation, even if they are able to identify the Standard English answers.

The initial part gathers basic information about the respondents, i.e. age, sex, profession, mother tongue, medium of education and a way of learning English. In this instance, the question at issue is whether the participants would display some common characteristics

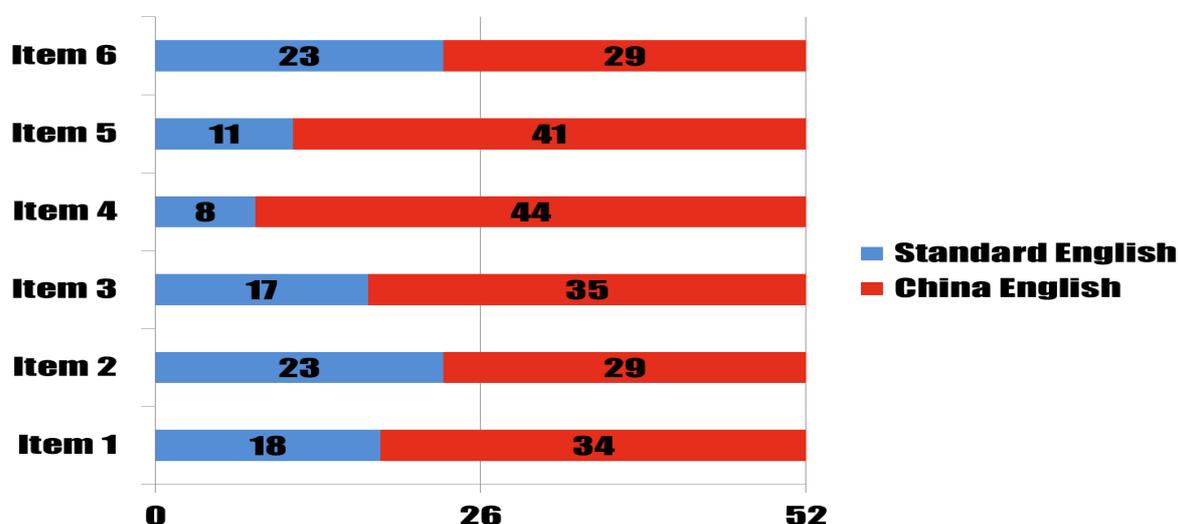
Based on the first part of the questionnaire, we can characterise the participations as follows: on the whole, fifty-two testees, all students, aged from 18 to 29 (22.3) participated in the questionnaire survey (comprising 61.5% of women (32) and 38.5% of men (20)). Each and every uses Chinese as the mother tongue, among them, 19.2% (10) specify the mother tongue as Cantonese and 23.1% (12) as Mandarin. The English language as mother tongue does not figure in the responses as supposed, not even as the medium of education. In this instance, Chinese predominates as the medium of instruction as well (100%; 32.7% (17) specified the language as Mandarin). Additionally, 100% of the respondents learnt English in school or other institution.

The cardinal part of the questionnaire covers distinctive grammatical as well as lexical features of the variety of English used in China. Structurally, the questionnaire comprises

predominately multiple questions, thus closed answers, and six open responses regarding the use of idioms and collocations.

Since the China English grammar is characteristic for its syntax, the items 1-6 survey the peculiar structure of China English phrases, i.e. topicalisation of adjuncts, the opposite placement of the cause and result, the null subject parameter and different position of interrogatives in questions and a diverse answering to the question.

Based on the survey, it can be concluded that the syntactic differences between Standard and China English, i.e. topicalisation of adjuncts (1) *Yesterday Kathy had a good dinner* (65.4%); the opposite placement of the cause and result (2) *Whether he would join the army is unclear* (55.8%), (3) *Because he was ill, he did not go to work yesterday* (67.3%); the null subject parameter (4) *Miss you a lot* (84.6%); a different position of interrogatives in questions (5) *Do you think when he will come?* (78.9%) and a diverse answering to the question (6) *I believe he will not come* (55.8%). Table 1 demonstrates the tendency of testees to use the phrases typical for China English in all cases (1-6). To put it in other words, the theory is proved by the survey.



Tab. 1 The Results of the Items 1-6

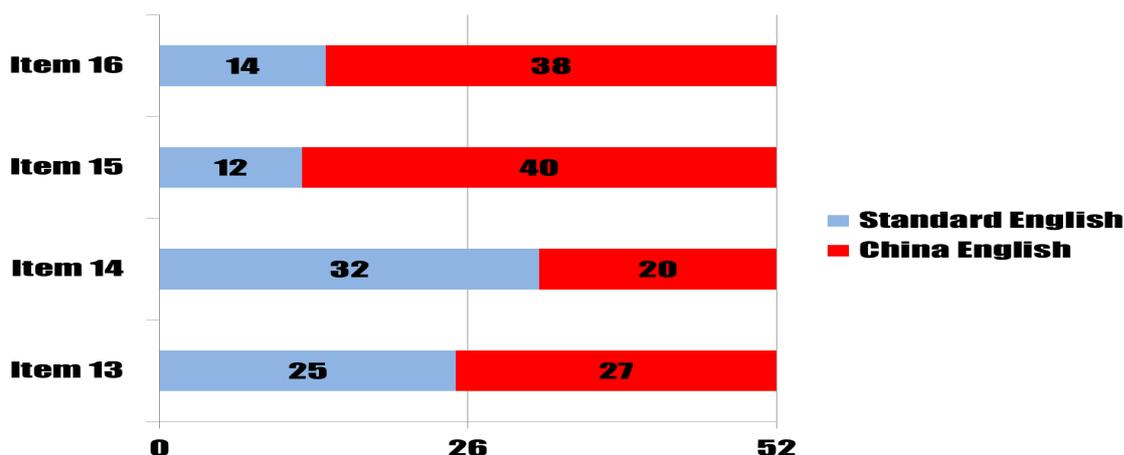
Further, as the usage of articles has not been systematically studied, the subsequent three tasks aim for examining this grammatical area. The overall outcome displays the entire absence of articles. It means that the China English testees prefer the sentences with omitted articles, i.e. (7) *We has group discussion* (8) *Girls and boys have just entered the classroom and*

(9) Play it by ear. Paradoxically, in two cases, this option corresponds to the Standard English answer. Consequently, according to the survey, the supposition of the different use of articles can be proved only partially and more profound observation is required.

Moving on a difficulty with the use of the empty “it” argued by linguists interested in China English is not confirmed. In each of the items concerning the problematic empty “it”, the majority of participants (more than 80%) have chosen the typical Standard English option, i.e. (10) “Who is it?”; (11) “It struck twelve o’clock just now”; (12) “It is very cold in winter”. Thus, based on the analysis of this grammatical phenomenon, the theory does not agree with the linguistic reality. In other words, it is the first entire disagreement with the theory.

To proceed with the core part of the questionnaire, the use of idioms and collocations is comprised in its lexical part. The respondents should either choose an appropriate response or fill a missing lexical item in the idiomatic expressions. It is believed that the users of China English prefer the idioms and collocations which aim for emphasising Chinese identity therefore are different from Standard English. Finally, the questionnaire includes four words which, according to the theory, should evoke specific associations peculiar to the speakers of China English. Linguists argue that *propaganda* (23) and *labour* (26) are associated with positive connotations in China English; on the contrary *individualism* (24) and *liberalism* (25) have negative associations in China English. The question is whether this argument would agree with the results of the survey.

In Table 2 the outcomes regarding the peculiar use of lexis and idiomatic expressions are demonstrated. It is believed that the users of China English aim for expressing the Chinese identity by means of vocabulary. As it can be seen, this assumption is neither confirmed nor disproved as only two items (15) *There was a strike of laid-off workers* (76.9%) and (16) *Three cobblers with their wits combined equal Zhuge Liang the master mind* (73.1%) display a prevailing number of answers characteristic for China English. One item does not correspond to the theoretical information at all: (14) *Good wine needs no bush* (38.5%); and one item is only slightly above 50% (13) *Heavens has no eyes!*



Tab. 2 The Outcomes of the Items 13-16

As it was mentioned, the last six items require filling the missing information in the idiomatic expressions. The most unexpected outcome is that nobody has filled in the following idiomatic expressions: *safety is first prevention is most* (17); *a fall into pit a gain into your wit* (18) and *one country two systems* (20). Therefore, according to the survey, it is stated that they are not regarded as the distinctive China English expressions, consequently are in opposition to the theoretical information.

By contrast, the following expressions have been correctly completed by the majority of testees (more than 75%) *iron rice bowl* (19); *no discord, no concord* (21) and *shoot two hawks with one arrow* (22). These idioms are definitely all formed on the basis of the Chinese language and express a culture-specific meaning.

Last but not least, the findings analysing different lexical connotations in China English confirm the theory, as the majority of respondents (82.7% – 98.1%) associate *propaganda* (23) and *labour* (26) with positive connotations and *individualism* (24) with a negative value. Interestingly enough, *liberalism* (25) is according to the majority of participants connected with the positive association (51.9%). Since this percentage is slightly above 50%, it is generally proved that the users of China English associate some lexical items adopted from Standard English with the opposite connotations, therefore display distinctive lexical features of China English.

With a view to conclude the individual grammatical and lexical features analysed in detail above, by way of summing them up, the subsequent pie chart in Figure 1 displays the overall finding of the research and answer the question whether the outlined linguistic features in the

theory may be regarded as China English and whether they are actually used by its users. The two possible cases are specified in the pie chart, i.e. A) a prevailing number of answers peculiar to China English B) preponderating responses characteristic for Standard English.

Considering the overall result demonstrated in the pie chart, the China English respondents express the peculiarity of their English by means of responses in the questionnaire survey. To put it another way, the aim of the conducted research has been attained as the linguistic reality explored confirms to a great extent the information presented in the theory.

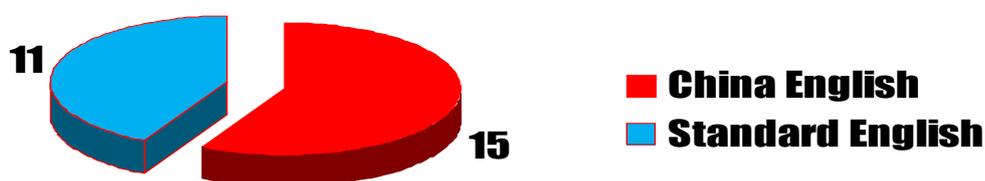


Fig. 1 The Overall Findings

Conclusion

By way of conclusion, the data gathered in the first part of the questionnaire can be summarised in a phrase: all participants in the survey on China English are representatives of young studying generation who have been educated in their mother tongue, i.e. Chinese, and acquired the English language skills at school or other institution.

Despite a few linguistic features that are either not confirmed, i.e. a difficulty with the empty “it”, or proved partially, i.e. an improper use of articles and some Chinese specific loan translations, the paper’s aim, an empirical corroboration of the theoretical information concerning China English generally agrees the linguistic reality. Therefore, it can be concluded that the question whether the theory corresponds to the linguistic reality of the international variety of English at hand is affirmed.

As may be inferred from the above information, China English demonstrates a specific sociolinguistic development mainly resulting from the external influences including colonialism, politics, the spread of English, globalisation and last but not least the contact with the indigenous languages. Thus all of these factors have contributed to a peculiar status of the variety of English in the Asian country with consequent functions and to their individual distinctiveness of the linguistic features of the lexico-grammar.

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