

A Study of Chinese Immigrants as Second Language Learners in Thomas Burke's Limehouse Nights

Yanxin Wang^{1,*}

¹School of Foreign Language and Culture, Nanjing Normal University, Nanjing, Jiangsu 210046, China

*Yanxin Wang, Email: wyx15651017991@163.com

ABSTRACT

This paper takes character conversations in Thomas Burke's Limehouse Nights as research corpus and combines historical materials to analyze the second language acquisition phenomenon. Historical, cultural, and social factors shaping the characters' acquisition and use of English will be explored. By moving away from the rigid opposition binary between self and other in the framework of Orientalism, the present paper yields a fresh understanding of Burke's representation of Chinese characters from the perspective of linguistics.

Keywords: *Thomas Burke, Limehouse Nights, Chinese immigrants, Second language acquisition*

1. Introduction

Limehouse Nights (1916), a short story collection written by the British writer Thomas Burke, is set in Limehouse, a typical Chinatown in London's east end. The work mainly revolves around heartrending love stories between white females and Asian men, mostly Chinese. In particular, most of the male protagonists in each story come from the lower rungs of society, working menial jobs in Limehouse Chinatown, such as shop keepers, Kang Foo Ah, and sailors, Cheng Huan, in order to survive. They are often represented as short-tempered, poorly dressed, and careless about their public appearance. For instance, the "wondering yellow man" Cheng Huan, the hero of "The Chink and the Child," lives in a typically "lousy room," giving himself up to opium at the deep end of Formosa Street (Burke, "The Chink and the Child" 7-8). At the same time, they often appear clumsy or intellectually disadvantaged in the pursuit of love and happiness, which more often than not ends tragically. Kam Louie is right to point out that "crime and menacing" pervade Burke's Chinatown, and such crime, I would add, often involves Chinese immigrants. For instance, Greaser's daughter kills her mother and Battling bullies his daughter Lucy when he is drunk. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that their spoken English is fraught with grammatical mistakes and confined to simple words, and it sounds rather vulgar, sometimes even ear-irritating.

Scholars such as Kam Louie and John Seed, sensitive to the alarmingly similar love plots in Limehouse Nights, advance the argument that Burke's work sheds light on the prevalent fear of racial contamination through inter-racial intercourse or marriage (Louie, 1071; Seed, 75). Admittedly, fear of yellow perils, which originates from the false belief in white superiority and the construction of Chinese as disgusting, violent and corruptive, has been haunting the English people since the 19th century. In this sense, these studies, well aware of Orientalism which informs the white imagination of China, help illuminate the causes of the often negative images of Chinese as depicted by Burke. However, to overemphasize the opposition between self and other within the English culture in Burke's times might result in ignoring the realistic and sympathetic aspects of Burke's representation of Chinese immigrants. As Louie suggests, "Burke was not always unsympathetic in his portrayals of the Chinese" (Louie 1063).

This paper argues that Burke's writings of Chinese immigrants are not all based on imagination and defamation. To demonstrate this point, I will examine Chinese characters from the perspective of linguistics on the basis that the protagonists of these stories are also second language learners. As I will soon illuminate, their spoken English shows linguistic features consistent with the process of non-native speakers' acquisition of English. In the following parts, I will first provide some general information about Chinese immigrants in London from the late 19th century to the early 20th century, including their living environments, careers, and social circles because these factors affect their acquisition of English. I will then

illustrate my central argument by first presenting three language acquisition phenomenon, followed by a discussion of the rationale behind the novelist's representation of it as such.

After the Opium Wars between Qing and the British Government, a large number of British industrial products began to be dumped into China. The ships of the East India Company frequently sailed to and from the coast of the South China sea, employing cheap Chinese laborers to work as coolies on the ships (Danes 66). Some of these hired Chinese seafarers, after arriving at British docks or secretly escaping from the ship, settled down in London and Liverpool. Chinese immigrants mainly live in London's east end, which was known as the slums of London before their arrivals. According to John Burrows, Chinese in Limehouse are confined at the bottom of society with limited education and little social mobility. As is shown in a study of the Chinese immigrants' major occupations in England in the early 20th century, they mostly made a living by working as seamen and laundry operators. As a result, they have no systematic grammar training which leads to typical grammatical problems such as misuse of negative expression, misuse of personal pronouns, Chinese Pidgin English, and other linguistic phenomena such as accent and overuse of dirty words.

2. First language (L1) and second language acquisition (SLA)

Language interference (also known as L1 interference, linguistic interference, cross-linguistic interference or transfer) the effect of language learners' mother tongue on their output of a learned language. The effect can be shown in, for instance, grammar, vocabulary, accent, and spelling. L1 interference is considered an essential factor affecting second language acquisition (SLA). According to Lennon (1990), there is a high possibility that cross-linguistic influence in SLA may cause errors in conversation. Three features resulting from negative L1 interference can be seen in the conversation among the protagonists in the Limehouse Nights, the first being Chinese Pidgin English.

Chinese Pidgin English was a historical product, "formed in a very restricted contact situation to fulfil limited communication need between English-speaking traders and their Cantonese speaking servants". Its grammar is based on Chinese while the words come from English. Many examples of Chinese Pidgin English can be found in the conversation of Chinese protagonists in Limehouse Nights.

Table 1 Chinese Pidgin English in Limehouse Nights

Source	Original text
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"The Bird," p.123	"Oh, Captain-- <i>no burn me today</i> , Captain. <i>Sung Dee be heap good sailor</i> , heap good servant, <i>all same slave</i> . Sung Dee heap plenty <i>solly</i> hurt Captain. Sung Dee be good boy. No do feller bad lings no feller more. O Captain. Let Sung Dee go <i>lis</i> time. Let Sung Dee go. O Captain!"
"Gracie Goodnight," p.43	"Save me! Save me!" he babbled. " <i>I give heap plenty money anyone save me</i> . I give hundred pounds--two hundred pounds-- <i>anyone save me</i> . Ooo! Save me!"

As can be seen from the table, Sung Dee speaks English using Chinese grammar. The sentence "no burn me today" perfectly follows the Chinese grammatical rules but is incorrect in English grammatically. The same goes with his words "Sung bee be heap good sailor." Moreover, the /h/ sound and /r/ sound are mispronounced, as a result of which this becomes lis and sorry becomes solly. Because of L1 interference, Chinese protagonists' spoken English is reasonable to show many mistakes, especially considering their lack of language education.

Secondly, case changes in personal pronouns are easily misused by the Chinese in Limehouse Nights. For instance, in the short story "The Bird," the cook, unable to tell the difference between subjective case and possessive case, articulates twice the expression "me old brown son" (114). In mandarin, personal pronouns do not differentiate between and subjective and possessive forms as in English. In order to express the possessive relationship, "de" (的) will be added to the end of personal pronouns (such as 你我他) but the pronounce itself does not change. Therefore, case changes in personal pronouns are rather complicated for Chinese English learners, and this knowledge is even more difficult for early Chinese immigrants to understand fully, not even mentioning using case changes correctly. As discussed above, these learners hardly had any language training, and they could only pick up simple

words for daily use by imitating the local people. Lack of knowledge of English pronounces, they misuse them following the grammatical rule of their mother tongue. In this sense, Burke’s depiction of the Chinese immigrants in Limehouse is reliable.

Thirdly, second language (L2) learners tend to use some words in L1 to create some phrases with fixed expression in L2, confusing understanding. Kang Foo Ah’s words – “Go, robber. Daughter of a dog” in “Gracie Goodnight” is an example to the point (Burke, “Gracie Goodnight” 37). His evoking of the image of a dog is intriguing here. In mandarin, "dog's bastard" (狗杂种) and "dog's born" (狗养的) are often used to abuse or curse a person accused of being born illegally or badly raised. However, English does not relate such expressions to “dog,” and in English, the word “bastard” will be used to express what Kang Foo Ah wants to express. Languages formed in different cultural backgrounds sometimes choose different images to express similar meanings. The English word “bastard” might be not within Kang Foo Ah’s vocabulary, and his use of “Daughter of a dog” is due to inaccurate expression caused by mother tongue interference.

3.External factors and second language acquisition (SLA)

External factors such as school learning and language environment play a significant part in second language acquisition. L2 learners are exposed to two different types of talk: teacher talk (the language used by teachers in class) and foreign talk (the language used by native speakers in conversation with non-native speakers)0. Drawing upon Stephen D. Krashen’s “Acquisition—Learning Hypothesis,” I argue that lack of language training and native speakers’ negative effect shape Chinse protagonists’ English as depicted in Limehouse Nights. Krashen argues for “strict separation between acquisition and learning,” considering acquisition as “a purely subconscious process” and learning as a “conscious process.” (Krashen 1985). Without systematic language learning, the Chinese immigrants are suggested to a process of what Krashen calls subconscious acquisition. As a result, their spoken English is often not “grammatically sequenced,” with their misuse of negative expressions as a telling example.

Table 2 Wrong use of negative expressions in Limehouse Nights

source	Errors in original texts
“Gracie Goodnight,” 45	“No one can't do more'n that.”

“The Paw,” 57	“And don't talk about it no more.”
“Tai Fu and Pansy Greers,” 105	"but you can't come here no more”

As is mentioned earlier, Limehouse used to be a slum before becoming Chinatown. Unsurprisingly, the white people living here came from a low social class and lacked qualified education. As a result, it is easy to see among them misuse of negative expression. For instance, when Greaser Flanagan says “don't talk about it no more,” she misuses the negative expression without changing “no” to “any.” With such native speakers as one of their main sources of language input, Chinese immigrants would tend to pick up incorrect expressions.

The influence of external influence can also be seen in the Chinese protagonist’s Cockney accent in articulating English. Second language learners often imitate what they hear about a language and internalize it into their own language through the input of language materials. In Limehouse Nights, Chinese characters speak rather vulgar English with easily noticed Cockney accent, partly because they imitate the language of the white people who live in the east end of London, inevitably picking up their accents and vocabulary as well. For instance, the landlord of a bar articulates “Now clear out, old cock, and toddle 'ome” (Burke, “ Gracie Goodnight”, 38), his English tinted by apparent coarseness.

As misuse of personal pronouns and negative expressions often occur before a certain amount of input is reached in L2, it is understandable that Cockney accents appear in these early Chinses Emigrants’ daily conversation. Therefore, their English, for all its grammatical mistakes and coarseness, does not necessarily indicate Burke’s mockery of the Chinese’s ability to acquire a new language. Instead, the writer’s representation of their language output contributes to the text’s realism.

4.Social status and SLA

Social status often affects how one speaks. Findings based on the interrelationship among language and some demographic variables advance the argument that minority group status and lower-class will lead to poorer language output.0 As pointed above, early Chinese emigrants in London’s Chinatown were underprivileged, living in a rather hostile environment. For this reason, their language and ways of speaking are often characterized by vulgarity. Therefore, it is reasonable that in Burke’s writing of Chinese, protagonists such as the old Kang Foo Ah and Tai fu speak English with simple sentence structures and

usually humiliating expressions such as “daughter of a dog” (Burke, “Gracie Goodnight” 39) and “damn” (111) .

5. Conclusion

To conclude, Burke depicted a gallery of Chinese immigrants in Limehouse nights, which seems to tap into the negative image of China pervading England in his times. This paper examines the English conversations by these characters from the perspective of second language acquisition, analyzing historical, cultural, and social factors that shape the characters’ acquisition of English. In light of the history of Chinese immigrants in London and the influence of Chinese as mother tongue in learning English, this paper suggests that the Chinese characters’ English deficiency and the negative qualities such as rudeness, vulgarity, and incapability related to English, are consistent with the learning process of second language learners. This paper thereby concludes that negative depictions of Chinese people in Limehouse Nights, in particular their poor and vulgar English, do not entirely result from oriental immigration or an effort to degrade Chinese.

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