

global  
china  
pulse.

02  
24

## CHINA'S LINGUISTIC FRONTIERS

This text is taken from *Global China Pulse: Volume 3, Issue 2, 2024.*





**On-site**

Chinese supervisor giving instructions to Ghanaian workers on-site, Takoradi, 3 October 2022.  
Source: Costanza Franceschini.

# 'Chinese English' Interactions, Jokes, and Frictions on Chinese Construction Sites in Ghana

Costanza FRANCESCHINI

*On Chinese construction sites in Ghana, language barriers make interactions difficult and are often a source of misunderstanding. However, using a new language, referred to locally as 'Chinese English', Chinese supervisors and local construction workers can communicate and even create opportunities for jokes. Yet, the line between playful and confrontational interaction is always very thin, rendering language both a tool of interaction and a source of conflict.*

*'You walawala ta guolai [Tell him to come here]!'*

**W**hen I first started conducting research at a construction site run by a Chinese state-owned construction company in the Western Region of Ghana, I found that language barriers were causing communication problems, often leading to misunderstandings and conflicts. However, after spending some time on the site, I noticed that the local employees who had worked with the Chinese company for a long time were able to speak with their Chinese managers and help their new colleagues engage with them. Simon, one of the Ghanaian workers who had been with the Chinese company since the beginning of the project, told me one day that he could communicate with his managers because he could understand and reproduce the language 'used by the Chinese', which he and his colleagues called 'Chinese English'. Whenever I was near him on-site and his boss was talking to him, Simon would turn to me and say: *'You see? This is Chinese English!'*

During the months I spent on various Chinese-run construction sites in Ghana, I observed that Chinese and Ghanaian construction workers spoke two different types of Chinese English. The first was a non-standard use of English, based on the structure of the Chinese language, spoken by Chinese workers with little knowledge of English, and often reproduced by Ghanaian workers when speaking to them. One day, while I was having lunch with some of the workers, Simon received a phone call from Mr Zhang. Simon put him on speakerphone so that his colleagues could hear what his manager had to say.

I heard Mr Zhang call him ‘*Simon!*’ and he replied, ‘*Bossa.*’ Then Mr Zhang told him: ‘*You talk Anthony, tomorrow Dixcove cama. Work small. Tomorrow tomorrow me go Mumford. You follow me. Okayle?*’ After hanging up, Simon started talking to his colleagues. One of them, Will, intervened and began to repeat Mr Zhang’s sentences, imitating what they define as the Chinese English spoken by their Chinese boss: ‘*You go Mumford. Understand? Bossa, me no go. You no go? You no go Mumford? You go housa! No no bossa, me go Mumford.*’ He continued, still simulating a conversation between himself and Mr Zhang: ‘*Will? You where?! Bossa me hausu, me now cama! You hausu? Why you hausu? Today work! Bossa, me cama, me now cama, okayle?!*’ Laughing at Will’s imitations, Anthony, the other colleague at the table, intervened and began to imitate Mr Zhang’s way of speaking, saying: ‘*Anthony, you where? Me long time no see you! You where?! Today work!*’ This made everyone laugh.

Although this type of language was used by the Chinese supervisors to communicate with the local workers, and by the Ghanaian workers to make themselves understood by their superiors, it was also often used as a source of humour by Ghanaian workers towards their Chinese bosses, causing banter and creating a sense of complicity among them. Laughing together through and about language served to mitigate the effects of the power dynamics and asymmetries that existed within the construction site. In this sense, the creation of a kind of group joking culture through the continued use of the same joking themes (Fine and De Soucey 2005: 2) facilitated the formation of bonds and engendered a sense of unity among the Ghanaian workers.

The second type of Chinese English was also based on the linguistic structure of the Chinese language, but additionally included words derived from both Chinese and English, as well as a creative manipulation of certain terms. For example, when I began paying attention to this language, I heard a Chinese supervisor yell at Harry, one of the Ghanaian workers standing next to him: ‘*You walarwala ta guolai* [Tell him to come here].’, asking the worker to call another young colleague who had recently arrived at the site and who had not properly understood the instructions he had been given. Later that day, the same supervisor turned again to Harry and said: ‘*You walarwala Maria, me give you 100 cedi, okayle no okayle* [Contact Maria (a prostitute), I will give you 100 cedis (to give to her), is it okay].?’ ‘*Okay bossa, me walarwala Maria, no problem* [Okay boss, I will contact Maria for you, no problem].’

As these dialogues show, this second form of Chinese English was used for a variety of purposes, including work instructions, informal communication, as well as more serious or joking exchanges between Chinese supervisors and Ghanaian workers on topics such as women and sex. However, as I will discuss below, while the use of humour partly fostered closer interaction between Chinese and Ghanaian workers and facilitated communication on topics considered tense or taboo (Driessen 2019), often it also ended up having the opposite effect.

## The Emergence of Contact Languages

The various forms of Chinese English recorded on Chinese construction sites testify to the emergence of a contact language, as is often the case between groups of people in close and sustained contact who need to communicate with each other but have no language in common. In contexts around the world where there has been prolonged contact between different communities speaking different languages, linguists have studied, catalogued, and described different types of contact languages, in particular those described as ‘pidgins’ and ‘creoles’ (Rickford and Romaine 1999; Todd 2005).

The language that emerged on Chinese construction sites in Ghana, as has been documented in other situations of contact between Chinese companies and local contexts in Africa—for example, in Ethiopia (Driessen 2020) and Angola (Schmitz 2020)—can be described as a ‘pidgin’ or, rather, a ‘workforce pidgin’. It is, in fact, a functional language that is used in specific contexts and situations at work and to communicate about certain topics but cannot be used at home or for social purposes (Velupillai 2015). This is due to the limited nature of the language in terms of vocabulary and linguistic structure, and the limited types of discourse and conversational content for which it is normally used. For these reasons, the linguistic variants under discussion cannot be effectively employed for other purposes or communication situations beyond those typically encountered in the workplace. In such contexts, the repeated interactions that occur therein help to express meanings that are not conveyed by the words themselves.

The emergence of new contact languages between Chinese and local workers in workplaces and trade interactions across diverse geographical regions, including Africa and the Pacific (Aikhenvald 2024), appears to be driven not only by practical needs, such as labour management, but also by the desire to communicate directly with one another, without intermediaries (Muhangi 2019). On some of the construction sites where I conducted research, there were workers who acted as interpreters—usually young Ghanaians who had studied in China and therefore had a mastery of the Chinese language and could translate between Chinese and English or between Chinese and local languages.

However, the presence of these interpreters was often met with intolerance by local workers, who asserted that they desired to communicate directly with their managers. This was not primarily due to a lack of trust of the translators, but rather to the perception that intermediation created a barrier between them. Furthermore, as I have been told by many of my informants and as I have observed, a certain degree of misunderstanding between workers and their supervisors often enabled them to circumvent potential conflicts. This was achieved by pretending that certain things had or had not been done in a certain way because of a lack of understanding, rather than out of a deliberate choice or a lack of respect for the tasks assigned. This was also the case with Chinese supervisors, whose strategic use of ‘non-understanding’ often allowed them to navigate difficult situations.

## The 'Chinese English' Lexicon

An analysis of Chinese English linguistic interactions between Chinese and Ghanaian workers reveals the formation of a novel lexicon. As a language used in a specific context, the construction site, and for a specific mode of interaction—namely, practical, direct, and assertive—the new terms, expressions, and meanings that have emerged and become the most common in everyday conversation reflect both the context and the nature of the relationships formed within it. Furthermore, they demonstrate how the language, vocabulary, and interactions themselves shape that context and those relationships. To illustrate this point, I will give a few examples.

A noteworthy example is the usage of the term '*walawala*' to signify a range of meanings, including 'to speak', 'to talk', 'to tell', and 'to contact'. The most proximate instance of this linguistic form in terms of transcription and dentation is the utilisation of the term '*walla*' in scripts for actors and texts for dubbing employed to denote the murmur of a crowd or background dialogue (Spiteri Miggiani 2023). In this context, the expression is frequently doubled as '*walla walla*'—understood both as an interjection and as a noun or attributive, as in 'walla actor', 'walla group', or 'walla session', and used to refer to sounds recorded by voice actors and added to a soundtrack in post-production for authenticity (OED 2023).

It is unclear whether this term is related to the idiomatic expression commonly used in the film and broadcasting industries. None of my interlocutors was aware of this possible connection, yet the meaning ascribed to it could indicate an association. On numerous occasions, the term was used by Chinese supervisors to express their discontent with the excessive talking and noise made by the workers, which was perceived to distract the Ghanaian workers from their focus on work. This was commonly conveyed with the phrase: '*You walawala too much!*'

A second example is the use of the name 'Maria' to refer to any woman—sometimes specifically a sex worker. The adoption of this name can be attributed to a combination of factors, including its simplicity and commonness, as well as its status as an archetypal name for referring to women within areas where Christianity is present or prevalent, such as in the part of Ghana where the research was conducted. The different meanings attributed to this name depended on the context. 'Maria' could mean 'woman' or 'wife' or 'girlfriend' when people were talking about themselves and their loved ones—for example: '*Me, Maria, no gooda* [My wife is sick].' But it could also mean 'prostitute' when the Chinese workers were joking about or asking workers to solicit one for them: '*Maria cama no cama* [The prostitute will come or not]?' '*Cama cama* [She will come].'

These interactions should be considered within the context of a highly masculine environment, in which some men regularly solicited sex workers. Furthermore, during my fieldwork research, I observed that it was not uncommon for Chinese workers

who had migrated to Ghana to work for Chinese construction companies to engage in informal sexual relationships with Ghanaian women even if they had families and wives in China.

Another example is the use of the word ‘Alibaba’ to refer to thieves, theft, or the act of stealing. As has been observed by other researchers (Driessen 2020; Schmitz 2020; Aikhenvald 2024), it remains unclear whether this usage is related to the *Arabian Nights* folktale ‘Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves’. Drawing on the work of Chen (2020: 8–9) and Driessen (2020), Aikhenvald (2024: 192) also suggests that the Chinese use of the term ‘Alibaba’ in a pejorative sense, denoting a ‘thief’, may derive from the mock ‘Uyghur’ comic character Uncle Alibaba, a lamb kebab peddler, and be associated with a misappropriation and negative view of Uyghur culture.

On Chinese construction sites in Ghana this term was frequently used as a joke: ‘*You! You Alibaba* [You are a thief].’ ‘*Me? Me no Alibaba* [I am not a thief].’ Concurrently, the term was also employed in more grave contexts, given the frequency of thefts in such an environment. The recurrence of thefts and the way Chinese supervisors reacted to them appear to be consistent with observations made at other companies’ sites in other countries, where the same word, ‘Alibaba’, was documented (Driessen 2020; Schmitz 2020).

Furthermore, a common expression utilised by Chinese supervisors was, ‘*Alleluia, alleluia, don’t give you money.*’ To illustrate, when Ghanaian employees requested from their Chinese supervisors to be taken off work on Sundays to attend church, they always received the same response: ‘*Alleluia, alleluia, don’t give you money.*’ With this statement, the Chinese workers and managers were emphasising, jokingly, but also with a certain conviction, that from their point of view going to church was an unproductive activity that certainly could not be put before work. Furthermore, since the Ghanaian workers often asked their superiors for a pay raise and frequently complained about not earning enough, the Chinese threw the ball back, saying that if they wanted to earn more, they should dedicate themselves more to work and not waste time on unproductive activities such as going to church.

However, while for the Chinese ‘going to church’ was considered an unproductive activity, a ‘waste of time’ that could not provide wealth and money, this was not the case for the Ghanaian workers. Most of the Ghanaian workers with whom I conducted my research were Christians and often attended Charismatic churches. For them, the act of ‘going to church’ was linked to both their religious faith and the possibility of acquiring money and wealth. Indeed, in Ghana’s Charismatic Christian churches, there is a perceived connection between material and spiritual riches (Lauterbach 2017: 74). In this context, wealth is regarded as an indication and a symbol of divine favour (Anim 2020; Bonsu and Belk 2010). Furthermore, Charismatic churches in Ghana, such as Pentecostal churches, represent novel circuits of accumulation and redistribution of wealth. Money and other forms of wealth are amassed within the



### Everyday Chinese English Interactions

Chinese supervisor and Ghanaian worker buying fruit from a woman selling food on-site, Winneba, 25 October 2022. Source: Costanza Franceschini.

church and subsequently redistributed by the pastor or church members who have been deemed worthy of a blessing from God (Lauterbach 2017; Meyer 1998, 2011; Benyah 2018).

### Chinese English (Uneasy) Interactions

Chinese English allowed the Chinese and Ghanaian construction workers to overcome linguistic barriers using the language creatively. However, the limitations of this means, which could only enable certain types of discourse and facilitate certain types of interaction, combined with the different cultural norms of speaking and interacting within workplaces and hierarchical settings, often ended up creating tensions. For instance, the use



of Chinese English by Ghanaian workers to poke fun at their Chinese bosses, while simultaneously asking for something—usually money—in a way that was congenial and confrontational, humorous and serious at the same time, frequently backfired. Sentences such as *'Bossa, bossa, me hungry, me today no chafan. You bossa give me small money chafan* [Boss, I'm hungry, I didn't eat today. Boss, give me some money to buy food]' annoyed Chinese supervisors, as they did not conform to the expected norms and practices of employer–employee interactions.

The Chinese supervisors often perceived the way Ghanaian workers addressed them as lacking respect and 'attentiveness' (Wu 2021) towards them. Chinese managers expected local workers to understand what they wanted without having to say it explicitly. In a sense, they expected Ghanaian workers to be familiar with the formal, allusive, and indirect communication codes that characterise Chinese conversation, especially in highly hierarchical contexts (Chang 1999). Therefore, while joking through language seemed at times to create hilarity between Chinese and Ghanaian workers, it could also easily turn humorous moments into confrontations.

For instance, Chinese workers frequently said to some of the Ghanaian workers, jokingly: *'You how many Maria? You plenty Maria!'*, alluding to the fact that many Ghanaians had more than one wife or girlfriend. The same questions were also often asked of the Chinese. On these occasions, however, Chinese and Ghanaian workers often alluded, sometimes jokingly and sometimes seriously, to the sexual relationships of Chinese managers with local women, usually sex workers. However, at times, the Chinese bosses' serious or joking request for the Ghanaian workers to find women for them could lead the latter to turn it into an accusation against their bosses for spending money on sex rather than paying them higher wages: *'Me bossa? Me walawala Maria? You give money Maria? You give money Maria no give me money chafan [to eat]? Me no walawala Maria.'* This illustrates how, in this setting, there is always a delicate balance between what is acceptable to say and what is not, between joking and insulting, between talking and fighting—a balance that could easily be broken, with jokes about sex quickly turning into work-related claims. ●

*This essay draws on the author's research for her PhD thesis, 'Assembling Development: An Ethnography of a Chinese Infrastructure Project in Ghana' (University of Milano-Bicocca, 2024), and her article "'You Walawala Too Much!': Chinglish Interactions between Chinese and Ghanaian Construction Workers', published in Antropologia in 2022.*