

A Study on the Comprehension of the Trade Language between Chinese and Barbarians

Yu Deying

School of Foreign Languages, Zhaoqing University, Zhaoqing, Guangdong, China
825399649@qq.com

Keywords: Chinese character annotation, conversational textbook, Cantonese English, content of the textbook, features of compilation, the Red-Haired Barbarians' Talk

Abstract: *The Comprehension of the Trade Language Between Chinese and Barbarians* is the first conversational English textbook that uses Cantonese dialect to annotate the pronunciation of English. Its compilation style follows *the Red- Haired Barbarian Talk* published in Guangzhou in the 1830s, which only lists Chinese original words and uses Chinese characters to annotate English pronunciation, without recording the original English words; In terms of textbook content, it mainly focuses on English vocabulary and sentences commonly used in trade, and its length greatly exceeds that of *the Red- Haired Barbarian Talk*; In terms of textbook features, it is an English conversational textbook based on the grammatical framework of the Cantonese dialect. Compared with other Chinese- character-annotated English textbooks compiled in the same period, the compilation level of *the Comprehension of the Trade Language Between Chinese and Barbarians* is not high, but it truly shows the whole picture of the "Cantonese English" textbook at that time, laying the foundation for the compilation and dissemination of the "Chinese Pigeon English" textbook.

1. Introduction

The Comprehension of the Trade Language Between Chinese and Barbarians is a conversational textbook that uses Cantonese dialect to annotate English pronunciation. Influenced by traditional cultural concepts of the distinction between Chinese and foreigners, the Chinese habitually referred to the British as "Red-Haired Barbarians", or "Red-Haired Ghosts in the early and mid-Qing Dynasty." The language they spoke naturally became known as "Barbarian Speech," "Red-Haired barbarian Speech," or "Red-Haired Ghost Speech," and their written language was called "Barbarian Script," or "Ghost Script."

As early as in the 1830s, this type of "Red-Haired Ghost Speech" textbook began to circulate in Guangzhou. In 1837, American missionary Samuel Wells Williams published an article in *the Chinese Repository*, introducing a vocabulary book titled *Common Phrases for Red-Haired Barbarian Trade*. In 1996, Zhou Zhenhe, professor of Fudan University published an article titled *Ghost Talk, Commonly Used Phrases of Chinese-English Language and Others*, marking the beginning of domestic research on self-compiled English textbooks in China[1]. In 1998, an article titled *A Search for Interpretation of Red-Haired Barbarian Speech* was published in the journal of

Guangdong Social Science, introducing a very special English textbook that contained fewer than 400 words[2]. In this textbook, there is no occurrence of English letters or words, where English pronunciation was transcribed in the Cantonese dialect. Professor Zhou Zhenhe recorded the full text of *the Red-Haired Barbarians' Speech* and attempted to interpret the original English words transcribing in Chinese characters, thereby restoring and displaying the appearance of English at that time to some extent[3]. Subsequently, a series of related studies appeared, such as those by Zhou Zhenhe, namely *Translation and Explanation of the Manuscript of "Red-Haired Barbarian Speech" in the British Library* [4]. Wu Yixiong mentioned *the Common Phrases Used by the Red-Haired Barbarians* in the article named "Canton English" and Sino-Western Interactions before the Mid-19th Century[5]. Zou Zhenhuan carried a study on the Compilation and Influence of Early 19th Century Cantonese Commercial English Textbooks, referring to several textbooks relating to the red-haired ghost Speech[6]. Gu Weixing interpreted of the largest early published Chinese English phrasebook named *Chinese and English Vocabulary Part One* [7] and explained the historical evolution of the Chinese Pigeon English[8]. Han Lina carried out a study on *the English-Chinese Translation*, the earliest-compiled Chinese-English phrase book in China[9]. Subsequently Huang Xingtao furthered Han's study by exploring the origin of the compilation of the book[10]. Mo Zaishu investigated *the Origin of Business English Teaching in Late Qing Dynasty*, where the *Comprehension of the Trade Language Between Chinese and Barbarians* was first mentioned[11]. In *the Research on the History of English Education in China*, Cui Chunhua analyzed the origin of the "red-haired ghost speech"[12], Sun Guangping made a synthetic account of the development of English textbooks in the Late Qing Dynasty[13]. And Chen Jianlin compiled a series of book named *History of Foreign Language Textbooks in China* and had a brief review of the English textbook that uses Cantonese dialect to annotate the pronunciation of English[14]. These scholars published articles from different academic perspectives, conducting research on certain self-compiled English textbooks, providing the world with a window for understanding the English textbooks compiled by Chinese.

2. The Compilation Style of the *Comprehension of the Trade Language Between Chinese and Barbarians*

Recently, the author discovered a book titled *the Comprehension of the Trade Language Between Chinese and Barbarians* in the collection of the National Digital Library of China, the compilation style of which is similar to *the Common Phrases for Red-Haired Barbarian Trade compiled in 1830s*, but much larger in volume. The book was published in 1858, the eighth year of the reign of the Chinese emperor Xianfeng in Qing Dynasty, with no related information about the author or editors. It is divided into two volumes, with 31 leaves (each leaf equivalent to 2 pages) in the first volume and 31 leaves in the second volume, totaling 62 leaves (124 pages). Its cover is dark brown, with no text message on it. From the title page, we know that the book is entitled *the Comprehension of the Trade Language Between Chinese and Barbarians* in English. The characters of the title is printed in the middle of the page, with the date "Newly Engraved in the Eighth Year of Xianfeng" at the top left corner, and the publisher's information, "Provincial Capital Jingtang Collection," at the bottom left. To the right of the title, it reads "Includes Weights and Measures of Various Countries and Ghost Characters."

In terms of content, the first volume mainly consists of categorized vocabulary, including "Foreign characters, foreign numbers, weights and measures of various countries, numerical categories, weight and measurement categories, uncategorized words (including personal titles, country names, place names, trade names, body parts, months, days of the week, time, etc.), animal categories, silk and satin categories, medicinal herbs, precious metals, clothing, bamboo and wood

utensils, colors, tools, glass, miscellaneous goods names (including various waters, oils, leathers, ships and their parts), goods, other miscellaneous characters," etc. The second volume starts with "Correct Pronunciation of Foreign Phrases, Volume Two," consisting of commonly used "trade phrases," generally arranged from short to long sentences, with some as short as three characters and others as long as a dozen or more.

Regarding text layout, *the Comprehension of the Trade Language Between Chinese and Barbarians* follows the traditional Chinese reading habit of arranging text from top to bottom, and right to left. In terms of Chinese phonetic notation, it continues the practice of *the Common Phrases for Red-Haired Barbarian Trade*, using the Cantonese dialect to annotate English pronunciation, without any instructions for pronouncing the Chinese phonetic characters. Only large and small font sizes are employed to distinguish between Chinese vocabulary and phonetic characters. In terms of page layout, each leaf consists of 22 columns of text, with three entries per column in the first volume and two entries per column in parts of the second volume, where longer sentences occupy one entry per column; each entry consists of "original Chinese word" and its corresponding "phonetic character" representing the English pronunciation. The original Chinese word is set above, with the phonetic character below.

3. The Content of *the Comprehension of the Trade Language Between Chinese and Barbarians*

Generally speaking, the content of *the Comprehension of the Trade Language Between Chinese and Barbarians* can be divided into the following three categories.

3.1. The Western Letters and the Conversion of weights and measures between Western Units and Chinese Ones

The so-called "western letters" refer to the Roman alphabet. Although none of the words in *the Comprehension of the Trade Language Between Chinese and Barbarians* are recorded with their corresponding English scripts, the first page lists twenty-eight "western letters," which are actually only 27 Roman letters, including 26 English letters, each labeled with its pronunciation in Chinese characters. The identity of the other letter is still under investigation. It is particularly noteworthy that these letters are not arranged in the alphabetic order of any European language, making it quite unique. Below the letters are Arabic numerals alongside Chinese numerals from "one to ten," as well as the fractions "twelfth, half, and third". It is likely due to the recent introduction of Arabic numerals into China, hence they emphasized the special comparison and publication of both numeral systems.

The bottom half of the first page and the second page of the first volume cover "Conversion of Weights and Measures from Various Countries to Chinese Units," introducing the commonly used metric units from countries such as France, Netherlands, Sweden, Denmark, Portugal, the United States, and the Great Britain. This includes the mutual conversion among units like "pounds, quarts, yards, inches," etc., and how they convert to Chinese units. This represents one of the earliest textbooks on the conversion between Chinese and Western metric units, holding significant importance in cross-cultural communication between China and the western nations.

3.2. The Common Vocabulary Related to Trade

The first volume of *the Comprehension of the Trade Language Between Chinese and Barbarians* organizes frequently used vocabulary in the trade process into 15 heads based on the method of "semantic clustering."

The head of Number introduces the English pronunciations of 220 numerals, including numbers

from 1 to 500,000. For example, the English transliteration for "one hundred, one thousand, ten thousand, one hundred thousand and five hundred thousand" are transliterated into Cantonese dialect.

The head of Weights and Measures includes 36 terms related to units of Chinese measurement such as "cattee, tael, candrin, yard, inch, piece, etc." It is worth noting that the English transliteration for "a foot", a metric unit in English is transcribed in Chinese character was "one leg". Actually, there are two folds of meanings of 'foot' in English: one is "foot, a unit for measure " and the other is "foot, part of human body." Here, the author did not opt for a transliteration but translated it as the meaning of former," indicating that the meaning of latter was less commonly used at that time or possibly due to the author's limited English proficiency.

Following the head of "Weights and Measures", the vocabulary is not explicitly categorized, yet it can be seen that they are organized based on meaning, including 83 personal titles, 63 country names, place names, and professional titles, 33 body parts, 12 months, 7 days of the week, and 22 time-related terms.

The head of "Animals and Poultry" includes 57 terms. Despite being named after animals and poultry, the terms encompass not only animal and poultry names but also meats, aquatic products, insects, and fruits and vegetables, such as "pig fat, fatty pork, lean meat, mosquitoes, butterflies, white eels, shrimps, crabs, mangoes, pomelos, persimmons, cucumbers," etc.

The head of "Herbal Medicine" includes 34 terms, such as "clove, cardamom, cinnamon bark, camphor, bezoar, rhubarb, musk," etc. The number of medicinal terms found in this book is twice of that in the book entitled *Commonly Used Phrases of Chinese-English Language* compiled by Ziqing, a Chinese author, in 1855. These herbs are frequently used in traditional Chinese medicine, and their translation into English plays a role in spreading Chinese culture abroad to some extent.

The head of "Jewelry and Gold & Silver" includes 40 terms covering foreign coins, Chinese coins, pearls, gemstones, and items made of metal, such as "three-needle darts, self-chiming clocks, striking clocks, eight-tone clocks, golden darts," etc.

The head of "Clothing" includes 32 terms covering various types of upper garments, trousers, shoes, hats, socks, towels, quilts, and other small clothing accessories, etc.

The head of "Bamboo and Wooden Ware" includes 24 terms mainly consisting of everyday items made from bamboo and wood, such as "tables, chairs, stools, boxes, beds," etc.

The head of "Colors" includes 34 terms comprising various pigments and color names such as "foreign red, rattan yellow, lead powder, cinnabar, silver beads, red elixir, red, white, black," etc.

The head of "Tools" includes 31 terms mainly comprising tools made of metal, such as "scissors, iron chains, hammers, axes, hand saws, large knives, small knives, Western swords, sickles," etc.

The head of "Glassware" includes 20 terms mainly consisting of items made from glass, such as "glass cups, glass plates, glass balls, glass bottles, glass jars, telescopes, glasses, mirrors," etc.

Among the unclassified heads, there are 2 words related to "water," 11 related to "oil," 15 related to "leather," and 39 related to "ships and their parts."

The head of "Goods" includes 167 terms mainly related to various miscellaneous goods associated with import and export trade, including aspects like "foodstuffs" and "daily necessities."

There are a total of 824 miscellaneous characters that are difficult to classify, including 364 single-character words and 460 two-character words. The recorded terms are primarily verbs and adjectives, laying the foundation for sentence construction in the "Trade Phrases" collected in the second volume of *the Comprehension of the Trade Language Between Chinese and Barbarians*.

3.3. The Phrases and Sentences Related to Trade

The second volume of *the Comprehension of the Trade Language Between Chinese and*

Barbarians is composed of commonly used trade phrases and sentences. They are organized from short phrases to long sentences based on the number of Chinese characters, with a total of 947 phrases and sentences, among which there are 457 three-character phrases or sentences, 108 four-character phrases or sentences, 85 five-character phrases, and 225 phrases or sentences with six characters or more. The content covers various common expressions in different trade scenarios, such as greetings between parties during the buying and selling process, inquiring about goods, describing products, asking prices, quoting prices, bargaining, payment methods, packaging, loading, shipping, measuring goods, sailing, picking up goods, signing documents, and trade ethics, providing a comprehensive range of topics.

4. The Compiling Characteristics of the *Comprehension of the Trade Language Between Chinese and Barbarians*

Based on the compilation style and main content of *the Comprehension of the Trade Language Between Chinese and Barbarians*, several notable characteristics can be included as follows.

4.1. The Largest Volume of the Red-Haired Barbarian Speech ever found Nowadays

As early as in the 1830s, a series of "Red Haired Barbarian Speech" textbooks were published in Canton, with different versions. However, the most widely circulated version among the public typically contained only 16 pages, with a vocabulary of about 400 words, and not a single script of English word appeared throughout the entire book. In 1837, American missionary Samuel Wells Williams mentioned *Red Haired Barbarian Speech* in an article published in *the Chinese Repository*, which says: "In previous records concerning the methods commonly used by Chinese people to learn spoken English, we have referenced some manuscript glossaries that frequently appear in their hands, compiled by individuals according to their own needs. Some of these glossaries are quite substantial, containing more than three thousand words and phrases, which are very valuable for those wishing to learn the patterns of expressions used by locals to describe foreign things." [15] However, existing research literature indicates that the extant textbooks of *Red Haired Barbarian Speech* generally contain about 400 words; according to Professor Zhou Zhenhe, a copy of *Red Haired Barbarian Speech* held at the British Library contains 1407 words [4]. This is still far from the "more than three thousand words and phrases" mentioned by Williams.

The discovery of *the Comprehension of the Trade Language Between Chinese and Barbarians* confirms that Williams' statement was not an exaggeration. According to a preliminary calculation by the author, "this textbook includes a vocabulary of 1860 words, 947 phrases and sentences, plus "Foreign Characters" and "Conversion Tables from Foreign Weights and Measures to Chinese Units," bringing the total number of entries close to three thousand. This makes it the largest-scale "English textbook without English scripts" found to date.

Although entitled *the Comprehension of the Trade Language Between Chinese and Barbarians*, the bottom right corner of the title page is marked with "Includes Conversion Tables from Foreign Weights and Measures to Chinese Units and ghost's Characters," where the term "ghost's characters" reveals the compilers' reluctant attitude towards learning English---a mix of disdain and necessity. This might also explain why the book only uses Chinese characters to annotate English pronunciations without including the original English words.

4.2. An English textbook based on the "Cantonese Grammatical Structure"

As early as in 1836, American missionary Samuel Wells Williams published an article in the *Chinese Repository* discussing the origins, applications, and methods of learning Cantonese English.

He also provided numerous examples of "Canton English," vividly showcasing its profile. However, by using English to present the meanings and phonetic notations of these examples, some of the original flavor of "Canton English" was inevitably lost. Over the past two decades, more and more scholars have included "Canton English" in their academic research, giving it various names such as "jargon," "patois," "Canton English," "Canton Dialect," "broken English," "imperfect English," "Pidgin English," "Pigeon English," or CPE (Chinese Pidgin English)." Domestic scholars generally use corresponding transliteration or conceptual translation terms, commonly referred to as "Guangdong English," "Canton English," "Business English," "Pidgin English", etc. Additionally, some early compiled "Canton English" textbooks are referred to as "barbarian language," "red-haired speech," "foreign speech," "ghost language," "salty water English," etc. Both domestic and international scholars have quoted some examples of "Canton English" in their researches to some extent, revealing its pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammatical features but failing to present a comprehensive picture.

The book of *the Comprehension of the Trade Language Between Chinese and Barbarians* showcases what authentic "Canton English" is like. This textbook includes 1,860 words and 947 sentences, from words to phrases, and then to sentences. Apart from using Chinese characters to annotate English pronunciations, it retains the linguistic framework of Cantonese to the greatest extent possible.

Firstly, the characteristics of Canton English is reflected in the transliteration of the English words. For example, this book includes vocabulary from more than ten categories and words representing "people" best reflect the characteristics of "Canton English," which is to add a "man" at the end following Chinese customs. For example, the Chinese words for "the rich," "the honest," "the wise" "the cunning" and "the beggar" are translated into "rich man," "honest man," "wise man," "cunning man," and "beg man," respectively.

Secondly, the characteristics of Canton English is revealed in the use of phrases or sentences. Almost all phrases consisting of more than two Chinese characters are directly translated word-by-word according to Chinese thinking logic, especially those expressing "affirmative" and "negative" meanings, clearly reflecting the mindset of "Canton English" in *the Comprehension of the Trade Language Between Chinese and Barbarians*. For instance, the Cantonese "to have" and "not to have" are translated into "have get," and "no get" in Cantonese English respectively. There more examples like "afraid" and "not afraid", "same" and "no same," "can do" and "no can do", and so on.

It is evident that when expressing negative meanings, "Canton English" completely ignores the use of auxiliary verbs in English and disregards the issue of word order in English. This expression method is even more pronounced in the second volume of *the Comprehension of the Trade Language Between Chinese and Barbarians*, where every sentence is expressed entirely according to "Chinese mindset of expression", completely ignoring the word order issue in English. The following are some examples of three-character, four-character, five-character, and six-character-plus phrases in the "trade language" section, including their original sentences, phonetic notations, and corresponding interpretations. For example, "what do you want" is transcribed into "want what goods". "where to get it" is transcribed into "what place find," "Forget it if you don't want it" is transcribed into "no want let run," "How much silver did you sell" is transcribed into "you go come can sell how much money," and so forth. It is clear that the phrases and sentences included in *the Comprehension of the Trade Language Between Chinese and Barbarians* completely overlook English grammar rules such as "sentence tense, subject-verb agreement, verb collocation, singular and plural forms of nouns, sentence order," etc. Instead, they follow the thinking and word order of Cantonese, using Chinese characters to mark the corresponding English pronunciation one by one, making it the largest-scale and most distinctively

"Cantonese- flavored" Chinese-style English textbook seen to date..

5. Conclusion

Compared to other Cantonese English textbooks published around the same time, such as *Chinese and English Phrases*, *English Pronunciation Guide*, and *Complete English Collection*, the 1858 edition of *the Comprehension of the Trade Language Between Chinese and Barbarians* falls significantly short in terms of standardizing the English language. The reason behind this is that the compilers of both *Chinese and English Phrases* and *Complete English Collection*, named Ziqing and Tang Tingshu respectively, had received many years of formal English education at missionary schools founded by foreigners, resulting in a relatively high level of English proficiency. Therefore, the English sentences used in their textbooks are closer to native English. In contrast, *the Comprehension of the Trade Language Between Chinese and Barbarians* does not list an author's surname, only bearing the name of a publishing house of Provincial Jingtang Edition. Its compilation style is very similar to *the Red- Haired Barbarian Talk* engraved in the 1830s, with the content and English expression methods being highly "Cantonese-ized." It is presumed that the author, like those of *English Interpretation* and *Foreign Barbarian Talk*, was a comprador from Guangdong's Thirteen Hong who had not received any formal English education. Instead, they transliterated English vocabulary learned through daily trade interactions into Chinese characters and expressed them according to Cantonese dialect thinking, thus creating a Chinese character-based English textbook consisting of 3,000 entries.

It is evident that *the Comprehension of the Trade Language Between Chinese and Barbarians* represents the accumulated wisdom of generations of Canton compradors over hundreds of years. During the intercourse of Sino-Western trade, they gradually amassed some English vocabulary, evolving from initially dozens of orally transmitted English words to several hundred Cantonese-accented English vocabulary textbooks, and finally into a conversational textbook comprising up to three thousand English words and sentences. Each stage of development embodies the sweat and intelligence of the Canton people. Therefore, by compiling these words into sentences and creating an "English textbook with Chinese mindset", regardless of their level of English proficiency, it is deserving of admiration from future generations.

Samuel Wells Williams once mentioned in *the Chinese Repository*, "The Chinese are reluctant to learn English from foreigners. They learn English through interacting with foreigners, using English vocabulary books compiled by Chinese, or consulting local teachers." [16]. In the 1850s, a foreigner in China noted in his work that a Chinese comprador filled his ledger with dense ideograms and annotated it with a long string of Pidgin English next to it [17]. This indicates that although many missionary schools were established by foreign missionaries in China during that time, enrolling Chinese students and teaching them English, textbooks like *the Comprehension of the Trade Language Between Chinese and Barbarians* which adopted Chinese character transliteration, were still widely used by Chinese English learners at that time.

In conclusion, *the Comprehension of the Trade Language Between Chinese and Barbarians* is a product of early Sino-British linguistic contact. Its compilation style, teaching content, and method of transliteration laid the foundation for the creation and dissemination of "Pidgin English" textbooks in Shanghai, Ningbo, and other places.

Acknowledgement

This work was supported by

Research and Practice Project on Promoting High-Quality Development of Basic Education through the Construction of New Normal University in Guangdong Province—Research and

Practice on Improving the Information Literacy of Middle School English Teachers from the Perspective of Educational Digitalization (Certified by Guangdong Education Department in 2023, No. 29, Item 34)

References

- [1] Zhou Zhenhe. *Ghost Talk, Hua Ying Tong Yu and Others* [J]. *Reading*, 1996, (03): 131-139.
- [2] Zhou Zhenhe. *Explanation of "Hong Mao Fan Hua"* [J]. *Guangdong Social Sciences*, 1998, (04): 148-149.
- [3] Zhou Zhenhe. *The Earliest Collection of Words in Yangjingbang English in China* [J]. *Guangdong Social Sciences*, 2003, (01): 77-84.
- [4] Zhou Zhenhe. *Translation and Explanation of the Manuscript of "Hong Mao Fan Hua" in the British Library* [J]. *Jinan History Studies*, 2005, (00): 333-353.
- [5] Wu Yixiong. *"Canton English" and Sino-Western Interactions before the Mid-19th Century* [J]. *Modern History Research*, 2001, (03): 172-202+1-0.
- [6] Zou Zhenhuan. *Compilation and Influence of Early 19th Century Cantonese Commercial English Textbooks* [J]. *Academic Research*, 2006, (08): 92-99+151+148.
- [7] Gu Weixing. *Interpretation of the Largest Early Published Chinese English Phrasebook in China - "Hua Ying Tong Yong Za Hua Part One"* [J]. *Journal of Jiangxi Normal University (Philosophy and Social Sciences Edition)*, 2007, (04): 126-131.
- [8] Gu Weixing. *Historical Evolution of "Chinese Style English"* [J]. *Foreign Languages and Their Teaching*, 2008, (07): 11-15.
- [9] Han Lina. *Study on "English-Chinese Translation"* [D]. *Jilin University*, 2008.
- [10] Huang Xingtao. *Compilation of "English Translation" and the Issue of the "Western Hall"* [J]. *Jianghai Academic Journal*, 2010, (01): 150-159.
- [11] Mo Zaishu. *Investigation into the Origin of Late Qing Business English Teaching* [D]. *Hunan University*, 2012.
- [12] Cui Chunhua. *Research on the History of English Education in China* [M]. *Dalian: Dalian Maritime University Press*, 2012.12.
- [13] Sun Guangping. *Research on the Development of English Textbooks in the Late Qing Dynasty* [D]. *Zhejiang University*, 2013.
- [14] Chen Jianlin. *History of Foreign Language Textbooks in China Volume I* [M]. *Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press*, 2023.08.
- [15] Samuel Wells Williams. *The Chinese Repository* [M]. *Maocao: Vol. VI. from May 1837 to April 1838: 276-278.*
- [16] Williams, Wells Samuel. *The Chinese Repository* [M]. *Canton: Printed for the Proprietors, Vol.6, from May 1837 to April 1838, Vol. VI. 1838: 279.*
- [17] Muter, Mrs. *Travels and Adventures of an Officer's Wife in India, China, and New Zealand. Vol. I.* [M]. *London: Hurst and Blackett*, 1864: 321.