

Exploring the Aesthetic Appeal of ‘China English’ Narration in Xiaolu Guo’s A Concise Chinese English Dictionary for Lovers

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Abstract:

This paper explores the aesthetic appeal of "China English" narration in Xiaolu Guo’s A Concise Chinese English Dictionary for Lovers, focusing on how interlanguage functions as both a narrative device and a means of cultural expression. Guo employs a hybrid form of English, reflecting the protagonist Zhuang’s evolving language proficiency, to authentically capture her experience as a Chinese woman navigating life and love in the UK. By analyzing the linguistic creativity and intentional use of "broken English," the study demonstrates how Guo’s stylistic choices foster empathy, authenticity, and a unique literary voice. The paper further examines rhetorical techniques, such as metaphor and personification, and the integration of Chinese cultural elements, which together enhance the novel’s emotional and aesthetic impact. Drawing from interlanguage theory, this study reveals how the linguistic hybridity in Guo’s novel challenges conventional language norms and boundaries, deepens intercultural resonance, and highlights the beauty that emerges from the fusion of languages. Although this study focuses on a single fictional example, developing an appreciation for the aesthetics in this China English classic may serve as a key to unlocking more promising possibilities in an increasingly intercultural and multilingual literary landscape.

Keywords: interlanguage, China English, linguistic creativity, cultural identity

1. Introduction

The uniquely and courageously written diary-style novel, "A Concise Chinese English Dictionary for Lovers" by Xiaolu Guo, has garnered immense praise for its linguistic novelty and captivating narrative. Published in 2007, the book fictionalizes China English as the language spoken by the main female character, Zhuang. The story follows Zhuang, a Chinese girl who initially travels to the UK to learn English but unexpectedly develops a romantic relationship with a British man. As the love story unfolds, the language of the book, which is also Zhuang’s narrative language, progresses alongside her personal growth and development.

The exceptional success achieved by the author in this book cannot be fully attributed to a single factor. However, the unique linguistic choice adopted by Guo undoubtedly plays a pivotal role and has sparked controversy. Guo deliberately employs "broken English" to vividly portray Zhuang’s initial limited command of the language. This linguistic style serves as a narrative device, illustrating Zhuang’s journey as her English gradually becomes more fluent and "standardized."

As the only known book written in China English at the time, "A Concise Chinese English Dictionary for Lovers" has been the subject of endless debates surrounding its linguistic choice. Some argue about the trustworthiness and reader-friendliness of this "broken English" (Cadwalladr, 2007), particularly considering that the book’s main target audience is native English speakers in the UK. On the other hand, others view it as the key to the book’s success, believing that the true essence of the



story shines through when concerns about the language divide are set aside. Guo herself, in an interview with the Weatherhead East Asian Institute (2020), expressed her intention to create a hybrid voice that transcends linguistic backgrounds.

This hybrid voice, can be alternatively annotated as the “Interlanguage” proposed by Selinker (1972), which depicts an intermediary system formed by individuals when acquiring a second language that exists somewhere between their native language and the language they are learning. Interlanguage is characterized by several linguistic features, encompassing simplified grammar, a restrained vocabulary, and creative language use. This unique creativity in the Chinese-English interlanguage, which is evident in "A Concise Chinese English Dictionary for Lovers," will be further explored in this paper.

The distinctive linguistic approach in "A Concise Chinese English Dictionary for Lovers" has gained significant attention and love from readers of diverse backgrounds. Beyond its well-received love story theme, the book offers an additional layer of authenticity through its unique linguistic style. Reading the book allows readers to embark on a journey with the protagonist Zhuang, experiencing her moments of sadness, happiness, and the challenges of navigating a foreign country. This narrative approach fosters a profound sense of empathy and understanding, enabling readers to intimately connect with Zhuang's thoughts and conversations.

Several papers have delved into the analysis of the linguistic choice of the book and the sociocultural phenomena that underlie it (Hwang, 2012; Sinoimeri, 2021; Oboe, 2013). However, this paper aims to explore the aesthetic side of China English narration in "A Concise Chinese English Dictionary for Lovers" and explore its significance through the lens of interlanguage theory. By meticulously examining the linguistic features and cultural subtleties lurking within the narrative, this study seeks to shed light on the controversies surrounding the book's linguistic selection and deconstruct the profound layers of authenticity and connection that emerge from this distinctive approach. Ultimately, this exploration will not only contribute to a wider comprehension of the intricate relationship between language, culture, and literature but also accentuate the unique beauty that arises from the fusion of languages.

2. The Aesthetic Creativity of China English Narration

According to Carter (2004, 13), linguistic creativity is not limited to exceptional individuals but is an inherent characteristic present in all people. Language serves as a powerful device for practicing creativity in various contexts, including second language (L2) learning and usage (Verde, 2022).

Firstly, L2 learners, who have not fully mastered the target language, often rely on their existing knowledge and resources to express themselves, leading to unconventional language patterns and creative expressions.

Secondly, creativity is an innate aspect of language itself. Despite the finite number of linguistic elements, language users, including L2 learners, can generate an infinite number of novel combinations, surpassing their pre-learned or inputted linguistic knowledge (Chomsky, 1965). Additionally, both pre-existing and newly-created linguistic creations are subject to recreation and reinterpretation as language norms are constantly evolving (Zawada, 2006).



Moreover, when confined to more structured thinking patterns, certain creative uses of language can give rise to poetic expressions that possess aesthetic appeal and evoke vivid imagery.

In the context of "A Concise Chinese English Dictionary for Lovers," the term "China English Narration" refers to the distinct linguistic style employed by the author. This style plays a crucial role in shaping the main character, Zhuang, and narrating her bittersweet life as a Chinese suburban girl in the UK. The interlanguage narration, resulting from the fusion of Chinese and English, reflects the inseparable blend of cultural backgrounds. It is characterized by a unique mix of Chinese idioms, sentence structures, and cultural references within an English framework. This linguistic hybridity contributes to the creation of a narrative voice that resonates with readers on multiple levels.

2.1 Language use and linguistic style

According to Ellis (2016), creativity in interlanguage can be either spontaneous or intentional. Spontaneous creativity occurs naturally when there is a need for communication and the language user is not consciously trying to be creative. In such cases, limited access to linguistic resources, including vocabulary, syntactical structures, and relevant cultural background knowledge, leads to deviations from the rules of the target language. This results in simplifications in various dimensions, such as the omission of articles, auxiliary verbs, and tense morphemes, as well as the omission of content words, which are evident consequences of this kind of creativity.

In this book, it can be observed that there is a mixture of both spontaneous and intentional creativity in the intentionally adopted linguistic style. The choice of China English as part of shaping the character and reflecting the peasant Chinese girl's image demonstrates a spontaneous use of creative language. Moreover, the lines of the book convey the author's ambition to present the character of the Chinese girl as not simply straightforward and simple, but rather as sophisticated in her perception and thoughts about the "New World" and her constant reflections on the values and cultural elements of her home country. The girl is depicted as a struggling yet curious individual, one who is sensitive and constantly engaged in deep introspection. This portrayal of the character, in my opinion, is why the author maintains Zhuang's language creativity throughout the book, even with her "broken English" at the beginning, allowing it to shine through. This forms the basis of this paper, as it aims to explore those moments created by the "Sparkling wit" (CBC Books, 2018), analyzing and interpreting the sophistication within it, which I believe plays a pivotal role in the unique charisma of the book.

2.1.1 Rhetorical expressions

Indeed, the observation highlights that Zhuang's language in the book is abundant in rhetorical expressions, including metaphor, juxtaposition, and personification. The main character, Zhuang, demonstrates exceptional skill in using accurate and inventive rhetorical devices that create vivid mental imagery. This proficiency adds depth and vividness to the narrative, enhancing the reader's experience.

Example 1 – About Drinking Tea

I put scones into mouth, and **drink tea like horse**.

— Confusion Pg9



She drink it in very thirsty way, **like angry camel in the desert.**

— Homesick Pg10

The act of drinking tea in English culture is often associated with refinement and elegance. However, it is rarely compared to something as crude and lacking in refinement as a horse (drinking water) or “angry camel in the desert”. These metaphors evoke vivid mental imagery and offer a unique and imaginative perspective on the tea-drinking experience. Additionally, they inject the description with a delightful sense of playfulness and humor.

Example 2 — About Cinema

Cinema is my paradise. When a person not having any idea about real life, just walk into cinema choosing a film to see.

What crazy films! I not understanding very much the English speakings, but I understand I must never walk in highway at night alone. **The world scary and strange like deep dark dream.**

— Homesick Pg10

In Example 2, the author employs rhetorical expressions and a linguistic aesthetic view to describe their experience with Cinema. By comparing cinema to paradise, a word familiar to the Chinese girl narrator, the author vividly depicts the importance of cinema in her world. This comparison conveys that cinema is not just an escape but also a source of comfort for the lonely girl in a foreign country. The sentence "When walking out of the world the movies create for her, the real world is like a deep dark dream" employs metaphor and simile to contrast the immersive cinematic experience with the harshness and unreality of the outside world. This juxtaposition gives insight into the girl's state of mind, as she struggles to discern between the movie world and the reality around her.

Example 3

Room **smelling old, rotten.** Suddenly **my body feeling old** too.

— Hostel Pg3

Juxtaposition is employed in this example by comparing the smell of the room to a feeling within the body. The room is described as "smelling old, rotten," which creates a vivid sensory image of a space that is dilapidated and decayed. By using the phrase "suddenly my body feeling old too," the narrator connects the physical experience of being in the room with a psychological response, suggesting that the atmosphere of the room affects her on a deeper level. This rhetorical technique of associating the physical condition of the room with the narrator's own bodily sensation adds depth and emotion to the description. It enhances the reader's understanding of the impact that the room has on the narrator's perception and contributes to the overall atmosphere of the scene. The description is brief yet evocative, effectively capturing the essence of the room and its effect on the narrator. The use of sensory language, such as "smelling old, rotten," creates a multisensory experience for the reader, allowing them to imagine the distinct odors associated with an aged and deteriorated room. This imagery adds a layer of realism and sensory immersion to the passage. Additionally, the use of



parallelism in the sentence structure enhances the aesthetic appeal of the description. The repetition of the word "old" creates a sense of rhythm and balance, contributing to the overall cohesion and aesthetic flow of the sentence.

Example 4 — About Men

Maybe I want find man can love me. A man in this country **save me, take me, adopt me, be my family, be my home.**

— Homesick Pg10

I feel a concentrate of love for you, **farmer, sculptor, lover of men, stranger.** Noble man.

— Charm Pg20

Example 5

Every cup different with other, big or small, half new or broken...So everything single, **no company, no partner, no pair.**

— Homosexual Pg13

In both Example 4 and 5, the protagonist demonstrates a narrative tendency towards repetitive parallelism. This technique is utilized to strengthen the overall tone and emotion of the passages, providing a distinct narrative style. What sets this particular form of parallelism apart is its resemblance to a paraphrase structure, rather than the conventional parallelism structures that focus on the progression of meaning within each unit. This deviation can be attributed to the limited vocabulary employed by the protagonist, but it also carries a certain sense of childish purity and innocence.

Example 6 — About Love

My heart **hold a secret to make me warm** at night.

— Homosexual Pg13

The meadow asking us to lie. We rest beside each other. I never do that with a man. **Juice from grass** wetting my white shirt. My heart melting.

— Guest Pg14

Example 6 beautifully utilizes personification to portray the development of romantic feelings in a young girl. The first sentence, akin to the Chinese expression "少女懷春 Shao Nv Huai Chun," delicately captures the secretive musings of a young girl as she daydreams about her beloved man. The second sentence builds upon this theme with even more charm, personifying the meadow as it seemingly invites the couple to lie (down). The description of dew on the grass as "juice" adds vibrancy and vividness to the imagery. The juxtaposition of "wetting" and "melting" not only creates an enchanting interaction between humans and nature but also possesses a sense of intentional or unintentional rhyming, enriching the poetic essence of the language used. It is unclear whether this sense of enchantment, purity, and innocence in the character is inherent to Zhuang's original depiction or if it is a result of the author's skillful linguistic manipulation, enhancing the overall aesthetic and emotional impact of the passage.



2.1.2 Skillfully incorporating Chinese elements

Another aspect that deserves attention in the composition of the book is the recurrent presence of direct or indirect references to Chinese cultural and social elements. This literary technique not only contributes to the development of the main character, Zhuang, as a young girl who instinctively contemplates her homeland amidst her adventures in a foreign country, but also adds a distinct Chinese cultural essence to the narrative. The incorporation of Chinese idioms, proverbs, and cultural symbols creates a poetic and visually captivating experience for the readers. The choice to include such elements reflects a deliberate effort to infuse the narrative with an enriching linguistic aesthetic. Through the juxtaposition of the protagonist's experiences in the foreign country with her reflections on her homeland, the narrative effectively captures the complexities of cultural identity and the sense of displacement. This amalgamation of cultural and linguistic elements creates a multi-layered and nuanced narrative that resonates on both emotional and intellectual levels. Consequently, these references become an indispensable component in shaping the hybrid voice that permeates the story. By adopting a hybrid voice that merges different cultural perspectives, the story becomes a powerful exploration of identity, belonging, and the interplay between different cultural landscapes.

Example 7

The lush next doors trees trying come through rusty iron fence, but nothing getting in this concrete family. This house **like factory place in China, just for cheap labours earning money, no life, no green, and no love.**

— Homesick Pg11

In Example 7 of Zhuang's "Homesick," the author explores the cultural elements by drawing a parallel between a concrete family home and a Chinese factory. Through this juxtaposition, Zhuang vividly captures the absence of life, greenery, and love within the sterile confines of the house, producing an overwhelming sense of alienation and a yearning for meaningful connections. By presenting the house as a microcosm of a dehumanized environment, Zhuang effectively conveys the emptiness that pervades the protagonist's experience.

Example 8

In China we say hundreds of reincarnations bring two peoples to same boat. Maybe you are that people for me to be same boat. I never met mans like you before. I think we perfect: You quite Yin, and I very Yang. You earthy, and I metal. You bit damp, and I a little dry. You cool, and I hot. You windy, and I firey. We join. There is mutualism. And we can benefit each other. And all these makes us efficient lover.

— Charm Pg20

The incorporation of Chinese cultural elements, in Example 8, as well as the use of repetitive sentence structure, create a rich and intriguing narrative. It begins with the introduction of a Chinese idiom that reflects the idea of fate and the serendipitous nature of finding a true partner in life. Additionally, the parallel sentence structure used throughout the paragraph enhances its impact. The repetition of phrases such as You quite Yin, and I very Yang, You earthy, and I metal, You bit damp, and I a little dry, emphasizes the complementary nature of the individuals involved and underscores



their compatibility. The use of concise and condensed units further adds to the strength and intensity with which the girl's eagerness to prove their compatibility and her yearning for love is conveyed. In She seeks connection and affection to alleviate her feelings of loneliness and emptiness, particularly in the context of adapting to a foreign culture. This exploration of personal emotions within the broader cultural framework adds complexity and depth to the narrative, allowing readers to empathize with the character's experiences and desires.

3. Conclusion

In "A Concise Chinese English Dictionary for Lovers," Xiaolu Guo masterfully employs the aesthetic appeal of China English narration to create a captivating and thought-provoking literary experience. By exploring the linguistic creativity of interlanguage within the narrative, the book transcends conventional language boundaries and offers a unique blend of cultural backgrounds. The incorporation of rhetorical expressions, poetic language, and skillful integration of Chinese elements enhances the aesthetic allure of the book, allowing readers to connect with the protagonist, Zhuang, on a deep and intimate level.

The linguistic style adopted by Guo, characterized by "broken English" and a fusion of Chinese and English language patterns, has sparked debates and controversies. However, through a careful analysis of the aesthetic creativity present in the narrative, it becomes evident that this linguistic choice is not only deliberate but also integral to the book's overall impact. The intentional and spontaneous use of creative language reflects Zhuang's journey and her evolving command of the English language. It also provides a rich repertoire of metaphors, juxtapositions, and personification that impart the narrative with vivid imagery and emotional depth.

Furthermore, the incorporation of Chinese cultural and social elements adds an additional layer of authenticity and complexity to the narrative. By seamlessly embedding idioms, proverbs, and symbolic references into the story, Guo creates a poetic and visually captivating experience that explores themes of cultural identity, displacement, and the search for meaningful connections.

This paper has examined the aesthetic appeal of China English narration in A Concise Chinese English Dictionary for Lovers and discussed its significance in relation to interlanguage theory. By analyzing the linguistic features and cultural nuances woven throughout the narrative, we have gained a clearer understanding of the author's linguistic choices, as well as the layers of authenticity and connection that develop from this distinctive approach. This study, while drawing attention to the unique beauty that emerges from the blending of languages, challenges the traditional black-and-white linguistic boundaries and brings innovative perspectives to second language learning and application.

In conclusion, "A Concise Chinese English Dictionary for Lovers" stands as a remarkable example of linguistic innovation and intercultural exploration. Through the aesthetic appeal of China English narration, the book challenges conventional language norms and invites readers to embrace the beauty and complexity of linguistic hybridity. It reminds us that, beyond the surface level of language, there lies a deeper connection that transcends cultural boundaries and resonates with readers on a universal level.



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