

Chinese Pidgin English

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Introduction

Chinese Pidgin English (CPE), as one the oldest English-based pidgins, evolved in the early eighteenth century from Hong Kong and spread to mainland China in the nineteenth (Holm, 1989). Up to now, CPE has almost disappeared due to the development of English education across China. Although it reads as ‘Chinese Pidgin’, but the major resource comes from Cantonese, the usage of which is restricted to Guangzhou Province and Hong Kong district. This essay aims to collect and summarize representative theories: Chinese Pidgin English in Hong Kong and mainland China, Chinese Pidgin English in California, and Chinese Pidgin English development after wars. CPE, as a communication tool for Chinese immigrants to foreign countries, also reflects the social status and cultural identity of the specific historic period. Its influence on the novels, films, and other cultural forms could also prove the origin of the CPE and the views from listeners of CPE.

The origin of Chinese Pidgin English

Before going into the origin of Chinese Pidgin English, it is noticeable to look at the origin of the term “pidgin”. According to the Oxford English Dictionary pidgin is a ‘Chinese corruption of English business’, but it come from Cantonese rather than mandarin Chinese. This leads the researchers of Chinese pidgins’ origin to the birthplace of international trading in the beginning of industrialization during which time the world map was reshaped dramatically. One theory of the evolvement of CPE dated back to the early eighteenth century in Canton (Holm, 1989). CPE firstly served as a trade language between Cantonese speakers and English speakers in Hong Kong, therefore the developing environment was largely bilingual rather than multilingual setting in many other pidgin languages (Bisang, 1985). As the invading of western countries proceeded to mainland China, CPE followed the population and spread into Shanghai and southeast China where ports and business became active.

The limitation of related research was rather obvious in lack of resources and a one-sided perspective from the English side. As the result of a multilingual situation, the bilateral relationship of both languages was of more significance from a sociolinguistic perspective. As much flawed and incomplete as CPE was, it served as the bridge for communication in the beginning of social and cultural interaction. The actual speakers of CPE did not have the awareness of their barriers, nor the access for further education of both languages, leaving a research gap in terms of qualitative studies such as individual learner differences. For future studies, it would be worth digging into the pragmatics of CPE and to what level of politeness could CPE convey since it was mainly applied in service industry.

Chinese Pidgin English in California

The reason that CPE in the US has a different resource from CPE in China is due to the limited spreading evidence of CPE. As Tryon et al (1996) pointed out that the proportion of the Chinese population had a wide range of localities speaking CPE, but without supporting evidence, it cannot be assumed that the Chinese who settled in many different places throughout the Greater Pacific area from the mid-19th century were CPE-speakers. However, according to Holm (1989), CPE-speakers, or pidgin-speaking Cantonese, did emigrate to American cities like Hawai’i and California without concrete evidence from reliable resources. The following section aims to discuss the connections between California CPE and CPE and the credibility of relevant researches.

To discuss Chinese pidgins in California, it is inevitable to look back into the Chinese American history. Based on the existing telegrams, literature, and legal papers the researcher Kim (2007) could conclude that at least in 19th century some Chinese immigrants spoke an English-based contact language with features strongly reminiscent of Pacific English pidgins, including CPE. To prove the connections between California CPE and CPE, Kim (2007) raised awareness of eleven linguistic features from Dressler’s (1927, in Kim, 2007) Downieville’s telegram, Ah Jake’s trial court record, and Baker and Mühlhäusler’s (1990) analysis of CPE linguistic features. The result showed that seven out of eleven linguistic structures were widely distributed in many pidgins and creoles around the world including

CPE. The same result was also supported by Baker and Huber's (2001) research on lexical aspect of English-based varieties of pidgins and creoles.

The conclusion that Kim (2007) achieved was California CPE might be a variety of CPE that had developed independently to the specific region of California by the late 1870s. The base of CPE was undeniable in the sense that CPE speakers from Hong Kong and Guangzhou area was the model for peer immigrants who did not have any knowledge about English or CPE. However, as far as California CPE had a richer source and more interaction with the English-speaking community than CPE in China, the contact language was influenced greatly by the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882. The authority and residents banned Chinese immigrants from working and living in rural areas across American. Besides, with the growing awareness of standard English from the second generation of immigrants, the use of California CPE was reduced to minimal under such conditions.

Related researches had shown the characteristics of California CPE and its connection with CPE in China. The statistics and transcripts from authorities supported the partial independence of CCPE but could not prove the influence from Pacific Pidgin English. For further study, it would be worth looking into the interaction between CCPE and American English, and its social and cultural influences of Chinese immigrant identity formation. Besides, in a family unit, American born second and third generations could have a connection to the CCPE used by the first generation of Chinese immigrants. A qualitative research based on interviews could find out details about CCPE for future reference.

Contemporary 'Chinese Pidgin English' or 'Chinglish'

As the information generation has arrived with the wide spread of internet, languages are changing faster than ever in history. The rise of 'Chinglish' has attracted researcher's attention from both positive and negative perspectives. In order to discuss further aspects of 'Chinglish', it is worth to find out the definition of pidgins and to which category this variety fits in. Wardhaugh's (2006) definition for pidgin includes three characters: 1. a language with no native speakers, a contact language; 2. the product of a multilingual situation; 3. the speakers must find or improvise a simple code to enable communication. In Chinglish's case, it meets the first condition but not the other two. Because Chinglish is used more for amusement within Chinese-speaking community and the comprehension of Chinglish vocabulary and grammar is based on the understanding of Chinese. Therefore, although it is derived in a bilingual situation, the speaker and listener communicate with a monolingual background.

With the popularity of growing Chinglish on the Internet, some phrases have been accepted by language learning references such as Urban Dictionary and Oxford English Dictionary (OED). In 2013, the phrase 'no zuo no die' became one of the top ten most cited phrase in China and Urban dictionary took it in the next year. The key Chinese word to understand this phrase is 'zuo', which came from mandarin Chinese meaning 'asking for trouble'. It basically means 'one would not be in trouble has one not asked for it' (Urban Dictionary). The syntax follows word-to-word translation order as CPE phrase 'no can no do'. Another example would be the phrase 'add oil', a direct translation from 'jia you' which actually originated in Cantonese 'ga yau'. It was taken in OED in 2018, meaning encouragement, incitement, and support, and Chinese often speak it loudly in games and competitions. Pinkham (2000), pointed out that Chinglish had a strong Chinese character and could not be used in formal communication, and it derived from the Chinese cultural background, aiming for communication between Chinese speakers with a shallow understanding of English.

The present paper does not identify Chinglish as a Chinese Pidgin English due to its lack of necessity to communicate in a multilingual situation. Besides, the purpose of development and target listener of CPE varied from that of Chinglish. The most important factor in Chinglish study is that it has not reached to a stable stage with a certain number of users and corpus to conclude any rules. The present paper would be looking forward to seeing the development Chinglish in every decade with the growing influence to international cultural diversity.

Conclusion

In general, CPE represents a period of language evolvement in that specific historical and cultural background, witnessing the flexibility and adaptability of languages as a communication tool. And Chinese Pidgin English was not a stable language that did not change over time. Its influence had spread across the world along with the immigrated CPE speakers. California CPE proved the spreading and evolvement

of CPE from China to the specific part of the US. While there is still room for discussion about the evolvement of CPE in the eastern coast of the US such as New York and Massachusetts state where the oldest China town was developed. Although CPE is not in practical use anymore, the study of it could serve as a reference for the future development of pidgins and creoles in terms of linguistic, cultural, identity formation, and sociolinguistic aspects. However, Chinglish, as part of China's contribution to the diversity of international cultures and civilization, worth studying and close attention due to the rapid changing pace through internet and globalization. It might decide the national image and international impression on how the Chinese communicate with the world.

Reference:

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