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Breaking through the “jargon” barrier: Early 19th century missionaries’ response on communication conflicts in China

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Abstract Tracing the origin and circulation of the “jargon” spoken at Canton, the paper examines how “jargon” became an issue of Sino-foreign communication conflicts in the early 19th century, and how Westerners responded to it. As a *lingua franca* spread extensively in the Canton trade, the so-called “jargon” (a pidgin form of patois) played an essential role as communication tool between Chinese and foreign traders. However, in the eyes of missionaries in early 19th century China, the normal Sino-foreign contact process was interrupted and distorted by both parties’ overusing of the jargon. In this regard, early Protestant missionaries’ support of Chinese language study reveals an initial effort to break through the “jargon” barrier.

Keywords Canton System, jargon, pidgin, missionary, *Chinese Repository*

摘要 通过研究广东贸易中“行话”的起源与社会流传,以及西方人对“行话”的认识与态度,可以揭示十九世纪初中外文化交流史上的一次话语权力的冲突。作为十八世纪起在广东沿海广为流传的贸易通用语,这种混杂了多种语言成分的洋泾浜语“行话”乃当地中国商人、通事等与外国人沟通的唯一工具。然而在十九世纪初来华新教传教士眼中,过分依赖于中国人主导的贸易“行话”以及缺乏正规学习中文的途径,皆成为中外正常交流的羁绊。由此可见,早期来华新教传教士所编写的大量中文著作显示出十九世纪初来华西方人为争取交流主动权所作的尝试。

关键词 广州贸易体系, 行话, 洋泾浜语, 传教士, 《中国丛报》

1 Prelude: What is jargon?

In 1836, Samuel Wells Williams, one of the early Protestant missionaries to

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China, wrote a seven-page article entitled “Jargon spoken at Canton” in a journal called *Chinese Repository*.¹ In the article, the author pointed out that a “corrupt” form of English became the common language used between the Chinese and foreigners around the Canton area, and through this particular medium, the communication, limited only within the trading process, had been so far maintained.² However, the situation of having this “foreign tongue” applied not only to native Cantonese, but also to English speakers, aroused in Williams a deep sense of confusion, with as well as a token of discontent.

The connotation of jargon is neutral in sense by its linguistic definition. It is a phenomenon of language contact, a form of *patois* employed by two or more groups of people, who originally have different native tongues. It contains certain limited vocabularies usually drawn from one language, and has simpler grammars than their source languages.³ The jargon spoken at Canton, or namely, Canton English, was one of the early forms of Chinese Pidgin English prevailing along the southeastern coast in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.⁴ In most cases, it was used among the Chinese merchants, interpreters, servants, and foreign traders in the trading area called *Shisan hang* 十三行 (Thirteen Factories) in Canton. As a natural outcome of trading contact, the jargon was a single-faced phenomenon if its historical role is viewed as a pure linguistic medium. However, when evaluated through a multiplicity of perspectives within certain historical context, the jargon expands its social implication to issues of language policy and cultural conflicts in history.

¹ The *Chinese Repository* was a monthly magazine started in Canton in 1832 by Elijah C. Bridgman (1801–1861). In 1833, Samuel Wells Williams (1812–1884) joined the editorship until its end in 1851. It was the main outlet for serious Western scholarship on China during that period.

² Williams, 1836, 428–435.

³ Sebba, 36. Peter Burke in his *Languages and Jargons* also states that, “The term was used to refer to unintelligible speech, a sort of gargling in the throat. As it spread from one language to another, the word ‘jargon’ changed its meaning and came to refer primarily to the language of the underworld, a kind of slang. ...” See Burke, 1995, 2.

⁴ On the study of early history of Pidgin English in China, details can be found in John E. Reinecke’s dissertation “Marginal Languages: A Sociological Survey of the Creole Languages and Trade Jargons” (Dissertation presented to the faculty of the Graduate School of Yale University, 1937). Robert A. Hall, in his *Pidgin and Creole Languages* (1966) summarized the four main periods of Chinese Pidgin English (CPE) from John E. Reinecke’s dissertation: The year 1715–1748 was the time when CPE originated at Macao and Canton, and 1748–1842 was the “Classical” period of CPE used at Canton. Then it was the period of “expansion and greatest use, in Hong Kong, Treaty Ports, and Yangtze valley, 1842–ca.1890” and the “decline time (1890–present time).” Shi Dingxu traced the origin of Chinese Pidgin English, which is certainly related to the early history of jargon spoken at Canton. Wu Yixiong also provided numerous details for the historical usage of Canton English in his study of Sino-Western communication before the mid-nineteenth century. See Shi Dingxu, 1991, 1–41; Wu Yixiong, 2001, No. 3.

Samuel W. Williams, as well as a few other missionaries and diplomats who arrived in China during the 1830s–40s, were in fact not merely reporters of the linguistic situation at the time. The discussion on jargon, as one can hear from their voices in the *Chinese Repository*, raised a further argument: beyond its linguistic nature, the jargon spoken at Canton in the 1830s indeed represented an unbalanced state of communication. As Williams further stated: “Foreigners have for ages come to China from different lands for trade, and still all communication is carried on in a foreign tongue. Hundreds of Chinese now acquire enough of the jargon to do business, while hardly a foreigner ever devotes an hour to learn the language of Chinese.”⁵

The jargon spoken at Canton, therefore, turned out to be a linguistic barrier segregated foreigners from local Chinese culture. Williams further pointed out that, “still more our ignorance of their designs, ideas, and springs of actions in regard to us, are owing to our general inability to converse with them in their own tongue.”⁶ The motive behind Williams’ calling attention to the phenomenon of jargon was therefore to make readers alert to the fact that, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, the normal contact process of understanding and being understood was somehow interrupted and distorted by both parties’ overusing of the jargon. Tracing the origin and circulation of the jargon spoken at Canton in the eighteenth- and early nineteenth-centuries, the paper examines how the “jargon” became an issue of Sino-foreign communication conflicts, and how the Westerners responded to it.

2 Early history of the “Canton jargon”

Canton was the most important sea port along the China coast from the late seventeenth to the mid-nineteenth century. From 1685, the Yuehaiguan 粤海关 (Maritime Customs in Canton) was established by the Qing government for the purpose of collecting taxes on import and export goods. During the same time, a few wealthy Cantonese merchants were gathered to assist the Customs House in managing Canton-foreign trade, including commerce with South and Southeast

⁵ Williams, 1836, 429. A similar report was also made by Caleb Cushing, an American diplomat to China in 1843: “In Canton, Macao, and the interjacent region, the prosecution of European commerce has led to some knowledge of the spoken (not written) European languages, among persons engaged in trade, or in domestic services; but the great majority of these persons generally speak a corrupt jargon, which is utterly useless for the higher objects of public business; and even this conversational vocabulary, imperfect and corrupt as it is, to say nothing of European literature, is not possessed by persons of intellectual pursuits, or of rank in the government.” See Cushing, 281.

⁶ Williams, 1836, 429.

Asia, as well as western Europe.⁷ All transactions were closely monitored by Yuehaiguan, from whom foreign merchants gained their permission to transfer goods from Macao to Canton.⁸ In 1720, a local merchant guild called *gonghang* 公行 was founded to handle trade with foreign merchants, particularly European (and later also American) merchants.⁹ Therefore, these Cantonese guild merchants became the first Chinese who adopted a common trade jargon, a *patois*, for dealing with Westerners.

Similar to narratives of English in other parts of the world during the British colonial expansion of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the progress of English in coastal China starting in 1637 was also related to trading contact; however, English speakers were not the first foreigners in China. Because the Portuguese was the first to trade in Macao in 1555, the development of a coastal trading jargon was inseparable from early Portuguese influences. During the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the Portuguese reached West Africa, South Asia, Macao, Japan, and Indonesia, where their language diffused along coastlines in a pidgin form.¹⁰ Arab, Hindi, and Malay also arrived before English because the Portuguese brought Arab interpreters and Hindi sailors on board, and after they gained a foothold in Macao around 1557, they also brought their Malaysian wives.¹¹

Macao prospered as the center of Portuguese trade in Asia during the late sixteenth century. A Portuguese-based pidgin language, mixed with Hindi, Arab, Malay, Cantonese and other languages, became the *lingua franca* for trade. Generation by generation, the Portuguese-Malay and the Portuguese-Chinese descendants developed it into Macao Portuguese Creole (MPC), and the language continued its predominance as the trading jargon until around the late seventeenth century.¹² Therefore, when English first arrived in China in the late seventeenth century, it was not the only Western language present. As part of a *patois* for coastal trade, English mixed with other languages and dialects, and, due to the context of its earliest usage, was first named “business English,” from

⁷ Liang Fangzhong, 3–4.

⁸ Van Dyke, 10–11.

⁹ Morse, Vol. 1, 160–170.

¹⁰ Holm, Vol. 2, 265. “The monogenetic theory claimed that a Portuguese pidgin modeled on the Lingua Franca developed in West Africa during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, and was carried to Asia by Portuguese sailors and traders and their followers, eventually being relexified into the pidgins that developed into the Creoles based on other European languages.” However, as Holm argued, “it must be remembered that the Portuguese reached Asia in 1498, when the African Creoles were still in an early stage of development, therefore, it seems likely that the contact language used by Portuguese sailors and traders in Asia contained fewer specifically African features than monogeneticists assumed.”

¹¹ Holm, Vol. 2, 268, 296.

¹² Holm, 296–297.

which—as we have seen—the term “pidgin English” was derived.¹³

The emergence of Pidgin English and its gradual rise as the predominant trading jargon took place around the first half of the eighteenth-century when the British established regular trading business with China through the East India Company. Current available linguistic data indicate a transitional period in which MPC affected and mixed with Pidgin English, but Pidgin English eventually took a leading role as *lingua franca* for south China coastal trade over the course of about one hundred years from the mid-eighteenth to mid-nineteenth century.¹⁴

Travel accounts by Euro-American traders who went to the Far East in the mid-eighteenth century help to confirm the usage of English in a pidgin form by Chinese merchants, compradors, and other people who participated in the Canton-West trade. For example, British traders George Anson and Charles F. Noble, both recorded local Chinese interpreters’ speech in broken English in their respective accounts in the 1740s.¹⁵ In his *Voyage*, Anson mentions that when he and other merchants conducted transactions along the riverbanks of Canton, arguments about money broke out between the interpreter or Linguist and the merchants.¹⁶

In the chapter called “An Account of Canton,” dated 1748, Noble describes that the “dialect” that local Chinese used to communicate with Westerners was “a mixture of European languages, but mostly, as we formerly hinted, of English and Portuguese, together with some words of their own.”¹⁷ For example, “I saluted him, or made my compliments to him, they say, *I moiki handsome face for he, I moiki grandi chin-chin for he.*”¹⁸ Noble also describes the general quality of his Chinese interpreters and emphasized that the English they spoke still contained traces of Portuguese. “I sometimes asked my Chinese acquaintance, what they were: they gave me many answers in broken and mixed dialect of English and Portuguese, which I could not understand. One of them

¹³ According to the sources quoted by the *Oxford English Dictionary* (henceforth *OED*), *pidgin* was first written as “pigeon,” “bigeon,” which was generated from the Chinese corrupted pronunciation of the word “business” in the early nineteenth-century. Most linguists today agree with the theory of *OED*, for example Shi Dingxu, 1992, 343–347.

¹⁴ A representative statement that suggests the relation between CPE and MPC is in John Holm’s *Pidgin and Creoles*: “A pidginized form of the Macao Creole came to be used for trade with Chinese merchants in Canton; when English merchants began trading there in the late seventeenth century, they used Macanese guides and interpreters, and it is likely that this restructured Portuguese influenced the ensuing Chinese Pidgin English.” See Holm, Vol. 2, 297.

¹⁵ Anson, 355, 360–361; Noble, 240, 244, 262.

¹⁶ Anson, 355.

¹⁷ Noble, 262.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* This is a sentence in which English, Chinese, and Portuguese elements are mixed. Numerous cases of Pidgin English that Noble mentions in his *Voyage* demonstrate Portuguese influences.

told me, pointing at one of them, *He no cari China man's Joss bap oter Joss*, or in better English, that man does not worship our god, but has another god."¹⁹

Linguistic behavior can be passed down through generations if the speaking community is relatively exclusive. In Canton and Macao, the Chinese who spoke a mixture of Portuguese, English, Chinese, and other languages in their trading jargon were local merchants and interpreters; historical sources suggest that interpreting for and trading with Westerners was usually a family business.²⁰ Therefore, facing the lucrative trading, Chinese merchants initially would have acquired the jargon for business purpose. Samuel W. Williams' account of Chinese-English glossary books helps confirm the popularity of the so-called "jargon" spread among the transacting chain. He wrote in *Chinese Repository* in 1837 that there were glossary books for local Cantonese merchants to learn English; however, all the English words were written in Chinese characters as phonetic annotations to transcribe the pronunciations of the English words, and so the glossaries did not incorporate the English letters.²¹

3 Speakers: Merchants and interpreters

Local Cantonese merchants, interpreters, compradors, and servants who were involved in the eighteenth-century coastal trading spoke a trading jargon with Western merchants. Therefore, their speech activities, including how they developed a *lingua franca* mixed with Chinese and English, the circumstances under which they spoke the jargon, and the reasons why they spoke it all contain clues about the early history of the so-called "jargon" spoken at Canton.

Annual transactions between the British East India Company and Cantonese merchants were established at the end of the seventeenth century; however, as Morse indicated, the first interpreters who served the Company were speaking a mixture of Chinese and Portuguese, and "this was sometimes an untrustworthy Chinese who could speak Portuguese; sometimes a low-class Portuguese who could speak Chinese; more commonly a half-breed, who had acquired the one tongue from his father, and the other from his mother."²² Early 19th century travel accounts suggest that Cantonese locals replaced Macanese interpreters and gradually came to dominate the business of being a "middleman" between the Chinese and the Westerners. For example, a few travel accounts written by British and American merchants mention that boat

¹⁹ Ibid., 244.

²⁰ See Downing's description about his own experience on a family-running-boat around Canton in 1836, 21–49.

²¹ Williams, 1837, 276–279.

²² Morse, Vol. 1, 67.

people who lived in the area around Lingding Ocean 零丁洋 were able to speak Pidgin English when it was necessary for Westerners to transfer to those people's sampans to approach the riverbank of Canton.²³ The boat people were usually called "pilots" in Westerners' accounts, and water piloting was normally a family business.

During the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Westerners lodged in a specific area along the riverbank outside of the city wall of Canton. The area, called *Shisan hang* in Chinese documents, served as the location for Canton-foreign trade, where Westerners established their own residences, warehouses, and trading firms.²⁴ It was an enclosed space in which Westerners spent most of their time; they were not allowed to leave the area except when accompanied by Chinese linguists (interpreters). The Chinese people whom they were in contact with were mostly merchants, compradors, stewards, cooks, and servants. Therefore, an enclosed yet relatively stable linguistic environment arose due to the restrictions on foreigners' movements. In this linguistic environment, a fusion of English and Chinese became the only available trading *patois* available to Western and Chinese merchants.

Historical accounts reveal the existence of such a linguistic space. Edmund Fanning, a merchant from New York, described his arrival at Canton in 1798. "This factory [that we rented] contains an audience or dining hall, lodging and store rooms, together with accommodations for the compidore [sic], servants, cooks, and coolies (laborers). After the factory is obtained, a compidore is engaged, then a trusty servant, who speaks the stranger's language, and attends upon your person in your walks, to act as interpreter."²⁵

The "Factory" illustrated by Anglo-American merchants refers to a relatively closed space where the trading business was usually carried out through a restricted circle of Chinese people. Therefore, these people, including local Cantonese merchants, compradors, and linguists, also became an exclusive group of communicators with foreigners. Travel accounts indicate that compradors, stewards, and linguists assigned to Westerners served not only as linguistic and cultural interpreters but also as domestic servants. Compradors and stewards needed to take care of a daily menu of three meals, shop for the Westerners, and deliver messages between Western merchants and Chinese officials. Linguists were required to accompany Westerners on tours along the riverbank and visits to cultural sites around the factories. This limited range of social activities led to a specific vocabulary in which local Chinese and Westerners negotiated their communications.

²³ Downing, 21–28; Fanning, 256–258.

²⁴ Liang Jiabin, 347–357.

²⁵ Fanning, 263.

C. T. Downing mentioned in his account that a few sentences of Pidgin English were almost in constant use with those who frequently conversed with Westerners. For instance, compradors or stewards will come to you and say, “*You catchee dinner? Can?*” while raising their eyebrows up at the same time. Then Westerners were usually pleased to answer “*Can,*” with a nod of the head. Compradors thus were able to understand this particular answer and would conduct them to the dining-room. But if they replied in English in other ways, Chinese compradors would only stare at them and say “*No sa-a-vez*” (Do not know).²⁶

The ability to speak English, even in a pidgin form, became an unspoken requirement for doing business with Western merchants. Charles Noble's account mentions that some Chinese merchants offered to let their sons serve Westerners in the factories as menials in order to allow them to pick up some English.²⁷ These merchants, who Noble describes as “petty,” wanted their sons to know English so that the younger generation could carry on trading with the Westerners, expand the family business and become wealthier. Being a menial would provide numerous opportunities to communicate with Western merchants, and so being a servant was also an occupation through which local Cantonese could study “business English” (Pidgin English) from Anglo-Americans in the factories.²⁸ However, since this method of study was temporary and irregular for the “students” (local Cantonese), their English pronunciation and grammar suffered.

Records show that wealthy Chinese merchants in Canton usually spoke relatively “good” English—by pidgin standards.²⁹ According to Noble's description, Tingua (Pan Tingguan 潘庭官) spoke English better than any other local Cantonese merchant and also was “a man of great integrity.”³⁰ William Hunter, in his account of 1820s Canton, recorded in detail how Chinese merchants used English to trade with Westerners. For example, when the old merchant Houqua (Wu Haoguan 伍浩官) was informed by American merchants about to credit the loss of his account, “he replied, ‘*My consider, my show you to-mollo*’—that is to say, he would think it over and let us know his decision ‘to-morrow’.”³¹ Hunter also noted that aside from Chinese merchants, Chinese linguists (interpreters) were the other professional group who were close to Westerners. However, their English may not have been as good as that spoken by

²⁶ Downing, 36.

²⁷ Noble, 224.

²⁸ Beyond Shi Dingxu's argument from a linguistic perspective, these examples offer further evidence that the term “Pidgin English” was historically related to the idea of “business English.”

²⁹ Here, “pidgin” means “broken English,” in consistent with the linguistic nature of a pidgin language.

³⁰ Noble, 254.

³¹ Hunter, 30.

Chinese merchants, and Hunter ironically wrote about the Chinese interpreters that were called linguists because “they knew nothing of any language but their own.”³²

Chinese Pidgin English, a jargon widely spoken at Canton in the early nineteenth century, demonstrated its dominant linguistic position between the Chinese and foreign trading groups. The jargon was also imperative for the arriving Western merchants to acquire for communicating with local Cantonese merchants. It became an increasingly significant phenomenon, which drew Williams’ attention to the fact that the jargon spoken at Canton indeed represented an unbalanced state of communication. John R. Morrison, the son of Robert Morrison and a chief translator who served the East India Company, compiled *A Chinese Commercial Guide* (1834), a text presenting details about commercial regulations and measures. At the end of the guide, the author attached a glossary that contains about fifty Pidgin English vocabularies. Morrison also added explanations for a few key words and phrases to help Western readers correctly use these expressions, which demonstrated the importance of such language reference in guiding foreign-Chinese transaction routines.³³

4 Essential barriers and the “Flint event”

Jargon spoken at Canton, as mentioned above, was in fact a pidgin language resulting from the limited trading contact between local Cantonese and foreigners. It turned out to be a linguistic barrier for the foreigners to learn Chinese; however, the linguistic phenomenon also corresponds to the diplomatic rhetoric used by the Chinese government throughout the Qing Dynasty. Anglo-Chinese relations during 1750–1800 were viewed as belonging to a crucial period, as Earl Pritchard stated, “the period is characterized by expansion of trade and peaceful efforts to break the rigor of the Canton System and penetrate the wall of Chinese exclusiveness.”³⁴ One aspect revealing this crucial point can be examined from the linguistic situation at the time. Various commercial, legal, and political disputes between the British and Chinese authorities originated from the language policy that only Chinese could be written on trading documents.³⁵

³² Ibid., 31.

³³ Morrison, 1834, 117–118. For example, “*Makee* is often considered a necessary prefix to a verb, as ‘you makee see this side’ for ‘look here.’” “*Ol’o custom*, old custom, usage; this expression is an excuse for every fault.” “*Side or si*,’ a position, situation, place, as *outs*,’ *topsi*,’ *downsi*;’ which *si*’ denotes where, whence.”

³⁴ Pritchard, 118.

³⁵ It was not until the Tianjin Treaty in 1858 that both the British and French governments claimed the right of using their own languages in addition to Chinese in official documents, regarding to the issue of communication with the Chinese government.

Therefore, a prerequisite for communication was either having knowledge of Chinese, or finding adequate translations. However, as practical communication tools, spoken and written Chinese were somewhat inaccessible to most Westerners, especially English speakers. Although the nature of the Chinese language was well understood by European savants in the eighteenth century, their works on Chinese were mainly focused on exploration of the philosophical theory of the “universal language,” and primarily limited within circles of high literati.³⁶ Little help could be found from those old works; though shifting their gaze to the local market, the foreign traders still could not find available language resources. “The Chinese government has endeavored to restrict the intercommunication of natives and foreigners;” said Williams, “and as one means of accomplishing this object, it has prevented foreigners from learning the Chinese language.”³⁷ In the early nineteenth century, though businessmen were ambitious to communicate directly with Chinese officials, and Protestant missionaries were eager to preach face to face among the local populace, neither of them found the way smooth: “[The situation that] there were no grammars, nor vocabularies of things in common use, has operated as an initial discouragement, and prevented many from making the attempt to learn the language.”³⁸ Under these circumstances, language contact in the early nineteenth century indeed amounted to a sort of conflict, rather than an ordinary process of communication. The group who gained the initial right of choosing language usage would also have a positive control of contemporary political and commercial intercourse. Elijah C. Bridgman, the first American Protestant missionary to China, once put forward: “It is of little use to come in contact with the Chinese unless we can communicate freely with them—interrogate them and be interrogated; hear them argue for, and defend their high superiority; and in turn, let them hear the opposite statements.”³⁹

As a major agent involved during the crucial years of Anglo-Chinese relations, the administrative committee of the East India Company had its ambition to expand the reach of its trade; however, it was in fact often frustrated by the unfair situation regarding language contact. “One difficulty always confronting the Committee was that of interpreting and translating, when, excepting for Sir G. T. Staunton’s work, the only interpreters were Chinese knowing only Pidgin

³⁶ See Mungello’s discussion in the *Curious Land* on Francis Bacon, John Webb, Athanasius Kircher, Andreas Müller, Christian Mentzel and Gottfried Leibniz as “proto-Sinologists” and their works on the Chinese language. In “List of Works upon China,” Williams also mentioned that the *Arte de la lengua Mandarinina* by Francisco Varo (Canton, 1703), though an important grammar work, “has long been out of print.” *Chinese Repository*, 402–443.

³⁷ Williams, 1836, 429.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 430.

³⁹ Bridgman, 1833, 5.

English.”⁴⁰ The quality of translation was directly related to the Company’s trading interests, for only by means of complete translations was the Company Committee able to obtain the best way of resolving the trading issues with the Chinese government. However, the presence of those Chinese interpreters was in fact an obstacle preventing the Company from achieving their trading goal. Not only was the Pidgin English of the merchants and linguists of the most elementary character, but their interests were not identical with those of the Company, and they were too timid to be trusted to interpret exactly any phrases which might be displeasing to the ears of the officials.⁴¹

As a matter of fact, an interpreter serving between the Chinese government and the East India Company could earn numerous profits. According to the records of the East India Company, hiring a qualified interpreter was without exception very expensive. “The post of linguistic attached to one of the foreign factories was lucrative in ways that will be understood by one who knows Oriental conditions.”⁴² However, the reason why this became such a lucrative position was based on the difference that local Chinese knew some English while foreigners had little knowledge of Chinese. Chinese interpreters thus became the major mediums of communication between the different parties. Under such conditions, the locals would rather to actively pick up Pidgin English than to teach foreigners Chinese. As Stifler argued, “previous to 1760 the study of the Chinese language by Europeans in China was not actually forbidden but was thoroughly discouraged by the presence of the so-called ‘linguists’ at Canton.”⁴³

An initial step in altering this unequal situation was the endeavor to look for English speakers who knew Chinese to serve the Company as translators, as well as to have employees from the Company learn Chinese. However, neither of these efforts can be considered to have been very successful. James Flint was brought in his youth to Canton in 1736 by Captain Rigby, who had the purpose of “leaving him in China to learn the language.”⁴⁴ Subsequently, during the 1740s, Flint was particularly employed by the East India Company because of his fame for knowing Mandarin and thus became their most important translator.⁴⁵ In

⁴⁰ Morse, Vol. 3, 7.

⁴¹ Ibid., 31.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Stifler, 48.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ See Morse, Vol. 1, 296. “We have directed Mr. James Flint to take passage on the *Tavistock* as Linguist to all out Supra Cargoes in general, and to assist in our affairs as occasion offers. ...” Also see Stifler, “Student,” 49. “It was hoped that through this man’s services, direct access to the Hoppo and even to the Viceroy might be regularly substituted for the indirect and unsatisfactory approach by way of the linguists and the Hong merchants, and that through this means a satisfactory basis of trade might take the place of the petty exactions and increasing restrictions which marked conditions at Canton.”

1753, in order to promote the acquisition of the Chinese language, the Company sent two young men (Bevan and Barton) to study Chinese at Canton,⁴⁶ and meanwhile, “teachers recommended by Flint were secured for them and they made good progress in the next two years.”⁴⁷ However, in 1759, dissatisfied with a petition composed by Flint and penned by a Chinese, Hoppo, the Chinese governor-general as customs superintendent, threw Flint into prison in Macao for three years.⁴⁸ Moreover, it is recorded that the man who confessed to have helped Flint write the petition in Chinese was to be beheaded that day for treachery.⁴⁹ As a result, the accusation of “treachery” and the subsequent punishment influenced the attitude of the Chinese teachers greatly. “The Chinese teacher who had been instructing young Bevan and Barton regularly for months was advised not to continue his visits at the Factory.”⁵⁰ In fact, it was especially difficult to find a native to teach foreigners Chinese later on.⁵¹

Therefore, it was the historical circumstances and the impact of the specific “Flint event” that set the essential barriers that prevented foreigners from acquiring the Chinese language. Even if some outsiders were not inclined to follow the practice of using the jargon in their dialogues with local Chinese, because of this life-threatening accusation of “treachery,” it was almost impossible for them to find a stable Chinese teacher. As Williams stated, “the practical effect of the law denouncing as traitors all those natives who dare to teach the language of the ‘central flowery nation’ to outside barbarians, is to interrupt the constant course of study whenever the teacher thinks he is in danger.”⁵² Since there were no textbooks, and few available teachers, the task of learning Chinese was tremendously difficult. According to what Bridgman claimed in his “introduction” in the *Chinese Repository*, till around 1800, there was not even one individual from England or America capable of translating from Chinese into English.⁵³

⁴⁶ Morse, Vol. 1, 296.

⁴⁷ Stifler, 49.

⁴⁸ Morse, Vol. 1, 298.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Stifler, 49.

⁵¹ See Morse, Vol. 2, 209. “With some difficulty the S. and S. Committee found a person who ‘expressed a willingness to engage himself as a teacher of the Chinese Language, and would remove himself for that purpose to Macao.’” However, “At Macao, the teacher refused to come to the Company’s house or even to lodge in its vicinity. ‘It would have been more convenient, could the Master have attended at our house, or provided himself with Lodgings in the neighborhood; but the precaution, which the danger or his undertaking so forcibly prescribes, has induced him to retire to an obscure and distant part of the town.’” Also, “He refused to teach more than three; and declined to accept any payment for his services, being evidently in a state of great fear.”

⁵² Williams, 1836, 430.

⁵³ Bridgman, 1832, 1.

5 To break through jargon: Missionaries' position

Under such circumstances, the effort to acquire the Chinese language was considered to be a basic yet imperative fight for other related interests, such as trading, preaching, and diplomatic communication. The motive of the early Protestant missionaries in approaching Chinese was no longer the strategy of “accommodation,” or the European savants’ searching for the “universal language,” but a claim of right and practice. Trading and preaching both require direct conversations, as Bridgman argued, “the simple object is to meet and treat the Chinese as men—human beings—not celestial, not infernal.”⁵⁴ Shortly after his arrival at Canton in 1830, Bridgman acquired a copy of Robert Morrison’s dictionary and devoted much of his time and energy to learn the Chinese language.⁵⁵ Language ability is essential for distributing books and conversing with individuals, in Bridgman’s point of view, because “very little can be done until considerable proficiency is made in the acquisition of the language; when that is done, something may be attempted.”⁵⁶

Appointed by the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, Samuel W. Williams reached Canton in 1833 and became Bridgman’s assistant. The work was ready to Williams’ hand, not direct preaching, but an indirect one for a missionary, which was setting up a press and engaging in publishing. As Blodget recorded, “a press, sent from America in 1831, had been put into operation early in 1832 under the charge [of] Mr. Bridgman, who then commenced the publication of the *Chinese Repository* of which he was also the Editor.”⁵⁷ Williams thus became the main figure in charge of the press and also assisted Mr. Bridgman in editing the *Chinese Repository* until its end in 1851. During the period, Bridgman and Williams published numerous articles regarding the Chinese government, language, literature, religions and social customs. Although Williams was a bit disappointed by the linguistic situation shortly after his arrival at Canton, he still had a very organized plan in his mind:

Yet we indulge the hope that scholars in this study will increase; and that as

⁵⁴ Bridgman, 1837, 2.

⁵⁵ The complete title of Robert Morrison’s dictionary is: *A Dictionary of the Chinese Language*, in three parts. Part the first, containing Chinese and English arranged according to the keys; part the second, Chinese and English arranged alphabetically, and part the third, consisting of English and Chinese (Macao: Printed at the Honorable East India Company’s Press; London: Published and Sold by Kingsbury, Parbury and Allen, Leadenhall Street, 1815–1823). Records show that Robert Morrison ordered a copy of dictionary from his booksellers in England for Bridgman to facilitate his study of Chinese, see Lazich, 66.

⁵⁶ Lazich, 67.

⁵⁷ Blodget, 216.

they increase, elementary books will be prepared to smooth the way, and induce others to commence. Intercourse will then be put upon a new footing, and as the Chinese become better acquainted with foreigners, they will esteem them more, and be more likely to regard proposed alterations in education and the arts with kindness and attention.⁵⁸

To fulfill this expectation, Williams took on the compilation of language reference books by commencing a work on the Canton dialect entitled *Easy Lessons in Chinese*.⁵⁹ The Chinese title was derived from the content of the book, namely, *Shiji dacheng* 拾级大成 [ten steps to excellence], for the whole course was divided into ten chapters. The design of this book was supposed “to be a work which can be advantageously used by the foreigner in his own country, or on his voyage hitherwards, as well as after his arrival among the people.”⁶⁰ Since there were few Chinese language tutors in one’s “own country” of the time, as well as around the Canton area, the *Easy Lessons in Chinese* was actually positioned as a textbook for self-teaching. The content thus reflects its effectiveness in practical usage. As the title indicated, “ten steps to excellence”, the content of each chapter moved gradually from the basic to the most difficult. Therefore, as the author suggested in the preface, only the last two chapters may need the help of a teacher. It states, however, “if he has learned the previous lessons as thoroughly as he ought, he will no doubt be gratified with the degree of facility with which he can read them.” The first two chapters seem to be most important, for the author believed that the “radicals” and the “primitives” combine to form most Chinese characters.⁶¹ Through mastering the radicals and primitives, one may feel it not so hard to remember the Chinese characters, because the huge amount of characters were catalogued into a much more fixed “system” invented by Williams.⁶²

The term *primitive* reflects Williams’ original perception of the Chinese language. It is meant to indicate the vocal part of a pictophonetic character (*xingsheng zi* 形声字) according to Williams’ definition—though nothing to do with, as he says, “for priority of any sort,” it indeed needs special attention for the sake of future study of a huge amount of characters.⁶³ It is understandable that Williams placed emphasis on the vocal part in view of the teaching conditions at the time. Native Chinese teachers’ pronunciation was particularly

⁵⁸ Williams, 1836, 430.

⁵⁹ The whole title is: *Easy Lessons in Chinese, or Progressive Exercises to Facilitate the Study of That Language, Especially Adapted to the Canton Dialect*.

⁶⁰ Williams, 1842b, i.

⁶¹ Chapter I. “Of the radicals,” and Chapter II. “Of the primitives.”

⁶² Williams, 1842b, i.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 32.

important for foreigners, because in the early nineteenth century, there was no system of orthography based on alphabetic signs. Local Chinese people picked up their dialect from colloquial conversations, and the literati learnt standard pronunciations by referring to traditional rhyming dictionaries (*yunshu* 韵书). Neither of these two ways was easily accessible from the perspective of a foreigner in the 1830s. Therefore, *primitives*, based on which a group of similarly voiced words are interrelated, could help foreign audience remember a set of characters. Comparatively, the idea of “radical” did not receive much attention from the author, for Williams insisted that the way foreigners approached Chinese was quite different than native speakers.⁶⁴

Three years after its publication, *Easy Lessons in Chinese* gained positive comments from his colleagues. Bridgman viewed it as an effective aid to the study of the Chinese language: “The acquisition of this language is not so difficult as many suppose, and no one will fail to acquire ability to speak it, if recourse be had to the proper means; ... and constant practice will very soon give facility in their use.”⁶⁵ The attempt to break through jargon, therefore, was no longer a desire, but a substantial step. As Bridgman further emphasized, “let any one, who is in daily contact with the people or officers of China, lay aside the old ridiculous jargon, and try to speak as the Chinese themselves speak, and the requisite ability to do so will very soon be acquired.”⁶⁶

It was during the 1840s that some essential changes arose. “The triumphant arms of the English have changed all this,” said Caleb Cushing, the American diplomat who came to China in 1843, “the progress of time has given facilities in another respect for the study of Chinese.”⁶⁷ Bridgman also stated in the beginning of his review article that, “necessity, advantage, convenience, and pleasure are all alike every year and month putting forth and urging new claims for studying the language and dialects of the celestial empire.” One example of this, as Bridgman continued, was the news that “a circular from H. B. M.’s foreign office has recently been addressed to all the British consular establishment in China, recommending, especially to the junior members, the assiduous study of the Chinese language, ...”⁶⁸ Under these circumstances, it was expected that “all the ordinary mechanical means of acquiring a foreign language being attainable in regard to Chinese, including as well books as teachers.”⁶⁹

In the Mar. 1842 issue of *Chinese Repository*, Williams provided a brief

⁶⁴ Williams, 1842b, 2.

⁶⁵ Bridgman, 1845, 339.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 340.

⁶⁷ Cushing, 286.

⁶⁸ Bridgman, 1845, 339.

⁶⁹ Cushing, 286.

account of how a great number of diplomats and Protestant missionaries had made progress in the study of the Chinese language.⁷⁰ As for the flourishing studies in Chinese, Williams also credited Samuel Dyer from the London Missionary Society, who “has been much and very successfully employed in manufacturing Chinese metallic types.”⁷¹ It was under Dyer’s assistance that numerous works written in Chinese could be published, not in China, but in Malacca and Batavia, including religious tracts, pamphlets, and bilingual dictionaries. In the July 1842 issue of *Chinese Repository*, an article on “New Works on the Chinese Language” also talked about the type and the print. The author specifically pointed out that the facilities for multiplying reference books had of late years been greatly increased, because the printing fee was getting cheaper. “Twenty years ago, Dr. Morrison’s Dictionary was completed, at an expense of £ 15 000; and all this outlay was made for type, manual labor.... Now, we suppose, one third that sum, or perhaps even a less amount, would suffice.”⁷²

Williams compiled a “List of Works upon China” in the August 1849 issue of *Chinese Repository*, briefly commenting on the works that were published before 1848. By examining the first three sections on “Aids in the Study of Chinese,”⁷³ one can see that more work was done during the 1840s than that of the total done from 1800 to the 1830s. More than twenty works were published in the 1840s, most of which were compiled by the Protestant missionaries in China.⁷⁴ Dictionaries and vocabularies written in two southern dialects, Cantonese and Hokkienese, were also of great importance due to missionaries’ need of direct preaching. Indeed, after the 1840s the challenge to Protestant missionaries to compile a bilingual dictionary was no longer about resources, but about the effectiveness of their works as study aids to the Chinese language.

6 Conclusion

Tracing the origin and circulation of the “jargon” spoken at Canton, the paper has examined how “jargon” became an issue of Sino-foreign communication conflicts in the eighteenth- and early nineteenth-centuries, and how Westerners responded to it. As a *lingua franca* spread extensively in the Canton trade, the so-called “jargon” (a pidgin form of patois) played an essential role as communication tool between Chinese and foreign traders. However, in the eyes of Protestant missionaries who just arrived in China, the normal Sino-foreign

⁷⁰ Williams, 1842a, 158.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Anon, 1842, 388.

⁷³ Sect. I. “Grammars,” Sect. II. “Dictionaries and vocabularies,” and Sect. III. “Dialogues and other philological works.”

⁷⁴ Williams, 1849, 404–406.

contact process was interrupted and distorted by both parties' overusing of the jargon. Previous research put much emphasis on missionaries' role in the study of Chinese language, and this paper helps clarify at least one reason why they made their initial efforts.

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