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The *Pharmakon* of Second Language Learning in Kipling's *Kim*

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Abstract

The significance of learning and thinking in a second language (L2) reflects the communication strategies, difference, and parallels seen within Rudyard Kipling's novel *Kim*. The main character of the novel, Kim, is caught in the colonial struggle of learning a language that is not his own, with great impact to his identity. Relevant social and cultural context impacts the learners of a second language and the use of their native or second language. Viewed synonymously with British Empire itself within the novel, the English language can be seen as politically, morally, and linguistically destabilizing to the sub-continental languages described in *Kim.* Equally, the many languages of India described in the novel can be seen as infiltrating the English language that Kipling and other British authors like E. M. Forster used to write their colonial-era novels about India. This article is a close reading of the novel, and offers theoretical and pedagogical discussion.

Keywords: Kipling, second-language, pharmakon, identity

Introduction

Kim was a young boy caught up the conflicts that surrounded him. Ideological, class, and language differences kept Kim and other characters within Rudyard Kipling's novel floating in and out of multiple identity constructs. As a colonial novel, like other works seen as critical of the empire by E. M. Forster (1952) and Wilkie Collins (1868), the immediate dichotomy seems to be British versus Indian. However, the complexities, particularly with language in the case of *Kim*, show that the situation is not as simple choosing to use one language over the other. The complexities of language within Kipling's *Kim* indicate that there was an exchange of foreign words or phrases among speakers on both sides, English and Indian. Power differentials greatly impacted the use of certain words, phrases, deferential terms, and slang. Furthermore, power constructs often determined who spoke which language, for what purposes, and when. Hindi and Urdu words influenced the descriptions of the British, and the English language as a *lingua franca* in the colony served as a complex indicator of social, political, and cultural changes occurring at the time. This article is intended to be a close reading of Kipling's *Kim* from a perspective of colonial language use and learning. I will discuss theories related to language learning and pedagogy, and I will also examine the novel from a pedagogical perspective. The novel has much to offer a literature or writing studies classroom as a tool for engaging students in discussions about colonialism, language, power, and identity.

1. Kipling's Own Second Language Learning

Kipling places tremendous importance on the language he uses in *Kim* and the language(s) that the characters speak within the novel. Kipling's repetition of how the main character, Kim, may speak English but thinks in Hindi reflects Kipling's own struggle to remove himself from the Indian language and culture at young age (Jussawalla, 1998). His childhood in India left Kipling with a deep cultural understanding of Hindi.

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"The early years with his *ayah* left an indelible mark on him, making him, like Kim, almost a native who spoke and thought in Hindi" (Jussawalla, 1998, p. 114). Having house staff who speaks a different language from the colonial family impacts the language learning of a child who must learn to navigate both, if not only one functional language. For Kipling, English was the language of his colonial heritage, whereas Hindi was the language people around him worked and functioned in.

From the perspective of language learning theory, second language learners often use certain linguistic structures of their first language as they learn a new language. This concept, known as interlanguage, was coined and explored by Larry Selinker (1972) and addresses how learners transition important ideas and phrases into their new language, sometimes even fossilizing their use of first language structures if it still conveys meaning in their second language (Selinker, 1972; Selinker & Rutherford, 2013). For second language learners, there can be phrases or concepts that need the original language of the speaker to convey a specific cultural or contextual meaning. This kind of interlanguage is seen throughout *Kim* as particular words or phrases are used from one language in the context of another.

The social and cultural context of language greatly impacts second language learners and their use of both their native or second language (Block, 2003; Lantolf, 2006; Prior, 2006). Kipling's heritage as a *sahib*, an Indian term of deference for British colonial upper-class man, is also the moniker that Kim must come to wear and identify with in the context of the novel. This identity construction of a *sahib* was certainly reflected by Kipling's interlanguage word and grammar choices throughout the novel. Kipling's own identity as a writer can be viewed as having both pro and anti Imperialist sentiments (Said, 1993; Scott, 2011). The English language, the language of the *sahibs*, and the language(s) of the subcontinent shows that Kipling understood the challenges of language and identity in the colonial context, while at the same time being a cog in the wheel of colonialism.

With English as the language of colonial power in India, the Indian learners and speakers of the language were not only learning a language that was not their own, but in doing so were being subjected to another identity construct that was not their own. The language dilemma in the colonized subcontinent acts as the same type of social impasse that Frantz Fanon (1967) described with regard to how colonized populations use language. "It is implicit that to speak is to exist absolutely for the other" (Fanon, 1967, p. 17). Although the "other" may be a friend or colleague, when speaking the language of the "other" there is no doubt that speaking for the other creates an identity conflict.

To speak means to be in a position to use certain syntax, to grasp the morphology of this or that language, but it means above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilization. […]. Every colonized people – in other words, every people in whose soul an inferiority complex has been created by the death and burial of its local cultural originality – finds itself face to face with the language of the civilizing nation; that is, with the culture of the mother country. (Fanon, 1967, pp. 17-18). Fanon's description of the place of language within the colonial context mirrors that of *Kim.* The English language, the language of the mother country, creates an identity crisis for the native Indians who must speak it.

The use of inter language, and the potential identity crisis resulting from a loss, change, or imposition of language can be examined through the concept of hybridity. For the colonizing British, "Englishness has often been constructed as a heterogeneous, conflictual composite of contrary elements, an identity which is not identical with itself" (Young 3). This hybridity and multifariousness of being English in India relates specifically to the place of the English language within the colonies. English as a language is divided by the inclusion of non-English words, non-English thought processes, and the non-English speaker trying to assimilate into the English language. Like the hybridity of the English people, a group made of England and its colonies, the language of England reaches far into the lives of both self and other. Just as cultural hybridity has been viewed positively and negatively by theorists and the hybrids alike, linguistic hybridity can and must be seen as *pharmakon* of the colonized people.

As both a cure and a poison, the *pharmakon* is the ideological embodiment of two completely contradictory meanings, particularly for language use and writing (Derrida, 1981; Plato, 2001). Despite the opposed meanings, though, the *pharmakon* must be defined in terms of both meanings because it is the combination and supplementation of each meaning by the other that necessarily creates the definition of *pharmakon*. Similarly, the English language acts as a *pharmakon* within Imperialistic efforts. English both cures the communicative needs of the Indians and English, but in essence poisons the Indian language. Within *Kim*, Kipling uses the *pharmakon* of language to show how the English language has influenced every aspect of the colony. *Kim* highlights the social, political, cultural and moral implications of language. English is used by the Indians to communicate with their colonizers, while the colonizers use their own native English to signify policy and practice. In their inclusion in English texts and actual usage during occupation, meanings of words like *sahib* are constructed in terms of differences or distinction in, also much like the *pharmakon*. Used by the English as a definition of British authority, *sahib* refers to any white man, Irish like Kim, or British. This definition of *sahib* comes by using the word as a symbol of contrast between the British and the Indians. By using the Indians' own word for this sign of domination, the English language is seen as poisoning the language of the native people.

2. In Dialogue with a Sahib

The main character in Kipling's novel of the same title, Kim, an Irish child, is frequently referred to as a *sahib* throughout the text. However, it is the English language that Kim believes will make him truly a *sahib*; "I have learned to read and write a little English at the *madrissah.* I shall soon be altogether a Sahib" (Kipling, 1989, p. 178). Here Kim equates and makes the connection between being a *sahib* and being able to read and write English. Specifically, this is the point when English also ceases to be interlanguage for Kim. He is learning English from a school, or *madrissah.* The school allows Kim to have formal, grammatical knowledge of English, which is something that furthers his move to become a *sahib.*

Kipling's use of interlanguage can be seen in his repeated use of Hindi words in *Kim*. The first evidence of this use of Hindi can be seen in the first sentence of *Kim* as Kipling says that the natives call the Lahore museum *Ajaib-Gher*, or wonder house. Kipling tries throughout the novel to describe places, people and objects just as they would be described in the vernacular of the period. Placing emphasis on certain nouns and adjectives by using the Hindi words is not so different from how translators of modern languages retain words of the original language due to an inability to translate the word effectively without losing some aspect of the meaning. However, with Kipling as both an author of fiction and a journalist, the use of the native words is important for two main reasons. For one, Kipling had extensive knowledge of Hindi from early on allowing him to see the value of knowing both languages for himself, his characters and his text. The second reason that Kipling used the vernacular Hindi is to add dimension to *Kim* in a way that grounds the story in the complex cultural and linguistic diversity of Hindustan. Kipling chose to use the native language of India to reflect his experience and to document the experience of himself, other British in India like him.

Kipling, like Kim, learned Hindi in an informal setting just as the other characters in the novel learned English in an informal setting. The use of interlanguage, or the sporadic inclusion of native words into the second language, whether English or Hindi, for the lack of a correct term, may be seen as a sign of the informal learning settings that produce the second language (Corder, 1981). Like most second language learners, Kipling would have initially used interlanguage as a means of adapting to the languages of both Hindi and English. This interlanguage of his childhood, no doubt became a site of exploration and reflection for Kipling. Feroza Jussawalla argues that Kipling's code switching between English and Hindi is not what Hanif Kureishi calls "the cockney Asian," or "one who cannot speak English well nor his/her native language or culture," but instead says that Kipling must be seen as carrying India with him through his writing (Jussawalla, 1998, p. 116). Kipling chose to retain numerous Hindi words in his text, colorful, cultural words like *pundit* and *kichree* (Kipling, 1989, pp. 71, 231). The interlanguage of the characters in *Kim*, as seen in Kim, Mahbub Ali, the lama, Hurree Babu, Lurgan Sahib and Colonel Creighton indicate the importance of being able to communicate in both communities.

The narrative voice of Kipling describes Kim's language ability in the second paragraph of the novel: "he spoke the vernacular by preference and his mother-tongue in a clipped uncertain sing-song" (Kipling 49). This description of Kim's language says so many things about his background and abilities. The vernacular of course would be Hindi, and he spoke it by preference, indicating that he had a choice of what he wanted to speak. His mother-tongue is English, which he was unable to speak proficiently or with any certitude. Given this comparison, it must be assumed that Kim speaks Hindi with greater skill than he speaks English. The probable reason for his preference of Hindi is that he mainly interacts with the Hindi-speaking population. Kim undergoes several stages of language acquisition within the novel. Of course he begins with an understanding of Hindi, but when he meets his father's old regiment, Kim is urged, forced in fact to become a *sahib*, which includes learning English. After he learns the English of the *sahibs*, Kim undergoes a confusion of the two languages and identities, not knowing when he should or could use each.

The lama is another character in *Kim* who is described in terms of his language abilities. The lama was seen as "talking at railway speed in a bewildering mixture of Urdu and Tibetan" (Kipling, 1989, p. 56). The interlanguage here is not between Hindi and English but Urdu and Tibetan, which is an example of Kipling's use of multiple languages within *Kim.* The "bewildering mixture" of these two languages signifies that the lama is not able to communicate in Hindi with proficiency, but rather he is including words from his native language. The lama's place in *Kim,* is one of singularity. In many ways, the lama is outside of what in "Discourse in the Novel," Mikhail Bakhtin (1981) would label as one of the socially constructed "voices" in *Kim,* but the lama does seem to participate in the "dialogic" flow of the novel. I say he is outside of the social construction because as a Tibetan lama, he is searching for something of his own devise, the magic river, in which process he uses and explores the system of the colony instead of actually becoming a part of it. He does participate in the dialogic, though, as he interacts with the social, political and religious language of the colony in pursuit of his goal.

The dialogic quality of the novel is further repeated in the character of Hurree Babu. Babu's role in this study of language in *Kim* stems from his occupation of a unique place in the novel that Lurgan Sahib points out when he says "I do not understand how *he* [Babu] can wear so many dresses and talk so many tongues" (Kipling, 1989, p. 208). Babu's existence as a spy for the Indian Survey Department forced him to act in the multiplicitous role of Indian, friend, foe, colonial servant and anti-colonial member of *Sat Bhai* (Kipling, 1989, p. 231). Of necessity, Babu speaks English or Hindi, choosing between the languages as a means of communication but also safety. In a discussion with Kim, Babu says that one day he will come dressed as a *Ladakhi* trader, and Kim will not recognize him. It is Babu's ability to shift identity and language that Lurgan Sahib refers to by pointing out the different dress and language that Babu utilizes. Babu even remarks on his language ability saying, "I am only Babu showing off my English to you [Kim]. All we Babus talk English to show off" (Kipling, 1989, p. 231). English, then is a means of "showing off," not to fit in, but to show skill. *Babu* at this time in colonial India was a word, not simply a name, representative of the Indians who could speak English and who tried to fit in with the English or Western culture. Though the word *babu* literally signified respect, the implications for Hurree Babu meant mockery. By putting himself in the category of "all us Babus," Hurree is placing all Indians similar to himself in the category of speaking English only "to show off." Some Indian nationals may have seen *babus* as traitors to the native Indian cause, whereas others would look up to *babus* because of their important status within the colonial government.

Kipling chose to have Hurree Babu call attention to the fact that he uses English to show off. With the English still dominating India at this time, an inside job makes Babu an Indian character of interest for readers back home in England. As someone passing as another nationality, political group and language user, Hurree Babu occupies the space of Indian, trying to fit in to the English world. This type of passing is different from the passing of Kim, because Kim is not as aware of his place in the Irish/British world so that he could make the decision to pass as Indian. Babu, however, chooses to pass as something he is not, even if it is as a Kashmiri, Ladakhi, trader. Kim thinks to himself, "how comes it that this man [Hurree Babu] is one of *us*," showing that Babu is indeed trying to pass as one of the English (Kipling, 1989, p. 209). "Passing traditionally refers to the social practice of assuming the identity of another type or class of person for social, economic , or political reasons. […] Passing often carries pejorative connotations of deception, dishonesty, and betrayal" (Caughie, 1998, p. 113).

"Passing of any kind could be read as denial of identity and a "selling out" to the status quo" (Behling, 2003, p. 416). So, in passing as English, Babu is seen as a turncoat, but perhaps more importantly to the novel, by passing, Kipling locates Babu as an example of what the colonial efforts have done to the people and language of India. All *babus* then, sell out to the status quo of the British when they speak English to show off.

In *Kim,* linguistic hybridity can be examined in terms of Kim's own identity and language. As an Irish child in India because of his father's participation in the colonial effort, Kim is left on the streets to live the life of an Indian child, thinking and speaking like an Indian. This hybridizaition can be seen as what Bakhtin described as "a mixture of two social languages within the limits of a single utterance, an encounter, within the arena of an utterance, between two different linguistic consciousnesses, separated from one another by an epoch, by social differentiation, or by some other factor (Young, 1995, p. 20). As a hybrid, Kim mixes both English and Hindi in a single utterance as in: "thy man is rather a yagi [bad-tempered] than a yogi [a holy man]" (Kipling, 1989, p. 61). Not only is Kim able to shift with the two languages, but is seen manipulating even Hindi to suit his needs. Upon their first meeting Mahbub Ali mistakes Kim for a Hindu beggar. Kim responds "using the Hindu form of address" which is "Maharaj." Then, Kim shifts languages to Mahbub's surprise saying in English "Oh, Mahbub Ali, but am *I* a Hindu?" (Kipling, 1989, p. 67). Kim's ability to shift languages and even look like another racial group may be seen as a form of passing like Hurree Babu, but as already stated, Kim does not necessarily assume the characteristics of another group purposely, but instead his situation of orphan in India naturally leads him to adapt, not pass as a native.

Questions of identity, whether selected or perceived comes in many forms in *Kim.* Religions, Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism are in play as different types of identities. Languages are paired with religions as a part of identities in *Kim*, with English for the British, Hindi for the Hindus, Urdu for the Muslims. Certainly in the characters of Hurree Babu (a Hindu) and Mahbub Ali (a Muslim) the opposition and contrast is established within the novel. Although Hindus and Muslims in India speak a very similar language, there are certain referentials linked specifically to religion, and religion, with Muslim Indians using Urdu, with Persian influences and script. As Mahbub mistakes Kim for a Hindu reinforced by Kim's use of the Hindu address, the language difference between the religions is highlighted. When Kim says "Allah be merciful" in the last chapter of the novel, Babu warns "do not use the Mohammedan terms with the Tibetan dress," suggesting the threat to the Great Game (Kipling, 1989, p. 330). For the Indian, regardless of religion, second language speakers in *Kim,* English acts as a pharmakon that both promotes their place in colonized India yet alienates them from their native language and culture. This status of English in the historical context of the colonial Victorian period is worthy of examination. Little less than fifty years after *Kim* was written, India gained independence from England. The representation of the English language in *Kim* uniquely and accurately depicts the complex native and British perspective on the language dilemma in colonized environments.

3. Pedagogical Implications for Second Language Learning

Colonial literature like *Kim* may be antithetical to the progression of postcolonial pedagogy, but it does provide a space for exploring, within the classroom context, the languages of the colonies. Spivak (1993) suggests that "many decolonized intellectuals feel that the straightforward ideal of teaching English literature in the theater of decolonization continues the process of producing out-of-date British Council style colonial bourgeoisie in changed global context" (Spivak, 1993, p. 135). *Kim*, as a text steeped in colonial discourse, fits within the frame of "the important task of teaching and studying English in the colonies" (Spivak, 1993, p. 134). More than its place in the classroom as a literary text, though, *Kim* has pedagogical applications within and outside of the text itself. There are important discussions that can be had with students regarding second language learning throughout the novel, as in Kim's own learning of English. The space(s) in between English and Hindi can be opened up to discuss the creation of identity and one's own literacy (Canagarajah, 2013). *Kim* is also a useful tool for both literature and writing classrooms as it engages students with the complexities of language, identity, power and social constructs. The social aspects and repercussions of language can be explored in the characters of *Kim's* second language learners. There are important questions that can be addressed in a classroom setting about the identity of the learners in *Kim* in relation to their native language as a position of beginning and where they move to as a consequence of second language acquisition. The broader implications are for students to think about their own language learning contexts.

"What happens to you as a result of becoming educated? What parts of an identity remain intact? What parts transform?" (Moreno, 2002). Further exploration for students in the classroom setting might entail what the transformation means for individuals and societies.

So, as a language learner himself, what does happen to Kim? As a *sahib*, the English-speaking one, Kim loses the Indian identity that he initially had in the beginning of the novel. His Hindi words no longer connect him to the natives as much as his English words separate him from them. In their last discussion about Kim, the lama and Mahbub Ali debate on Kim's future. "He must go forth as a teacher," says the lama. Mahbub replies, "That is the right gait for the colt. Certainly he must go forth as a teacher. He is somewhat urgently needed as a scribe by the State, for instance" (Kipling, 1989, p. 334). As a teacher, Kim, a *sahib*, would teach in the language of the *sahibs.* Further, as a scribe for the State, a British political apparatus, Kim would write in the language of the *sahibs.* Kim's identity shifts from a simple child of the street, Indian, Urdu-speaking, to a *sahib* with responsibilities to the language of the colonizers. Where Kim and the natives go depends on their language skills. The identity of each character in *Kim* is linked directly with their language abilities and usage.

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