When a native speaker of English comments that you speak or write “Chinglish”, would you feel at a loss? You might ask, “What’s Chinglish anyway?” It might be a bit difficult to give a definition. Broadly speaking, Chinglish is unidiomatic English which contains characteristics of the Chinese language. In *The Translator’s Guide to Chinglish* (《中式英语之鉴》), the author Joan Pinkham, with the collaboration of Jiang Guihua (姜桂华), sets out to give a full picture of Chinglish in its various aspects. The author has spent eight years in Beijing working with translators as an English polisher, first at the Foreign Languages Press and later at the Central Translation Bureau.

Pinkham’s book is designed to enable readers to spot the Chinglish elements in their English and make corrections. Abundant real-life examples are extracted from translators’ drafts and printed materials, such as newspapers and magazines. For each example, a suggested revision is offered. Chinglish features are grouped under two broad categories, namely unnecessary words and incorrect sentence structure.

The author calls unnecessary words “the hallmark of Chinglish”. Words are considered redundant when their meanings are already included or implied in other parts of a phrase or sentence. Many unnecessary words are easy to identify. For example, in the phrases “actual fact”, “serious chaos”, “new innovation”, “financial expenditure” and “final completion”, the adjectives contribute nothing but clumsiness. By the same token, “blue in colour” says the same thing as “blue”, and “accelerate the pace of reform” carries the same meaning as “accelerate the reform”. Likewise, in “totally abolish”, we may take away the intensifier “totally” because its meaning is already expressed by the verb. The same applies to “firmly ban”, “thoroughly eliminate” and “successfully accomplish”.

When the future tense of a verb has been used, it is pointless to specify “in the future”. Similarly, when the verb is already in the past tense, reference to time like “in the past” or “previously” is generally superfluous.

To decide whether a word is necessary, we may just check if it has added any meaning to a sentence. “Make” and “have” are useful but they are “dangerous” words. In some cases, they overload the sentences. Instead of saying “make an investigation into” and “have an influence on”, we may simply say “to investigate” and “to influence”. Illustrations of word economy are indeed numerous.

In the second part of her book, Pinkham examines texts from a wider perspective, focusing on sentence structure. The problems with sentence structure are relatively complicated. As a basic principle, conciseness is preferable to long-windedness, and clarity to obscurity.

Sentences overloaded with abstract nouns should generally be avoided. Native speakers prefer verbs to abstract nouns as they are more direct and forceful. Take a look at this example: “This would not only be a hindrance to the people of different nationalities in exchanging experience with and learning from each other but also a great disadvantage to the development of culture.” The presence of abstract nouns (“hindrance”, “exchanging”, “learning” and “disadvantage”) renders interpretation of meaning difficult. Rephrasing the sentence by substituting abstract nouns with verbs can help, as you can see from the following: “This would not only make it difficult for people of different nationalities to exchange experience and learn from each other, but would also impede the development of culture.”

The author also discusses the correct use of pronouns. Problems arise when the antecedent of a pronoun is ambiguous, too remote or even missing. Here is an example: “The price of one ton of crude oil is 1,300 yuan if it is sold to the government.” The same pronoun appears twice, but it refers to two different things. To remove ambiguity, it is necessary to specify which pronoun refers to which antecedent. One possible solution would be: “The price of one ton of crude oil is 1,300 yuan if it is sold to the government.” Relative pronouns are another area that often causes problems. Readers will surely find the following notice laughable — “Wanted: Man to take care of cow that does not smoke or drink”. Common sense tells us that cow neither smokes nor drinks. To correct, we may put the relative pronoun immediately after its antecedent — “Wanted: Man that does not smoke or drink to take care of cow”.

Ambiguity also stems from dangling sentences. Look at this example: “After gaining some experience, these measures will gradually be introduced in other regions.” The problem is: who has gained some experience? The implied subject should be “we” (the administration), while grammatically “the measures” performs the function of the subject. The sentence could hence be rewritten as “After we have gained some experience, these measures will be gradually introduced in other regions.”

*The Translator’s Guide to Chinglish* is a handy aid for translators and English users. It helps increase our awareness with regard to writing correct and idiomatic English. We ourselves can identify many of the language problems covered by this book, provided that we take a second but critical look at our drafts. Very often, it is a good idea to leave a text aside for some time, and then go back to it with a clear mind later.