

# *A Study of British and American Literary Works from the Perspective of Language Attrition -- Taking the Scarlet Letter as an Example*

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**Abstract:** With the continuous improvement of social economy and daily living standard, the requirements of material life have been greatly satisfied, and while, the more important spiritual aspects are being increasingly pursued. Among all kinds of British and American literary works, not only great practical significance are contained, but also some artistic value can be implied. To study British and American literary works from the perspective of language attrition, we can appreciate the classics from a new angle to edify the sentiment. And through language attrition, we can gain a deeper understanding of the classic works and the corresponding vocabulary and grammar knowledge may also be mastered at the same time. Therefore, this paper first makes a deep analysis of the important factors that influence language attrition, and then, taking *The Scarlet Letter* as an example, puts forward a study of English and American literary works from the perspective of language attrition.

## **1. Introduction**

### **1.1 Culture Atmosphere**

The main reason for the meaning change in the works is the lack of factors to maintain language stability. That is to say, it is because of the lack of a culture atmosphere of the target language and the relative less input of the target language that language attrition is easily appeared when learners reading the works. This is highly consistent with Hirschfelder's cognitive theory, which holds that culture is primarily a causal chain derived from social cognition and that this social cognitive causal chain has many functions. On one hand, it can establish good semantic relations among people; on the other hand, it plays an important role in the expression and management of groups. Therefore, if language learners have more chances to use the target language, it means that they may have an increased opportunity to test the new social cognitive causal chain, get the basic ability to accept other target language input, and better read all kinds of British and American literature even when the basic learning process is finished. Meanwhile, it can also help language learners to improve their ability to use the language, and further resist language attrition. Reading a British or American literary work can not only enable the corresponding language learners to enter a perfect language learning environment, but also effectively prevent language attrition, and it can also help the

language learners to understand the writing background and the meaning of the work.

Take *The Scarlet Letter* as an example. It tells the story of a tragic love affair that took place during the colonial period in North America. The heroine, Hester Prynne, is married to the doctor, Chillingworth, but there is no love between them. Hester Prynne lived alone in New England and fell in love with Dimmesdale, a famous and respected priest in local area. They gave birth to daughter Pearl so Hester was publicly punished, wearing the red "A" for adultery. But she remained steadfast, refusing to reveal the child's father. When Hester Prynne was released from prison, she and her daughter, Little Pearl, survived by Needlework. Little Pearl, with her fair and unworldliness, her strong character, and her abundant energy, shone before the world with the scarlet letter, a symbol of shame in that Puritan Society, but it is also the only brightness in that rigid and gloomy society. There are many classic sentences in *The Scarlet Letter*, and language learners can take the method of reading and reciting to contact the target language, thus minimizing the possibility of language attrition.<sup>[1]</sup>

## 1.2 The Ability of Literacy

Among language skills, output language skills and receptive language skills are two important components. And receptive language skills can be divided into two types, that is, the language user's own reading comprehension and listening ability, while the output language skills are composed of writing ability and oral expression ability. After the corresponding research, it can be seen that the productive skills of reading and writing are relatively resistant to language attrition, while the receptive skills of listening and speaking are more susceptible to language attrition. And comparing to the receptive language skills, the attrition rate of output language skills is faster. Therefore, language learners must pay more attention to the training of reading and writing skills, avoid the problems of language forgetting or degeneration, and improve their writing and reading ability by reading British and American literature<sup>[2]</sup>.

## 2. The Study of the Scarlet Letter

### 2.1 Vocabulary

From the research results of scholars at home and abroad, we can find that in the acquisition of vocabulary, phonetics and Grammar, learners' vocabulary attrition is the most obvious, followed by phonetics and grammar. The main reason for this phenomenon is that the syntactic rule system has a strong attachment morphology, and each phoneme also has a strong closure. In contrast, vocabulary knowledge is trivial and open, which makes vocabulary easy to be eroded. Therefore, language learners must pay attention to the mastery of various kinds of vocabulary knowledge. Syntactic structure is the core of language. If learners can grasp the basic syntactic structure flexibly, they can guarantee their language ability to be more stable. At the same time, language as a more open system is the only way to language varieties, thus, language learners must adhere to lifelong learning to avoid language attrition. In the process of reading British and American literature, language learners already have a basic understanding of the stories that the works describe, and the corresponding vocabulary has formed a corresponding context, so they can better understand the words that appear frequently. For the study of vocabulary, learners should not only master the most basic semantics and usage, but also analyze the prefixes and suffixes of vocabulary through the method of serial memorization. In this way, language learners may really grasp the corresponding vocabulary and better extract various language information.

There is a sentence in *The Scarlet Letter*. "This figure of the study and the cloister, as Hester Prynne's womanly fancy failed not to recall, was slightly deformed, with the left shoulder a trifle

higher than the right.”<sup>[3]</sup>In this sentence, “recall” means “to remember something” “to make somebody think of something” or “to order somebody to return”. The phrase with a similar meaning is “come back”. The root of the word is “call” which means “to ask somebody to come by shouting or speaking loudly” or “to make a short visit to a person or place”.

Another example is the word “overshadowed” in the following sentence. *“This rose-bush, by a strange chance, has been kept alive in history; but whether it had merely survived out of the stern old wilderness, so long after the fall of the gigantic pines and oaks that originally over-shadowed it --- or whether, as there is fair authority for believing, it had sprung up under the footsteps of the sainted Ann Hutchinson, as she entered the prison-door --- we shall not take upon us to determine.”*<sup>[3]</sup>It is the past tense of the verb overshadow which means “to make somebody or something seem less important, or successful” or “to throw a shadow over something”. It is a combination of the words “over” and “shadow”. It can be seen that the main reason for the erosion of vocabulary is that most of the vocabulary is learned in an isolated situation, and there is a lack of connection between the knowledge and it is easy to have the erosion problem. However, by reading the British and American literature, vocabulary learning is not easy to be eroded because of the context in which the words are learned.<sup>[4]</sup>

## 2.2 Grammar

In British and American literature, a close reading of *The Scarlet Letter* reveals a number of grammatical items that, if taken in context, can reduce the chance of abrasion. As early as the 1980s, scholars believe that a theory of Universal Grammar exist in the human brain. It belongs to a unique system of language knowledge, and includes general principles and a set of parameters that work together to form phrases and guide general principles to better operations. From the perspective of Universal Grammar, the process of language attrition is actually a process in which a parameter changes from a marked state to an unmarked state. While reading *The Scarlet Letter* carefully, one can easily find that a number of grammatical items in the classic works. More cases can be found in the literature works. If learners spend time reading those works, the chance of abrasion can be reduced. For example, the following are several sentences from *The Scarlet Letter*.

*Never, sayest thou?” rejoined he, with a smile of dark and self-relying intelligence.”Never know him! Believe me, Hester, there are few things --- whether in the outward world, or to a certain depth, in the invisible sphere of thought --- few things hidden from the man who devoted himself earnestly and unreservedly to the solution of a mystery.*<sup>[3]</sup>In this short passage, there are several grammar items, such as “whether... or...”. In this grammar, “whether... or...” is a positive linguistic situation that can connect two arbitrary juxtapositions and, when connecting two subjects, should follow the basic principle of proximity.

Another example is the inverted sentence. It can be seen in the following sentence. *Had there been a Papist among the crowd of Puritans, he might have seen in this beautiful woman, so picturesque in her attire and mien, and with the infant at her bosom, an object to remind him of the image of Divine Maternity, which so many illustrious painters have vied with one another to represent.*<sup>[3]</sup> In this sentence, when “if” is added at the beginning, “had” should be put after the word “there”. However, in the English articles, “if” is usually omitted, and meanwhile, “had” will be put in at the beginning of the sentence. Such grammar projects abound in *The Scarlet Letter*, and if language learners pay attention to them and practice them, they will reduce the chances of grammatical attrition.<sup>[5]</sup>

## 3. Conclusion

In the process of reading British and American literary works, it can not only further edify the

learners' own sentiment but also achieve the main purpose of practicing the target language while clarifying the western cultural knowledge, and it can not only effectively exercise the learner's reading ability but also reduce the language attrition.

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