Sketching a Chinese writer's vocabulary profile in English: the case of Ha Jin

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Abstract

This study sketches a vocabulary profile of Ha Jin, a prominent Chinese writer. Ha Jin's writings have been repeatedly used to showcase a Chinese variety of English, and his repertoire of words deserves systematic description on its own right. A sample of his novels is constructed for this research, and is compared with novels written by (a) native English speakers and (b) creative writing by advanced Chinese-speaking learners of English. Corpus-based analysis reveals that Ha Jin's vocabulary repertoire is as extensive and diversified as those of native speaker novelists, while markedly richer than those of advanced learners.

1 Introduction

Of the native speakers of Chinese who wrote and published in the English literary world, Ha Jin is one of the most acclaimed novelists. Ha Jin has received numerous important writing awards in the English world (cf. 2.1). He is probably also the most studied Chinese-English bilingual in the World Englises literature (WE). Numerous WE scholars have emphasised the importance of recognising a Chinese variety of English, given the fact that a staggering 440-650 million Chinese are learning English as an L2 (cf. He & Zhang, 2010; Xu & Sharifian, 2017) and China is now a global economic power. An extensive debate has developed on whether a Chinese variety of English can be identified (e.g., Li, 2007; Luke & Richards, 1982; Wang, 2008; Xu, 2010a). Many researchers believe that a Chinese variety of English is now emerging (e.g., Kirkpatrick, 2007; Xu, 2010a, 2010b; You, 2011). This debate aside, few researchers would deny the importance of systematically describing the linguistic characteristics of proficient Chinese-English bilingual speakers.

We carry out a corpus-based description of Ha Jin's vocabulary profile in comparison with those of native speaker novelists and advanced Chinese EFL learners, with the aim of answering the following questions:

(a) Is Ha Jin's vocabulary repertoire as rich as those of native speaker novelists in terms of type and diversity?
(b) How much more closely does Ha Jin approximate native speakers' vocabulary profiles than advanced Chinese EFL learners do?

2 Literature survey

In this section, we review research on Ha Jin and survey most relevant corpus-based studies for language teaching and learning.

2.1 Ha Jin and bilingual creativity

Bilingual creativity has become an important area of World Englishes research (Bolton, 2010; Kachru, 1994; You, 2011), and Ha Jin's novels have been investigated as exemplifying a Chinese variety of English. Zhang (2002) follows Kachru's (1994) treatment of bilingual creativity to examine Ha Jin's *In the Pond* (2000b). A range of "nativised" characteristics – such as address terms, curse words, proper names, vocabulary items of Chinese reference, political discourse, metaphors and idioms – were detected. In the same strand of research, Xu

(2010a, 2010b) attempts to codify the linguistic features of Chinese English (CE). He uses short stories by Ha Jin as a part of his sample, and identifies words and expressions of distinct Chinese reference – e.g., work unit, political status.

The explicit Chineseness in Ha Jin's writing does not appear to be objectionable for English readers, who rather are attracted by his realistic description of the frame of life in China. Book reviewers generally applaud Ha Jin's command of English – e.g., "nearly flawless English" (Cheuse, 1999), and "On the page, Jin has the kind of effortless command that most writers can only dream about" (Garner, 2000). Updike (2007) commended his style: *Waiting* (Jin, 1999) is "impeccably written, in a sober prose […] capably delivers images, characters, sensations, feelings"; while *War Trash* (Jin, 2004) "flows as smoothly", although he perceives some small solecisms in *A Free Life* (Jin, 2009). However, Ha Jin himself refuses to be judged on the same terms as native-speaker writers. Jin (2010) elaborates on bilingual creativity and his own space as an immigrant writer; and finds himself working in border areas rather than the centre of English literature. Ha Jin advocates for his creative word use in "In defence of foreignness" – e.g., the need for him to coin the word "emplomaniac", an example of a small solecism to Updike (2007). For Ha Jin, Standard English is often insufficient to depict the full colour of non-native experiences, while the very attempts of non-native writers to stretch the language and make creative use of it to fit the context underlines the contributions they can make to the English language.

2.2 Recent corpus-based studies

Corpus-linguistic tools have been applied in various fields of research on new Englishes and applied linguistics. Recent corpus-based studies describe varieties of English (e.g., Liu, 2011; Xiao, 2009) and assess the potential value of using specific registers, e.g., children's literature (Webb & Macalister, 2012), as English learning resources. L2 learners' corpora are constructed to investigate their linguistic features in terms of vocabulary richness (Laufer & Nation, 1995; Wen, 2006). Corpus-linguistic tools are also put in the hands of L2 learners to engage them in learner-centred, data-driven learning (Gaskell & Cobb, 2004; Park, 2012).

Technically, the description of vocabulary use has often been carried out using software such as WordPerfect and WordSmith Tools (cf. O'Keeffe & Farr, 2003). More recently, the web-based tool Compleat Lexical Tutor (shorthanded as "Lextutor" in this study) was developed by Thomas Cobb of the Université du Québec (http://www.lextutor.ca/) to assist L2 learners to carry out data-driven vocabulary learning and to facilitate research on learners' vocabulary profiles (Cobb, 2007; Horst et al., 2005). Lextutor provides new features that WordSmith does not have, e.g., distribution of occurrence-frequency bands.

Ha Jin's works, and those of other prominent Chinese-English bilinguals, have not been systematically examined using a corpus-linguistic approach. This research employs tools and methods developed in corpus linguistics to attempt a more systematic account of Han Jin's lexical profile.

3 Method

We outline research methodology concerning the sample and measures for describing the vocabulary profile of the three groups of writers.

3.1 Sample: Ha Jin, native speakers and advanced learners

Ha Jin's five novels – *Waiting* (1999), *The Crazed* (2002a), *War Trash* (2004), *A Free Life* (2009), and *Nanjing Requiem* (2011) – are used to compute their type-token ratio. Some of his novels have won important prizes – e.g., *Waiting* received the National Book Award for Fiction and the PEN/Faulkner Award, *War Trash* won a second PEN/Faulkner Award, while *A Map of Betrayal* received Christian Science Monitor Best Book of Year 2014. For purposes of comparison with Jin's novels, three novels by native English speakers are used in this research. The novels are *The Human Stain* (2001) by Philip Roth (a three-time recipient of the PEN/Faulkner Award), *The Road* (2006) by Cormac McCarthy, and *Tinkers* (2009) by Paul Harding (both winners of the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction). In addition, creative writing by advanced learners is included in our sample, in the form of stories written by Chinese college students, most of them majoring in English or communication. The students' stories are retrieved from the fall 2011 issue of the magazine *Bridge* (http://www.umac.mo/fsh/cyberub/) (abbreviated as "Bridge" in this paper) and the collections

of stories titled "Hou Yet & Lap Sap Casino" and "Oasis" (abbreviated as "Casino & Oasis") and "Jubilee Story Book for Girls and Boys" (abbreviated as "Jubilee") in a creative writing journal with a web-based outlet (http://www.writingmacao.site88.net/Fourth_Issue/MAIN.htm). Both the magazine and the journal are associated with a tertiary institution in Macau, China, and containing serious creative writing of high quality.

3.2 Instrument and data analysis

We assess the range and diversity of Ha Jin's vocabulary repertoire by placing emphasis on three aspects: (a) type-token ratio, (b) the occurrence of less-frequently-used words, and (c) word recycling. Corpus-linguistics tools were applied in our quantitative analyses – e.g., WordSmith 6.0 for computing type-token ratios and producing the wordlist sorted by occurrence frequency, and Lextutor VocabProfiler BNC-20 for vocabulary profiling. We performed vocabulary profiling on nine pieces of writing by the three groups of authors. From each piece of writing, a sample of 12,000 words was gathered at twelve points at even intervals. For instance, in a novel of 120 pages, twelve chunks of 1,000-word-long text were collected from pages 1, 11, 21, … up to 111. We analysed each 1,000-word-long sample with Lextutor to obtain the word-token distribution in the most-commonly-used word bracket (K1) and less-frequently-used word brackets (K2 to K5 and beyond: cf. 4.2). We were therefore able to compare (a) Ha Jin and the native speakers and (b) Ha Jin and the learners in terms of the less-frequently-used words, once-occurring word types, and average frequency of occurrence of word types, based on the 36 samples of each of the three groups of authors.

4 Results

In this section, we examine the breadth of Ha Jin's vocabulary repertoire in comparison with those of native speakers and advanced learners using corpus-based measures. We focus on type-token ratio, the occurrance of less commonly used words, and the recycling (or reuse) of words.

4.1 Type-token ratio (TTR)

The measures of TTR reveal an interesting finding. Ha Jin uses 46.9 word types per 1,000 words in our sample (Table 1) – a noticeably higher rate than that of the native speakers (41.9) and that of the advanced Chinese learners (38.2). The analysis is based on the commonly used 1000-word unit preprogrammed in WordSmith Tools. His type-token ratio is relatively consistent across his five novels (cf. TTR and SD in Table 1). This finding suggests that Ha Jin commands an extensive range of word types that is comparable to native speaker novelists.

	sample	token	type	TTR	SD
Ha Jin	*A free life*	193,895	13,467	47.10	52.26
	The crazed	87,450	9,044	47.62	51.12
	Nanjing requiem	93,518	8,868	47.74	50.90
	Waiting	91,236	7,988	45.07	53.19
	War trash	132,460	10,281	47.00	51.63
	average			**46.91**	**51.82**
Natives	*The human stain*	138,716	12,383	42.88	54.85
	The road	58,763	4,785	38.11	58.81
	Tinkers	48,757	6,710	44.63	52.48
	average			**41.88**	**55.38**
Learners	*Bridge*	21,257	3,321	41.32	54.33
	Casino & Oasis	40,181	3,699	37.75	60.28
	Jubilee	28,994	3,336	38.56	58.54
	average			**39.17**	**57.71**

Table 1: Type-token ratio: three groups of authors

4.2 Use of less-frequently-used words

The second measure of Ha Jin's vocabulary repertoire seeks to determine whether he employs less-frequently-used words as often as native speakers do. Lextutor's Vocabulary Profiler was employed to compute the portion of words he uses in each frequency bracket – i.e., the first, second, third, … thousand most-frequently-used words in English. [1] Proper names and names of places are considered as K1 words in this study, which was made possible by the Vocabulary Profiler on the Lextutor website. For example, Kong and Manna, the names of the protagonists in *Waiting*, are treated as K1 words, like he or she.

	sample	K1	K2	K3	K4	≥ K5	total (%)
Ha Jin	*A free life*	83.12	6.63	2.52	3.00	4.73	100
	Nanjing requiem	82.52	6.83	3.24	1.74	5.67	100
	Waiting	83.48	6.63	2.86	1.59	5.44	100
	average	**83.04**	**6.70**	**2.87**	**2.11**	**5.28**	**100**
Natives	*The human stain*	83.79	4.87	2.93	1.88	6.53	100
	The road	82.38	6.61	3.88	1.30	5.83	100
	Tinkers	79.71	7.79	4.66	2.03	5.81	100
	average	**81.96**	**6.43**	**3.83**	**1.74**	**6.06**	**100**
Learners	*Bridge*	85.30	6.87	1.98	1.59	4.26	100
	Casino & Oasis	85.99	7.16	2.43	1.19	3.23	100
	Jubilee	88.46	5.59	2.42	1.16	2.37	100
	average	**86.58**	**6.54**	**2.28**	**1.32**	**3.28**	**100**

Abbreviations: K1 refers to the most-frequently-used 1000 words in the British National Corpus, K2 the second most-frequently used 1000, K3 the third, and so on. **Natives** stand for native speakers of English, and **Learners** for advanced learners of English in this study.

Table 2: Vocabulary profile: word use across different bands of frequency

Table 2 indicates that Ha Jin employs the first thousand most-frequently-used words (K1 band) at a similar rate (83.0) to native speakers (82.0) [t(70) = 1.44, p = .155], which is significantly lower than that of the advanced learners (86.6) [t(70) = -4.71, p< .001]. Statistically, Ha Jin (5.3) utilises words beyond the most-frequently-used four thousand words (i.e. ≥ K5) less frequently than native speakers (6.1) [t (70) = -2.277, p< .05]. On the whole, Ha Jin's use of words across different bands of frequency closely approximates that of native speakers, while differing conspicuously from that of the advanced learners of English (see Tables 3 and 4). The learners rely on K1-band words much more heavily and employ less-frequently-used word bands at much reduced rates. Han Jin has employed less commonly used to an extent similar to what the native-speaker novelists did.

	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference
K1	1.439	70	.155	1.08
K2	.722	55.397	.473	.27
K3	-3.499	60.949	.001**	-.95
K4	1.975	70	.052	.37
≥ K5	-2.277	70	.026*	-.77

Table 3: T-test for Equality of Means: Ha Jin versus native speakers

	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference
K1	-4.713	70	.000***	-3.55
K2	.396	53.521	.693	.16
K3	3.120	70	.003**	.60
K4	4.397	70	.000***	.79
≥ K4	6.347	70	.000***	2.00

Table 4: T-test for Equality of Means: Ha Jin versus advanced learners

4.3 Word recycling

The third measure of Ha Jin's vocabulary profile examines whether he uses a substantial number of words that occur only once in a given sample of text. Authors who command an extensive vocabulary tend to avoid reusing words; in technical terms, they reduce the average frequency of occurrence per word type and raise the proportion of once-occurring words in a given length of text. Based on our 12,000-word sample of each piece of writing by the three groups of authors (cf. 3.2), Ha Jin uses each word type 4.4 times on average, which is statistically similar to the rate (4.7) for the native English speakers [t(15963) = .07, p = .483] but significantly lower than that (5.6) for the advanced learners [t(12994) =3.32, p< .001] (see Table 5).

	sample	Mean	N	SD
Ha Jin	*A free life*	4.32	2,788	19.06
	Nanjing requiem	4.32	2,796	20.00
	Waiting	4.56	2,639	20.77
	average	**4.40**	**2,741**	**19.94**
Natives	*The human stain*	4.18	2,862	20.18
	The road	6.09	1,972	36.19
	Tinkers	4.15	2,908	24.03
	average	**4.66**	**2,581**	**26.48**
Learners	*Bridge*	4.9	2,465	22.11
	Casino & Oasis	6.1	1,966	22.90
	Jubilee	5.89	2,030	22.64
	average	**5.58**	**2,154**	**22.52**

Table 5: The mean value of occurrence frequency of word types

	Ha Jin					Natives					Learners				
sample	*A free*	*Nanjing*	*Waiting*	***average***	**%**	*Stain*	*Road*	*Tinkers*	***average***	**%**	*Bridge*	*Casino*	*Jubilee*	***average***	**%**
n=	2,788	2,796	2,639			2,862	1,972	2,908			2,465	1,966	2,030		
1	62.48	60.12	57.75	**60.16**		64.12	54.26	62.48	**60.99**		55.17	48.93	49.90	**51.62**	
2	13.63	16.02	16.90	**15.49**		14.40	14.60	15.34	**14.80**		15.74	16.43	16.01	**16.03**	
3	6.24	6.62	7.35	**6.73**		6.29	8.01	5.98	**6.61**		7.79	8.39	7.78	**7.97**	
4	4.34	3.90	3.98	**4.07**		3.04	5.27	3.82	**3.90**		4.95	5.24	5.42	**5.18**	
5	2.30	2.47	2.39	**2.38**		2.59	2.64	2.17	**2.44**		2.92	3.71	3.30	**3.28**	
6	1.36	1.68	1.36	**1.47**		1.36	2.28	1.51	**1.65**		2.19	2.34	2.32	**2.28**	
7-20	6.71	6.12	7.46	**6.75**		5.52	8.32	6.26	**6.51**		8.03	9.87	10.84	**9.47**	
21-100	2.44	2.65	2.24	**2.44**		2.20	4.01	2.06	**2.61**		2.72	4.37	3.74	**3.54**	
101-400	0.47	0.39	0.53	**0.46**		0.45	0.46	0.31	**0.40**		0.45	0.66	0.64	**0.57**	
401-	0.04	0.04	0.04	**0.04**		0.03	0.15	0.07	**0.08**		0.04	0.05	0.05	**0.05**	

Table 6: The percentage of word types across different ranges of occurrence frequency

Table 6 shows the number of word types that occur at the different frequencies and frequency ranges. Ha Jin and native speakers are statistically similar in the distribution of word types across all occurrence frequencies [c^2(156, N = 15965) =139.52, p = .82], whereas Ha Jin and the advanced learners differ significantly from each other [c^2(166, N = 14684) =304.51, p< .001]. Ha Jin uses once-occurring word types (60.2%) at a similar rate to that of the native speakers (61.0%), which is conspicuously higher than that of the advanced learners (51.6%). On the other hand, the advanced learners reuse words at a consistently higher rate than Ha Jin and the native speakers across the frequencies and frequency ranges from (2) to (101-400).

	sample	K1	K2	K3	K4	≥ K5
Ha Jin	*A free life*	37.45	20.91	10.86	7.29	23.49
	Nanjing	35.64	20.19	11.07	7.34	25.76
	Waiting	33.18	21.57	13.31	6.36	25.58
	average	**35.58**	**20.90**	**11.70**	**7.03**	**24.78**
Natives	*Stain*	36.89	17.49	10.57	6.81	28.24
	The road	33.58	16.19	14.79	7.44	28
	Tinkers	31.98	18.51	14.68	7.67	27.16
	average	**34.35**	**17.64**	**13.15**	**7.31**	**27.55**
Learners	*Bridge*	45.49	21.64	8.73	7.26	16.88
	Casino	44.97	24.66	11.4	5.08	13.89
	Jubilee	43.05	24.53	13	5.52	13.9
	average	**44.71**	**23.45**	**10.82**	**6.12**	**14.90**

Table 7: The percentage of once-occurring words in different occurrence-frequency bands

In addition, once-occurring words merit particular attention here – they are generally content (open-class) words rather than functional (closed-class) words, and constitute a predominant proportion of the word types that occur. We again used Lextutor Vocab Profiler to obtain the distribution of once-occurring words across word-type frequency brackets (Table 7).

Ha Jin employs both the K1-band words and the words beyond the K4 band (i.e. ≥ K5) at rates similar to those of the native speakers, in contrast to the advanced learners, who use the K1 band extensively and the ≥ K5 words sparingly. Statistically, Ha Jin and the native speakers differ in the distribution of once-occurring types across the word bands [c^2(4, N = 9669) = 25.76, p< .001], as do Ha Jin and the advanced learners [c^2(4, N = 8282) =145.55, p< .001], although the chi-square value between the Ha Jin–natives pair (25.76) is categorically lower than it is between the Ha Jin –learners pair (145.55). As a point of reference, we obtained the chi-square value of a pair of novels by the native speakers – *The Human Stain* and *Tinkers*. Although the two novels seem to be similar in terms of the distribution pattern of once-occurring words, they are statistically different [c^2(4, N = 3652) =20.87, p< .001]. Based on this reference point, we observed that Ha Jin's novels differ from the novels by native speakers in the distribution of once-occurring words to a similar extent that two novels by native speakers differ from one another.

5 Conclusion

Our corpus-based descriptions reveal that Ha Jin's novels demonstrate an extensive and diversified vocabulary repertoire, as rich as those of native speaker novelists, while considerably more refined than those of advanced Chinese learners of English. Ha Jin employs more word types per thousand words than do native speakers, and approximates native speakers in his use of less-frequently-used words and in his level of word reuse. The empirical evidence gathered from the present research together with that of Wang (2015) lends support to Widdowson's (1994) position that bilingual creativity derives from a writer's strong command of his/her adopted language as well as his/her native language.

Acknowledgments

The author thanks the two anonymous reviewers of this chapter for their valuable comments and suggestions, and acknowledges research grant (MYRG2015-00209-FAH) from the University of Macau.

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